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Africa and Slavery

Slavery has been an important phenomenon throughout history. It has been found in many places, from classical antiquity to very recent times. Africa has been intimately connected with this history, both as a major source of slaves for ancient civilizations, the Islamic world, India, and the Americas, and as one of the principal areas where slavery was common. Indeed, in Africa slavery lasted well into the twentieth century – notably longer than in the Americas. Such antiquity and persistence require explanation, both to understand the historical development of slavery in Africa in its own right and to evaluate the relative importance of the slave trade to this development. Broadly speaking, slavery expanded in at least three stages – 1350 to 1600, 1600 to 1800, and 1800 to 1900 – by which time slavery had become a fundamental feature of the African political economy. This expansion occurred on two levels that were linked to the external slave trade. First, slavery became more common over an increasingly greater geographical area, spreading outward from those places that participated directly in the external slave trade. Second, the role of slaves in the economy and society became more important, resulting in the transformation of the social, economic, and political order. Again, the external trade was associated with this transformation.

Slavery: A Definition

Slavery is one form of exploitation. Its special characteristics include the idea that slaves are property; that they are outsiders who are alien by origin or who are denied their heritage through judicial or other sanctions; that coercion can be used at will; that their labor power is at the complete disposal of a master; that they do not have the right to their own sexuality and, by extension, to their own reproductive capacities; and that the slave status is inherited unless provision is made to ameliorate that status.[1] These various attributes need to

be examined in greater detail to clarify the distinctions between slavery and other servile relationships.

As property, slaves are considered to be chattel, which is to say they can be bought and sold. Slaves belong to their masters who, at least theoretically, have complete power over them. Religious institutions, kinship units, and other groups in the same society do not protect slaves as legal persons, even though the fact that slaves are also human beings has sometimes been recognized. Because they are considered chattel, slaves can be treated as commodities. But slaves seldom have been merely commodities, and often restrictions have been placed on the sale of slaves once some degree of acculturation has taken place. These restrictions could be purely moral, as they were in the Americas, where, at least in theory, it was thought wrong to divide families when sales were taking place, although in fact slave owners did whatever they wanted. In other situations, restrictions were actually enforced, or persons were automatically granted some degree of emancipation that precluded sale. In Islamic practice and under Islamic law, women taken as concubines could not be legally sold once they had given birth to children by their master. Furthermore, such children were technically free and usually recognized as such. The women became legally free on the death of their master in many cases, and in some they were nominally free as soon as they gave birth, although they could not normally terminate their status as concubines. In reality, they attained an intermediate position between slaves and free. Other restrictions on sale limited the ability of masters to sell the children of slaves, either because of religious sentiments, in the case of Islam, or because an acceptable kinship or ethnic status had been confirmed. If a sale did take place, it was carefully justified in terms of criminal activity, sorcery, or some other ideologically acceptable reason; often these same reasons could result in the sale of freeborn members of the same society. Nonetheless, it is characteristic of slavery that the slave is considered property of another person or some corporate group, despite restrictions on the nature of this property relationship that developed in actual situations.

A digression is necessary to establish what is meant by "freedom." The term is really relative. People are either more or less free to make decisions for themselves. All societies place numerous constraints on individuals, but even when this is recognized, we can still understand slaves as people who are particularly unfree. In the context of slave societies, freedom involved a recognized status in a caste, a ruling class, a kinship group, or some such corporate body. Such identification included a bundle of rights and obligations that varied considerably with the situation but were still distinct from those for slaves, who technically had no rights, only obligations. The act of emancipation, when it existed, conveyed recognition that slave and free were not the same. Emancipation dramatically demonstrated that power was in the hands of the free, not the slaves.

Therefore, slavery was fundamentally a means of denying outsiders the rights and privileges of a particular society so that they could be exploited for

economic, political, and/or social purposes.[2] Usually outsiders were perceived as ethnically different: The absence of kinship was a particularly common distinction. A person who spoke the same language as his master, without an accent, who shared the same culture, believed in the same religion, and understood the political relationships that determined how power was exercised was far more difficult to control than an outsider. When differences in culture or dialect have been relatively unimportant, the level of exploitation and the social isolation of slaves have usually been limited; such situations suggest small slave holdings and minimal political and economic stratification. Certainly the most developed forms of slavery have been those where slaves were removed a considerable distance from their birthplace, thereby emphasizing their alien origins. This uprooting has been as dramatic as the transport of Africans across the Atlantic or the Sahara Desert or as nondramatic as the seizure of people who lived only a hundred kilometers or less from the home of the enslavers. Both situations helped define the slave as an outsider, at least in the first instance. Over time, cultural distinctions tended to blur, so that the extent to which alien origin was a factor has varied.

