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978-0-521-34867-6 - Slavery and African Life: Occidental, Oriental, and African Slave Trades

Patrick Manning

Excerpt

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Prologue

Tragedy and sacrifice in the history of slavery

Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and possessing magnitude . . . and effecting through pity and fear the catharsis of such emotions . . .

There are in tragedy . . . six constituent elements, viz. Plot, Character, Language, Thought, Spectacle and Melody.

Aristotle, *Poetics*¹

To perform a sacrifice is, primarily, to try to outwit death . . .

When war becomes the servant of sacrifice, when a people decides to appropriate the lives of others in order to incessantly feed its gods, the religious system is lost in madness.

Luc de Heusch, *Sacrifice in Africa*²

The spectacle of slavery – with its chains, slave ships, and broken families – touched on every century of the modern era, including our own. This study of African slavery in the modern world focuses primarily on economic history. Yet the influence of slavery has extended beyond the economy to transform human emotions and trouble the human spirit. For this reason I have chosen to integrate spiritual and dramatic terms into this tale of costs and benefits: slavery was a sacrifice of Africans for the transformation of the wider world, and slavery was a tragedy for the people of Africa.

This is a brief book, given the immensity of the subject. In it, I have chosen the condensed and dramatic form of a tragedy, instead of the extended and narrative form of an epic. The tragic form, as given above in Aristotle's classic definition, is appropriate for several reasons. The seriousness of African slavery can hardly be in doubt. The story is complete in the sense that I shall discuss all the main dimensions of African slavery, though at the expense of much detail. As for magnitude, the form of the presentation is intended to reinforce the conclusion of the analysis: African slavery is of magnitude not only for its moral and philosophical meaning, but for its significance in modern economic history. Further, I shall make no attempt to segregate logic from passion. Instead, I shall seek directly to confront the

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moral conflicts, the pain and suffering, in order to draw out of the reader pity – or empathy, to use the more modern term – for the victims of slavery on all sides, and fear that we may ourselves fall into a similar dilemma. The experiencing of these emotions, however, will arise from the context of a cold, hard analysis of demographic and economic facts.

The tragic experience of slavery in the modern world left Africans depleted in population, divided irremediably among themselves, retarded economically, and despised as an inferior race in a world which had built a vision of racial hierarchy based on the inspiration of their enslavement.

To portray the history of slavery as a tragedy is to emphasize that it is no morality play, medieval or modern. The cast of characters is not divided into innocent Africans pursued by evil Europeans, nor do I divide Africans themselves into the moral and the immoral. There were many innocents, particularly the children, and there were those who, overcome by consistent temptation, became truly evil exploiters of slaves. The protagonists here, however, are those who lived normal African lives, and who, in so doing involved themselves in slavery and in the slave trade. By removing African individuals and societies from any presumption of innocence, we bring them onto the stage as fully drawn historical actors: protagonists with the full range of emotions, goals, interests, flaws, insights, and blindness expected of tragic heroes.

Aristotle counsels us that these are the appropriate sort of heroes for a tragedy: he argues that the tragedy will fail to inspire pity and fear if it centers on a good hero falling into misfortune or on an evil hero rising. Instead, “We are left with the man whose place is between these extremes . . . Such is the man who on the one hand is not pre-eminent in virtue and justice, and yet on the other hand does not fall into misfortune through vice or depravity, but falls because of some mistake.”³

The mistake of our African protagonists was their willingness to participate in slavery and in the slave trade, even if they did so only to dispose of enemies in revenge, or in hopes of securing a fortune which might enable their family or their kingdom to grow and profit. The tragic results of these attempts to advance themselves at the expense of others emerge out of the logic of the plot itself, though over a period of more than a century rather than in a single episode. Developments in the story included the decline in the African population, the disruption of countless families, and the individual falls of the mighty.

The tragic climax came in the mid-nineteenth century, with the decline in external demand for slaves. Africans faced an array of choices, each one of which led necessarily to a tragic end. Those who sought to sustain African slavery achieved short-term prosperity, but then underwent conquest by Europeans. Those who sought to renounce slavery had either to accept conquest by their neighbors or ally with conquering Europeans and negate their own heritage.

