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978-1-107-00134-3 - Slavery and Slaving in African History

Sean Stilwell

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Slavery and Slaving in African History

This book is a comprehensive history of slavery in Africa from the earliest times to the end of the twentieth century, when slavery in most parts of the continent ceased to exist. It connects the emergence and consolidation of slavery to specific historical forces both internal and external to the African continent. Sean Stilwell pays special attention to the development of settled agriculture, the invention of kinship, “big men” and centralized states, the role of African economic production and exchange, the interaction of local structures of dependence with the external slave trades (transatlantic, trans-Saharan, Indian Ocean), and the impact of colonialism on slavery in the twentieth century. He also provides an introduction to the central debates that have shaped current understanding of slavery in Africa. The book examines different forms of slavery that developed over time in Africa and introduces readers to the lives, work, and struggles of slaves themselves.

Sean Stilwell is Associate Professor of African History at the University of Vermont.

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Preface

Slavery and Slaving in African History is a synthetic and interpretive history of slavery in Africa from its earliest manifestations through to the early twentieth century, when slavery in most parts of the continent had ceased to exist. It reconstructs the processes that led to the consolidation of slavery with the broader goal of understanding – as best we can – the lived experience of slaves. Throughout the book, I integrate an analysis of the personal and relational aspect of slavery (between master and slave) into a broader examination of slavery as an institution. I focus especially on the way slavery emerged and changed over time. Mythologies about Africa have often made the study of slavery difficult. In popular imagination, the African past before the twentieth century is often portrayed as fundamentally rural, isolated, unspoiled, simple, and egalitarian. Slavery was rare, while slaves were not exploited as slaves but rather became part of African families. In other cases, Africa is portrayed as little more than the home to unknowable, savage “tribes” gleefully waging war only to sacrifice or sell their victims. An important purpose of *Slavery and Slaving in African History* is to present Africa, Africans, and slavery in a more realistic and accurate way. Africa was historically diverse; indeed, Africans would not have thought of themselves as “African” until quite recently. Before the twentieth century, the most important local allegiances were to kinship groups, religious orders, occupational groups, villages, cities, or states (among many other possibilities). Africans created cities, armies, polities, and religions over the course of centuries. Although African economies are commonly portrayed

as subsistence orientated or fundamentally concerned with the redistribution of goods and resources, over time parts of the continent were increasingly orientated toward production and market exchange. People in some regions used currencies in the form of cowrie shells, for example, while groups of merchants sought actively to profit via the exchange of goods. Craft production, international trade, mining, and economic specialization were common. Thus, many different forms of political and economic complexity emerged throughout the African past. Some Africans lived in small-scale – but complex – decentralized communities. Other Africans built coercive and centralized states. In nearly all places, hierarchies developed that were based on who belonged (us) and who did not (them).

In the end, *Slavery and Slaving in African History* demonstrates that Africans used slaves in numbers that rivaled those of the Americas, Ancient Rome, and the Islamic Middle East. By the nineteenth century, many millions of Africans were held in bondage as slaves. Some Africans used slaves to grab new positions of power in decentralized societies. Others used slaves to consolidate state-based political power in response to resistance from other elites or commoners. Yet others used slaves to produce goods that they could not force or convince free people to produce. In places, slavery became a central – or foundational – institution on which African societies and states depended. But there were many kinds of slavery in Africa. I have, therefore, highlighted the ways that similarities *and* differences in African slaveries were tied to specific historical processes, including statecraft, lineage politics, and trade. Slavery was an absolutely critical element of the African past. The impact of slavery was constructive for some (for those who used slaves to build legitimate states, for example), and for others, slavery was profoundly destructive (for those communities pillaged for slaves, for example).

The following chapters examine these themes and transitions. Chapter 1 explores the broad concept of slavery in Africa. It seeks to understand and define the meaning of slavery in both theory and practice. Chapter 2 places those definitions within history. It examines the chronology of slavery from roughly 10,000 years before the Common Era through to the end of slavery at the beginning of the twentieth century. The following four chapters then examine specific themes and moments in the history of slavery in Africa. Chapter 3 aims to understand the dynamics of slavery in decentralized (or horizontal) societies. Chapter 4 explores the important role of slavery in African

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state formation and consolidation. Chapter 5 turns to the economic history of high-density slavery, including the various external slave trades. Finally, Chapter 6 recounts the reasons for the gradual end of slavery in Africa.