When social structures and economies were more complex, the identification of slaves as outsiders also became more pronounced, so that the acculturation that invariably occurred did not affect the ability of masters to exploit the labor and services of their slaves. For Muslims, religion has been a means of categorizing slaves. Those recently acquired were usually not Muslims, or were only nominally so. Even when slaves began to practise Islam, they were usually considered less devout. For Europeans, slaves were perceived as racially distinct; despite acculturation, slaves were even more clearly defined as outsiders, thereby guaranteeing that the acquisition of rights in European society would be severely limited. Other, more subtle distinctions were made, including differences in dialect, the accent of people who had just learned a new language, facial and body markings, perceived physical characteristics, and, most common of all, memory.

Slavery virtually always has been initiated through violence that reduced the status of a person from a condition of freedom and citizenship to a condition of slavery.[3] The most common type of violence has been warfare, in which prisoners were enslaved. Variations in the organization of such violence – including raids for the purposes of banditry, kidnapping, and acquisition of slaves – indicate that violent enslavement can be thought of as ranging from large-scale political action, in which enslavement may be only a by-product of war and not its cause, to small-scale criminal activity, in which enslavement is the sole purpose of the action. Taken together, warfare, slave raiding, and kidnapping have accounted for the vast majority of new slaves in history. Even when the motives for war were not to acquire slaves, the link between war and slavery was often strong. In societies where it was customary to enslave prisoners, the belligerents invariably took account of the possibilities of defraying the cost of war through the sale or use of slaves. When wars and raids were chronic, these

resulted in the continuous enslavement or reenslavement of people, and the incidence of slavery in such situations increased.

Whereas warfare and similar violence accounted for most of the newly enslaved people in history, judicial and religious proceedings accounted for some as well. Slavery was a form of judicial punishment, particularly for such crimes as murder, theft, adultery, and sorcery. The methods by which suspected criminals were enslaved have varied greatly, but often they were sold out of their home communities. This avenue of enslavement once again was rooted in violence, however legitimate in the eyes of the society in question. The status of a person was radically reduced: The new slave could lose his membership in the community, and his punishment could confirm a status that was passed on to his or her descendants.

There have been instances of voluntary enslavement, particularly when the threat of starvation left the person with no other recourse. This is not a case of conscious violence by society or an enemy. There may well have been structural causes in the past that placed people in situations where they could not be assured of survival and hence found it necessary to enslave themselves. This structural dimension may well have carried with it a dimension that was ultimately exploitative and violent. Nonetheless, voluntary enslavement was unusual, and it probably accounted for only a small percentage of slaves in most places. Furthermore, the possibility of voluntary enslavement depended on the existence of an institution of slavery in which violence was fundamental. If there were no such institution, a person would not become a slave but a client or some other dependent. That the status of slave was even assigned in such instances indicates that other servile statuses were not appropriate, either because they were lacking or because they were defined to exclude such cases.

The extent of coercion involved in slavery is sometimes obvious and sometimes disguised. The master can enforce his will because of his ability to punish slaves for failure to comply with his orders or to perform their tasks satisfactorily. Whipping, confinement, deprivation of food, additional hard work, and the ability to dispose of slaves through sale were common means of coercion. Physical punishment could lead to death, and even when there were legal and customary prohibitions on killing slaves, these were rarely enforceable. Often coercion was more indirect. The example of other slaves being punished or sold and the knowledge that the master could do so were usually sufficient to maintain slave discipline. Sacrifices of slaves at funerals and public ceremonies, which were common in some places, were also examples to the slaves. Such public displays were not usually a form of punishment for insubordination; in fact, they were sometimes conceived of as an honor, but most often slaves were purchased specifically for sacrifice. Because insubordination could lead to sale, the risks for the slave were obvious. A purchaser might well be in need of a sacrificial victim.

Slavery is fundamentally tied to labor. It has not been the only form of dependent labor, but slaves could be made to perform any task in the economy.