The plot of a complex tragedy, again according to Aristotle, involves

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reversals of fate and episodes of recognition among characters. For Africans, the reversals were frequent enough at the individual level: warlords and merchants met sudden death at the hands of enemies; the reversals from wealth to indebtedness were no less significant. Cases of individual recognition by people separated by the misfortunes of enslavement were no doubt common enough: King Jaja of Opobo in Nigeria recognized an oath sworn by a man falling to the water from a boat, and was then reunited with the family from which he had been kidnapped and enslaved at the age of fourteen. But the most significant recognition for our story was the gradual realization by Africans of themselves as a people. At the beginning of the slave exports, Africans had no more common identity than did Europeans; they did not even share the European veneration of a common religious faith. Yet the course of the slave trade itself, with the accompanying development in European minds of a racialistic conflation of all black peoples into a single commodified work force, was perhaps the single greatest factor in the development of a Pan-African, racial consciousness. To the degree that Africans and Afro-Americans partook of that identity, they recognized each other during the nineteenth century at the height of their unfolding tragedy, but too late to halt the course of events.

The tragic hero of this tale, as is usual in classical tragedy, is male. This is because the surviving records of slavery give prominence to men, both as enslavers and as slaves. Moreover, it was the men who most clearly joined in the great gambit of the slave trade, only to experience later reversals which brought them tragedy and suffering. While I have not been able to bring women to center stage, I have sought to avoid relegating them to the passive role of victim. Women did participate at each stage of the drama, as slaves, slave owners, and as persons warning of the consequences of the tragic decision. We shall see, further, that women's lives were transformed fundamentally and repeatedly by the slave trade. The experience of slavery reinforced patriarchy – the domination of men over women – just as it reinforced the domination of men over men. Whether women or men suffered more, in the end, is difficult to tell.

I could go on and attempt to fit this story into even the most rigorous definition of tragedy. The thought and language of African protagonists not only stirs up emotions but adds magnitude to the presentation. The melody of the tragedy includes the work songs and dirges of the slaves, but also the martial music of African armies marching to battle. Certain of the heroes were great and noble individuals. For many cases one can argue that African participants in slavery failed but became more admirable in catastrophe. Without much doubt one can argue that the unhappy end – African poverty and division, compounded by most of a century of alien rule – was inevitable and issued from the decisions of the heroes in the face of a moral conflict, in which disaster was to result from any choice.

Perhaps this vision of African slavery as a tragedy will appear old-fashioned to some readers. Many have argued in recent years that tragedy

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can no longer be written, and that such horrors as the Jewish holocaust and the genocides of Armenia and Cambodia were more *pathetic* than tragic. I think that the response of the philosopher Walter Kaufmann to this objection is appropriate.⁴ He argues not only that pathetic events qualify for modern tragedy but that they were important in ancient tragedy. He offers, instead, three more deeply seated reasons why modern-day observers feel that tragedies cannot be written: our contemporary infatuation with success and unwillingness to consider failure; a growing disbelief in great men; and, mainly, our contemporary unwillingness to observe drama centered on the immense and overwhelming human suffering that characterized Greek tragedy. If these are the reasons why audiences may wish to avoid tragedy, they are not, Kaufmann notes, reasons why tragedy should not be written. It is only the audience which experiences the tragedy which can partake of the catharsis that may result from it.

If the enslavement of Africans was a tragedy for Africa, it was also, from the standpoint of the wider world, a sacrifice. Africa's loss was the gain of the Occident – and of the Orient.

Sacrifice takes place in many ways and on many levels. African families performed sacrifices in memory of ancestors, to renew the earth's fertility, and to pay tribute to their rulers. Merchants and planters in Africa and elsewhere sacrificed the enjoyment of their current wealth for investments intended to bring later profit. Christians celebrated the ritual of the Eucharist, to participate in God's sacrifice of his son for the salvation of man. The meanings of these and other sacrifices came to overlap inextricably through the experience of slavery.⁵

An act of sacrifice entails distinct roles: the sacrificer who performs the act, the authority to whom the sacrifice is made, and – in the case of human sacrifice – the victim. The sacrificer offers up something of value in order to survive a threat, or to improve the conditions of a community. The victim gives up his or her life, but may leave behind the memory of having made a contribution to the community. The authority in whose honor the sacrifice is made receives it physically or symbolically, and benefits from the prestige of recognition.