Given the broad nature of the narrative, I have inevitably focused on some places more than on others. I have left some things out. I have used a wide continental lens as well as a narrower one that focuses on specific regions and societies. I have tried to do justice to the specialist knowledge in each region and period and to develop a productive tension between a perspective that places historical change at its center while also exploring the political, economic, and social structures of slavery.

This book first took shape in a bus somewhere between Accra and Cotonou in 2007. During that trip, Marty Klein and I – in the company of many other scholars – first discussed what a new history of slavery in Africa might look like. Although I continued to travel to Nigeria to work on the history of epidemics in colonial Nigeria, the slavery project soon took over; the possibility of writing a book that (hopefully) appeals to both scholars and students, specialists and generalists, and that is broadly interpretive, became simply too exciting for me to ignore. In writing this kind of book, I have incurred a great many formal and informal debts. I owe the many and varied scholars of slavery in (and beyond) Africa a lot. I have used, and sometimes twisted, their work for my own purposes. Some people read the manuscript in draft, others contributed ideas, yet others simply wrote something exciting that I found valuable or intriguing. I thank especially Trevor Getz, Jonathon Glassman, Martin Klein, Murray Last, Paul E. Lovejoy, Patrick Manning, Suzanne Miers, John Edward Philips, and Ehud Toledano. I found Joseph C. Miller's treatment of slaving as a political strategy compelling, although I explored that concept very differently than he no doubt imagined. In this regard I sought especially to highlight the central role of slaves themselves. Given the more general appeal of this book, I made an effort to limit my citations, although I have also tried to make it clear when I owe someone a specific scholarly debt. The editorial board of the *New Approaches to African History* series and two anonymous referees saved me from many mistakes and offered thoughtful suggestions. Likewise, Will Hammell and Sarika Narula at Cambridge University Press were absolutely wonderful. Sarika especially answered my occasionally obsessive questions with good humor. Bhavani Ganesh Kumar at Newgen Knowledge Works expertly guided the manuscript through the production process. Joe LeMonnier did a

great job on the maps. The librarians at UVM's Bailey-Howe library helped me in many large and small ways. I am especially lucky to work in the Department of History at the University of Vermont, where I have colleagues who are both supportive and challenging. Here I especially thank Bogac Ergene, a fierce critic; Jon Huener, an occasional pub buddy; and Steve Zdatny, my hockey teammate. Students in my Comparative Slavery seminar at UVM have been the recipients of some of my ideas – which they sometimes critiqued – and for this I thank them. Finally, I have dedicated this book to the late Philip James Shea. To those who knew Phil, my choice might seem odd. Phil lived in and wrote about Northern Nigeria, especially Kano. He was intensely dedicated to his craft and to Hausa history. I think Phil would have no doubt preferred that I finished my work on Nigeria before taking on this project. Yet Phil was also a dedicated teacher and a believer that for history to matter it needed to be read. And he was a supportive and generous colleague. I regret that I am unable to share this finally finished book with him, but I will always be grateful for the many kindnesses, incisive criticism, and warm friendship that he shared with me over the years in Kano.