They had to do what they were told, hence they often performed the most menial and laborious tasks and sometimes undertook great risks. In the case of slaves, the concept of labor has not usually been perceived as separate from the slave as a person. The slave was considered an instrument of work, and coercion could be used to force compliance with particular orders. The slave was told what to do and, if he or she did not do it, he or she was punished, often severely. Slavery could and did exist alongside other types of labor, including serfdom (in which people were tied to the land, and their obligations to the lord were fixed by custom), clientage (voluntary subordination without fixed remuneration for services), wage labor (in which compensation for work was monetized), pawnship (in which labor was perceived as interest on a debt and the pawn as collateral for the debt), and communal work (often based on kinship or age grades, in which work was perceived as a reciprocal activity based on past or future exchange). These other forms of labor could involve coercion, too, but usually not to the point at which they could be called slavery.

A peculiar feature of slavery was this absolute lack of choice on the part of slaves. Their total subordination to the whims of their master meant that slaves could be assigned any task in the society or economy. Hence slaves have not only performed the most menial and laborious jobs, but they have also held positions of authority and have had access to considerable wealth. The plantation field hand and the slave general had their subordination to their master in common. Both were assigned a task, but the nature of their employment was so different that they had virtually no mutual interests. The identity of the slave was through his master. Legally, the master was held responsible for the actions of the slave, and this was the same for administrative slaves as well as common laborers. Therefore, slaves did not necessarily constitute a class. Their dependence could result in the subordination of their identity to that of their master, on whom their position depended, or it could lead to the development of a sense of comradeship with other slaves, and hence form the basis for class consciousness. Both could take place in the same society if slaves and others recognized a clear distinction between those engaged in production and those involved in the military and administration.

Because slaves had to be fully subservient, their masters controlled their sexual and reproductive capacities as well as their productive capacities.[4] When slaves constituted a significant proportion of any population, sexual access and reproduction were strongly controlled. Women (and men, too) could be treated as sexual objects; the ability to marry could be closely administered; and males could be castrated. The significance of sex is most strikingly revealed in the market price of slaves. Eunuchs were often the most costly, with pretty women and girls close behind, their price depending on their sexual attractiveness. These two opposites – castrated males and attractive females – demonstrate most clearly the aspect of slavery that involved the master's power over the slave's sexual and reproductive functions. Slaves lacked the right to engage in sexual relationships without the consent of their master. They could not marry

without the master's permission and provision of a spouse. Their children, once slaves were given permission to have children, were not legally their offspring but the property of their master, often the master of the mother. Biologically, they were the offspring of the slaves, but the right to raise the children could be denied. Instead, slave children could be taken away and, even when they were not sold, redistributed as part of marriage arrangements, trained for the army or administration, or adopted by the master's family.

Masters had the right of sexual access to slave women, who became concubines or wives, depending on the society. This sexual dimension is a major reason why the price of female slaves has often been higher than the price of men. Male slaves could be denied access to women, and this dimension of slavery was a vital form of exploitation and control. The ability to acquire a spouse depended on the willingness to accept slave status and to work hard. Marriage or other sexual unions were a method of rewarding men. The desires of women were seldom taken into consideration. Although men could be given a wife from among the reduced pool of females available for such unions, they were not usually allowed effective paternity over their offspring. Actual bonds of affection and recognized biological links existed, of course, but these could be disrupted through the removal of the children if the master so wished. The master could reward the male slave, or he could deprive males of their sexuality through castration.

The slave status was inherited. This meant that the property element, the feature of being an alien, and the form of labor mobilization continued into the next generation, although in practice the slave status was often modified. The condition of slaves changed from the initial instance of enslavement through the course of the slave's life, and such an evolution continued into the next generation and beyond. The changed status varied from society to society, being more pronounced in some places than in others. In the past, the theory of the slave as an outsider became more difficult to uphold once a slave began to understand and accept his master's culture. Even though the theory could still define the slave as an alien, slaves were usually provided with the essentials of life, including access to land, spouses, protection, religious rites, and other attributes of citizenship. The more technical aspects of slavery, including the elements of property, labor, and being alien, could be invoked arbitrarily, but in practice these legal rights of the masters were usually not exercised fully. Usually some kind of accommodation was reached between masters and slaves. The sociological level of this relationship involved recognition on the part of slaves that they were dependents whose position required subservience to their master, and it necessitated an acceptance on the part of the masters that there were limits on how far their slaves could be pushed.

Those born into slavery found themselves in a different position from those who had been enslaved in their own lifetime, for the initial act of violence became an abstraction. Parents might tell their children of their enslavement, but this was not the children's experience. Children could also learn about

enslavement from new captives, and they were educated into a society in which such acts were well known. The threat of violence was also present. Legally, they often could be separated from their parents and sold, even if in practice this was rare. The same insecurity that led to the enslavement of their parents or the new slaves with whom they came in contact could result in their own reenslavement through war or raids. And if they behaved in a manner that was not acceptable, they could be sold. The violence behind the act of enslavement remained, therefore, although for the descendants of slaves it was transformed from a real act to a threat. As such, violence was still a crucial dimension of social control.