If all could agree that slavery involved sacrifice, each tended to see his own sacrifice as central, and each tended to define the sacrificing community rather narrowly. African parents sacrificed their children involuntarily to the attacks of slave raiders, and reluctantly but sometimes voluntarily to the assault of famine and the demands of tax collectors. African monarchs and merchants handed their slaves over to European merchants, and accepted money and gifts in return. But they too could claim to be acting out the will of the gods. They could claim to be using their compensation to provide nourishment and hope for their communities, just as, in time of famine, one might sacrifice an ox in honor of the gods, yet divide the meat among the community.

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The slaves themselves – the millions sentenced to death or transportation – were clearly and uniquely the sacrificial victims. Yet in another sense, those slaves who survived were also sacrificers, for they had to contribute their energies to the wealth of a new community. At the same time, plantation owners saw the sacrifice as their own, considering the sums they had to pay and the food they had to advance for slaves before they could achieve any profit. The fact that they defined the slaves as outside their community made it easy to ignore slave contributions either as victims or as sacrificers. Through such reasoning the planters, much like African merchants and monarchs, could see themselves as sacrificers rather than as exploiters.

The authorities on whose altars slaves were sacrificed were both temporal and spiritual. Slaves taken by the Aro, an elite religious clan of eastern Nigeria, were sacrificed to the great oracle of Arochukwu – “eaten” by it – as the first step of their journey to the coast. Secular African authorities – monarchs and warlords – benefitted as much as did African gods. In the New World, slaves were sacrificed to the worldly ambitions of merchants and planters. The victims, once baptized, contributed as well to the glory of the Christian God.

In this complex web of need and greed, the nature, the meaning, and the effectiveness of the sacrifice are seen to shift with the standpoint of the participants. Sacrifice, at its best, strengthens and ultimately rewards a community, brings honor to the victim, ennobles the act of sacrifice, and propitiates the authority for whom it is performed. But sacrifice need not achieve its aims. There is the waste of an investment with no return, and the waste of a human sacrifice which brings neither honor to the victim nor recognition to the sacrificer.

Slavery brought material benefit – growth, if not equitable distribution – to the New World. More than 10 million slave immigrants reached the New World, where they performed much of the earliest, dirtiest, and most exhausting work of constructing an economic system which has since prospered enormously.⁶ Slavery brought material benefits to Africa as well: not only in the form of goods purchased in exchange for slaves, but also through centers of manufacture and culture such as the city of Kano in the Nigerian savanna, whose nineteenth-century brilliance was due to the labor of slaves. In each of these cases the sacrifice yielded a tangible gain, but with a disproportionate level of waste: the devastation of the areas raided for slaves, the many lives lost in transit to the New World, and the many more lives brought to an early end in bondage.

The spiritual benefits and costs of slavery are more difficult to trace, but are no less important. They were distributed inequitably and with ironic consequences. For a time, the sacrifice of Africans did contribute to the glory of the Christian God, to worship of the idol of the market-place, and to prostration before the secular icons of western civilization. Yet as time went on, the continued enslavement of Africans brought each of these into

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question. Leaders of the Christian faith, prophets of the new industrial order, and philosophers of civilization's development each turned against slavery as the eighteenth century came to an end. Thus the sacrifice of slavery ultimately brought about its own repudiation and a change in the ideals of the western world. Ironically, however, in the course of their enlightenment western leaders forgot the contributions of slaves to Christian faith, to economic progress, and to civilization's advance. The very term "western civilization" serves to arrogate full credit for the present economic supremacy of the Atlantic nations to its European ancestors. Once the African sacrifice was forgotten, the rise of racism followed logically upon the end of slavery. Yet a further irony is that African gods and African ideals, having succumbed to the confusion of slavery, yielded for a time to conquest.

The dramatic images of tragedy and the religious images of sacrifice will recur through the book. The form and the analysis of the book, however, are focused firmly on social science. My analysis gives emphasis to four social scientific aspects of slavery in Africa: demography, economics, social institutions, and ideology. Further, since it is a historian who is drawing these materials together, the reader will not be surprised to find a strong emphasis on the factor of time: a given event can affect events which follow it in time, but not those which precede it.