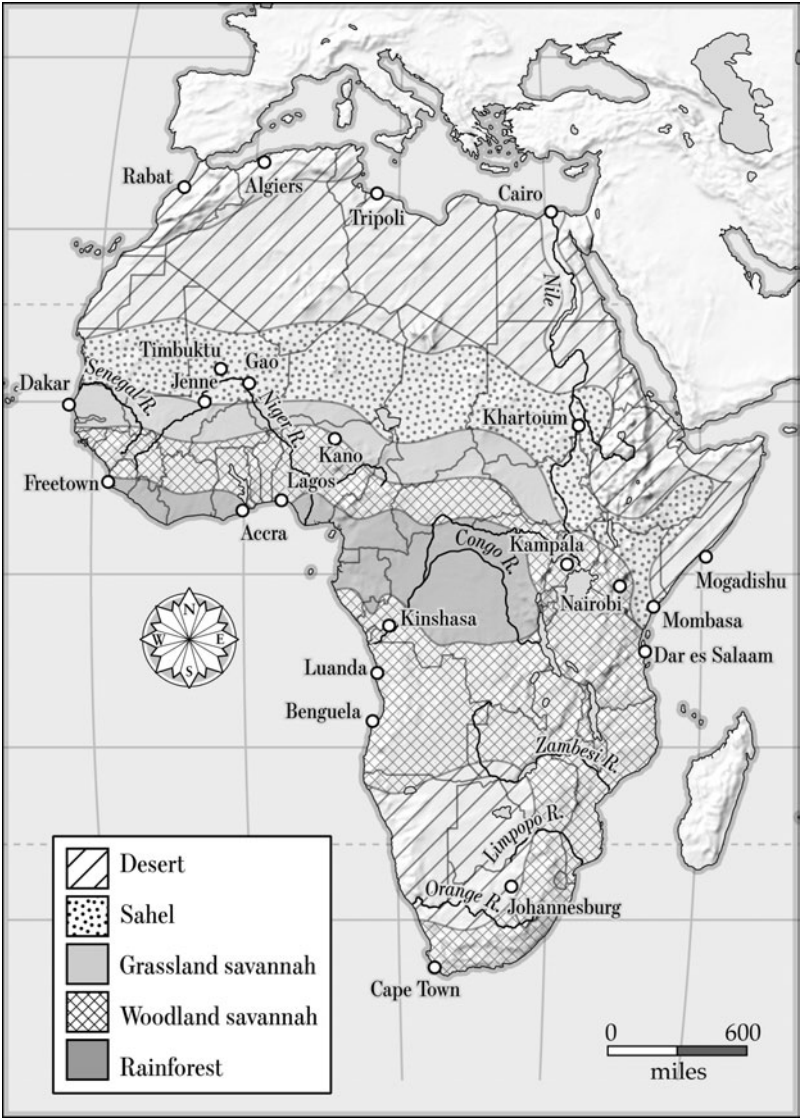


FIGURE 1. Physical map of Africa.



FIGURE 2. Selected African states before 1800 that are mentioned in text.
Note: The borders of these states varied over time.



FIGURE 3. Selected African states after 1800 that are mentioned in text.
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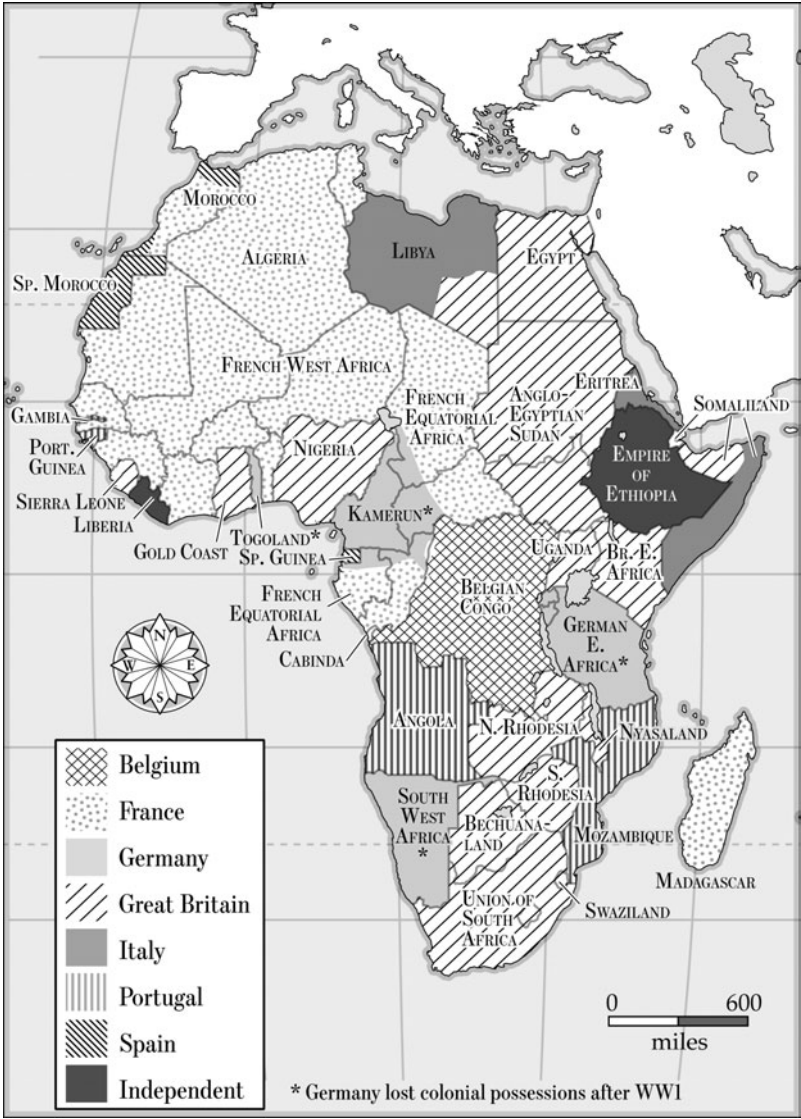


FIGURE 4. Colonial Africa in 1914.