In both cases, moreover, the violence inherent in slavery affected the psychology of the slaves. The knowledge of the horrors of enslavement and the fear of arbitrary action produced in slaves both a psychology of servility and the potential for rebellion. This dual personality related to the coercion of the institution, for memory and observation served as effective methods of maintaining an atmosphere in which violence always lurked in the background. Slaves did not have to experience the whip; indeed, they were wise to avoid it.

Slaves tended not to maintain their numbers naturally, and slave populations usually had to be replenished.[5] One reason for this situation was the relatively short life span for many slaves. Death could result from particularly harsh work; funeral sacrifices and unsuccessful castration operations also took their toll. Travel conditions for slaves destined for distant markets were also a factor, both because individuals were moved from one disease environment to another and because rations were often inadequate. Another reason was the demographic imbalance between the sexes in slave populations. The number of women in a population is a principal variable in determining whether or not a population will remain stable, expand, or contract. In conditions where the number of males was much greater, as it was among newly imported slaves in the Americas, or when there was an uneven distribution of slave women in society, as in many parts of Africa, the birthrate for slaves could be too low to maintain the slave population, or the relative fertility of women could be affected by their frequency of sexual contact. The situation for populations with an excess number of males led to the general decline in the total population, not just slaves, unless more slaves were imported. When slave women were distributed unevenly, the general population did not necessarily decline, only the proportion of slaves in the population. The women were usually taken as wives or concubines by free men, so that they still bore children, although perhaps not as often as they might have if they had been free. Because the status of concubines and slave wives changed, sometimes leading to assimilation or full emancipation, the size of the slave population decreased accordingly. The children of slave wives and concubines by free fathers were often granted a status that was completely or almost free. Under Islamic law, this was most pronounced. Concubines could not be sold once they gave birth, and they became free on the death of their masters. The children of such unions were free on

birth. In other situations, custom dictated that slave wives be incorporated into society, and even when their children were not accorded the full rights and privileges of children by free mothers, custom prevented the possibility of sale or poor treatment that was meted out to the newly enslaved. These features of gradual assimilation or complete emancipation contradict the aspect of slavery that emphasized inherited status but was compatible with the master's power to manipulate sexual and reproductive functions for his own purposes.

Assimilation and emancipation accounted for the continued importance of enslavement and slave trading, the instruments that replenished the supply of slaves in society. The perpetuation of enslavement and the resulting trade reinforced the property element in slavery, but it did so unevenly. Those most recently enslaved or traded were treated the most like commodities. Those who had lived in one location for many years after their purchase or enslavement were less likely to be treated as if they were simply goods of trade. The institution as a whole was firmly embedded in a property relationship, but individual slaves experienced a modification in that relationship, until some were no longer property, or indeed slaves.

A brief postscript is necessary to consider the special case of slavery in the Americas, because the American system was a particularly heinous development. Many features of American slavery were similar to slavery in other times and places, including the relative size of the slave population, the concentration of slaves in economic units large enough to be classified as plantations, and the degree of physical violence and psychological coercion used to keep slaves in their place. Nonetheless, the American system of slavery was unique in two respects: the manipulation of race as a means of controlling the slave population, and the extent of the system's economic rationalization. In the Americas, the primary purpose of slave labor was the production of staple commodities – sugar, coffee, tobacco, rice, cotton, gold, and silver – for sale on world markets. Furthermore, many features that were common in other slave systems were absent or relatively unimportant in the Americas. These included the use of slaves in government, the existence of eunuchs, and the sacrifice of slaves at funerals and other occasions (but not the use of slaves and the descendants of slaves in the military). The similarities and differences are identified to counteract a tendency to perceive slavery as a peculiarly American institution. Individual slave systems had their own characteristics, but it is still possible to analyze the broader patterns that have distinguished slavery from other forms of exploitation.