This book is not only about the past. It also asks how the world of today should respond to the heritage of past inequities. To the extent that there is emerging a world community in this late twentieth century, it seems to rely on the notion that there should be equality of opportunity for all people, regardless of origin. Yet the reality of inequality confronts us daily: racial, sexual, and national discrimination, compounded by the vast economic gulf separating the wealthy nations from the poor. Many of these inequalities are inherited from past times, though some inequalities continue to grow. Slavery and the slave trade have all but completely passed from the face of the earth, yet their effects remain with us in racial, sexual, and economic inequality.

What sort of compensation should be granted to those who have suffered the exploitation of slavery, colonialism, or gender inequality? What sort of guarantees should be implemented to reduce levels of inequality? What ideas should we emphasize to encourage the equality of opportunity we seek? The great dialogues between north and south, between male and female, which will continue for the rest of our lives, require answers to these questions in order to reach conclusions which expand equality of opportunity. These answers must be sought in part in our study of the nature and causes of past inequality.

An understanding of Africa and its problems today requires that we recognize the extent of the damage inflicted by slavery, that we recognize the essential role of New World demand for slaves in inflicting that damage,

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and that we also recognize how much of the damage to Africa was self-inflicted. On the other hand, we must recognize as well the astonishing flexibility, mutability, and resilience of African societies in the face of such inhuman pressures. Surely those who withstood the distortions of life under slavery had lessons to teach a wider world.

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The political economy of slavery in Africa

The story of slavery in the modern world is not a pretty story, nor an uplifting one. It is an unhappy chapter in our history which, one might think, is best forgotten, but scholars and readers continue to be fascinated with slavery, for slavery was not just an ancient institution which carried forth the inequalities of our earliest days, it was also an oppression important – and perhaps unavoidable – in the construction of our contemporary world. We live daily with the heritage of slavery, since black people in Africa, the Americas, and elsewhere are still victims of poverty and racial discrimination whose origins can be traced to the slave status of so many blacks in the past. But it is not only black people who carry forward the heritage of slavery. David Brion Davis, perhaps the most distinguished historian of modern slavery, has posed the issue in terms of the relationship between slavery and human progress.¹ That is, the accomplishments of which all of us in the late twentieth century are most proud – our economic advance, our progress toward freedom and equality – and which are in one sense a repudiation of slavery, came into existence in part because of the contribution of slavery and slaves to our economy, our society and our ideas.

Scholars have revealed a great deal of important information on slavery in Africa, and have published a number of good general studies.² But for most people outside of Africa, and perhaps even within Africa, the perception of the history of slavery focuses on the sugar and cotton plantations of the Americas, and leaves the African dimension of slavery as little more than a hazy outline. This book, therefore, is another attempt to summarize the impact of slavery on African life: an attempt to clarify African slavery and to set it in a world context.

The interpretive outlook that I will emphasize in the chapters below includes three interconnected points. First, there occurred a succession of transformations in African economic and social life from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, and these transformations were centered on institutions of slavery. Thus the slave trade, often pictured as one long misfortune for Africa, was instead a series of unfortunate transformations.

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My second main point is to show the degree to which these transformations were brought about through external impact. This external impact came mainly through European demand for slaves but also because of Middle Eastern and Asian demand. My third point is to show how these transformations were also the result of conflicts within African society – for instance, the conflict between the desire for individual aggrandizement and the desire for social welfare.

The plan of this study thus corresponds to an interpretation of African history in the modern period, and an interpretation of African history in the context of modern world history. Here I am using the term “modern” in the same way historians of Europe normally do, to refer to the period since 1500. This is a study of Africa in the period of maritime contact among the continents: the period of rising mercantile and industrial capitalism, and the period of national monarchies and nation states.

In order to make the presentation concise, I have concentrated the analysis on a few key points. First, the analysis emphasizes the demography of slavery, including the fertility, mortality, and migration of the slaves themselves and of the areas and populations from which they were drawn. Second, I emphasize the economics of slavery, and particularly the prices of slaves. The changing prices of slaves give an important indication of transformations in slavery more generally. Third, I emphasize the changing institutions of slavery in Africa. Here, the recent literature is particularly rich, and I am restricted to presenting only the most essential points out of a complex set of stories. In addition, I will give some attention to a fourth area, the ideology of slavery in Africa. The varying African beliefs which justified, limited, or condemned, slavery and the slave trade, while only sketchily documented, were none the less important.

The consideration of these several types of factors at once is an exercise in political economy. That term is less popular today than it has been in recent times, but it corresponds well to an analysis which, while based on the material conditions of life, also includes social structures, politics, and human consciousness as explicit elements in the analysis. It focuses on conflict and long-run change in the material and social conditions of human society.

The presentation also depends on being specific about geographic variation in African slavery and the slave trade. This requires being clear about the geography of the slave *origins* as well as of slave *destinations*. In the *origins* of slaves, I will work at three geographic levels: the *regional* level, with the slave-exporting portion of Africa broken into thirteen regions, as shown on map 1.1; *local* areas within those regions (such as the Fante, Asante, Brong, and Voltaic areas within the Gold Coast region); and three *sub-continental* zones, each consisting of an aggregation of several *regions*. These are the Western Coast, the Eastern Coast, and the Savanna and Horn.

As for the *destinations* of slaves, I have divided them into the *Occidental*

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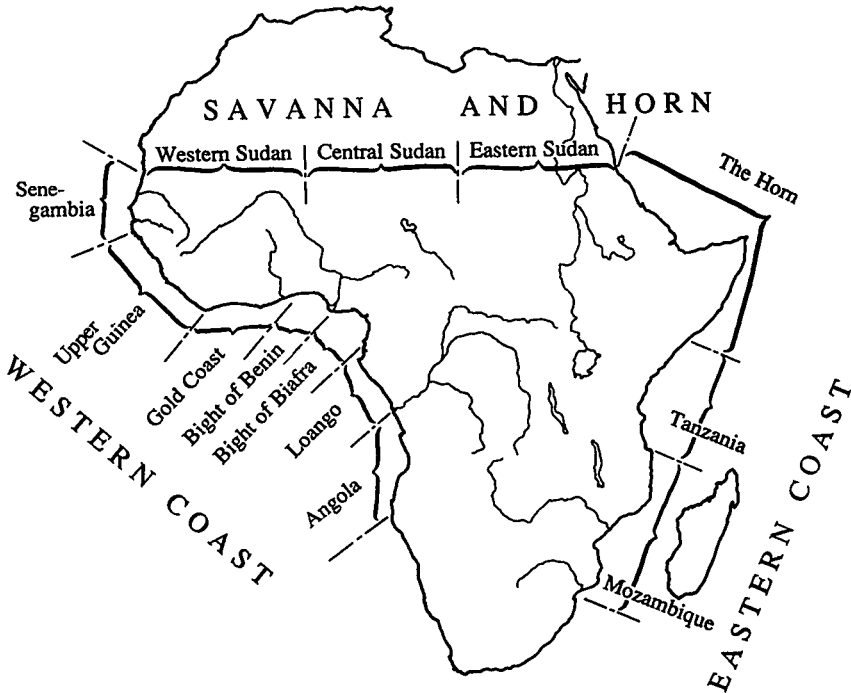
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Map 1.1. Slave origins

trade, the *Oriental* trade, and the *African* trade. This terminology is in some ways old-fashioned, but it helps to make clear some important distinctions and some important unities in the history of the slave trade, for it is a terminology which is cultural in its connotation as much as geographic. Thus it permits one to emphasize a certain unity in the traditions of slavery in the western world (or the world under western rule), by including Europe, the Americas, South Africa, and the Mascarene Islands under the single category of the Occidental trade. Or, to compare it with the more common terminology, the Atlantic slave trade was most but not all of the Occidental trade; the Indian Ocean trade included both Occidental and Oriental aspects, with the latter being numerically predominant. What I have called the Oriental trade is sometimes called the Islamic slave trade: but religion was hardly the point of the slave trade, and such a terminology would suggest that one compares the Islamic slave trade to the Christian slave trade. Further, to use the terms Islamic trade or Islamic world in this way is implicitly and erroneously to treat Africa as if it were outside of Islam, or as a negligible portion of the Islamic world.

Finally, this threefold terminology forces us to consider the African slave trade – that is, the slave trade from one African region to another – on the