Slavery in Social Formations

Slaves have constituted a small percentage or a substantial proportion of different populations. Whereas this demographic factor has been important, far more significant was the location of slaves in the society and economy. Slaves could be incidental to the society at large because they were so few in number, but

even when there were many slaves, they could be distributed relatively evenly through society or concentrated in the hands of relatively few masters. Their function could be essentially social, political, or economic, or it could be some combination of these. Slaves could be used extensively in the army and administration (political); they could be found in domestic and sexual roles (social); or they could be involved in production (economic). Often, some slaves in society performed one or another of these functions, although sometimes they were concentrated more in one category than another. Almost always slaves were found in domestic service, but if the social location of slaves was confined almost exclusively to domestic and sexual exploitation, then other forms of labor were necessarily essential to productive activities and hence to the nature of economic organization. Even when slaves filled political functions but were not engaged in productive activities, the basic structure of the economy had to rely on other forms of labor, and hence the society was not based on slavery.

Slavery as a minor feature of society must be distinguished from slavery as an institution. In those places where a few people owned a few slaves, perhaps as conspicuous examples of wealth but not as workers, slavery was incidental to the structure of society and the functioning of the economy. Slavery became important when slaves were used extensively in production, the reinforcement of political power, or domestic servitude (including sexual services). These situations required a regular supply of slaves, either through trade or enslavement, or both, while the number of slaves in society could become significant enough to affect its organization. When slavery became an essential component of production, the institution acquired additional characteristics. M. I. Finley has stated the importance of this development most aptly:

> Slavery, then, is transformed as an institution when slaves play an essential role in the economy. Historically that has meant, in the first instance, their role in agriculture. Slavery has been accommodated to the large estate under radically different conditions … and often existed alongside widespread free small holdings. That both slaves and free men did identical work was irrelevant; what mattered was the condition of work, or rather, on whose behalf and under what (and whose) controls it was carried on. In slave societies hired labor was rare and slave labor the rule whenever an enterprise was too big for a family to conduct unaided. That rule extended from agriculture to manufacture and mining, and sometimes even to commerce and finance.[6]

In Africa, slavery underwent such a transformation at different times and at varying rates in the northern savannah, the west-central regions of Angola and the Congo basin, and other places.

The transformation of slavery from a marginal feature in society to a central institution resulted in the consolidation of a *mode of production* based on slavery. Mode of production is used here to emphasize the relationship between social organization and the productive process on the one hand and the means by which this relationship is maintained on the other hand.[7] The concept isolates the social relations of production, that is, the organization of

the productive population in terms of its own identity and the ways in which this population is managed. This interaction between the social and economic relations of production requires conditions specific to each mode of production, which allow for the regeneration of the productive process; otherwise there is no historical continuity, only an instance of production. Finally, the relationship between the productive process and its regeneration is reflected in the ideological and political structures of society – sometimes called the superstructure – as a means of distinguishing these features from the materialist base.[8]

A *slave mode of production* existed when the social and economic structure of a particular society included an integrated system of enslavement, slave trade, and the domestic use of slaves. Slaves had to be employed in production, and hence the kind of transformation identified by Finley must have occurred. This transformation usually meant that slaves were used in agriculture and/or mining but also could refer to their use in transport as porters, stock boys, and paddlers in canoes. Slaves could still fill other functions, including concubinage, adoption into kin groups, and sacrifice, but these social and religious functions had to be secondary to productive uses. Furthermore, the maintenance of the slave population had to be guaranteed. This regeneration could occur through the birth of children into slavery (inheritance of slave status), raids, war, kidnapping, and other acts of enslavement, as well as the distribution of slaves through trade and tribute. Given that slave populations were seldom self-sustaining through natural reproduction, enslavement and trade were usually prerequisites for the consolidation of a slave mode of production.

Slavery did not have to be the main feature of social relations in a society for a slave mode of production to exist. Other institutions could also determine the relations of production under different circumstances (kinship, pawnship, etc.). When slavery prevailed in one or more sectors of the economy, the social formation – that is, the combined social and economic structures of production – included a slave mode of production, no matter what other modes coexisted (feudalism, capitalism, etc.). This incorporation of various economic and social structures into a single system through the combination of, and interaction between, different modes of production could occur within the context of a single state or a wider region.[9] Such social formations could include peasants who, for example, were either involved in a tributary relationship with a state, or were autonomous and subject to raids by the state. The ways in which such different systems were integrated – often called their "articulation" – could be quite complex. Slavery could be linked to other modes of production through long-distance trade, tributary relationships, or raids and warfare. When the structural interaction between enslavement, trade, and domestic employment of slaves was the most important part of a social formation, it can be said that the slave mode of production was dominant. This occurred when the principal enslavers and slave merchants comprised a class of slave masters who owned a substantial number of slaves and relied on them for the maintenance of their