Introduction

Rethinking the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade from a Cultural Perspective

In 1725 the English Captain George Roberts wrote a description of the Cabo Verde islands off the coast of West Africa (hereafter, Cabo Verde). He offered a glimpse of the former "glories" of this archipelago, which had been at the heart of the Atlantic world when that world was in the process of its tortured formation. In the late sixteenth century, Roberts wrote, there was "great Trade at St. Jago [the largest and most populous island, today called Santiago], Fuego [Fogo], Mayo, Bona Vista [Boavista], Sal and Brava … especially in Negros. They had Store of Sugar, Salt, Rice, Cotton, Wool, Ambergrease, Civet, Elephants' Teeth, Brimstone, Pumice-Stone, Spunge, and some Gold".[1] A close reading of Roberts's text reveals the source of such riches, for, he wrote, "Saint Jago formerly was the great Market for Negro Slaves, which were sent from thence immediately to the West Indies".[2]

Just four years before Roberts's book was published, an English surgeon, John Atkins, travelled between the peninsula of Cape Verde (where present-day Dakar is located; hereafter, the Cape Verde peninsula) and Whydah (present-day Benin). He described how "*panyarring* is a Term for Man-stealing along the whole Coast".[3] The headmen he met in the region of present-day Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia were called *caboceers*.[4] The term *panyarring* derived from the Portuguese *apanhar*, meaning to "catch" or "seize", and may also have been related to the term *penhorar*,

[1] NGC, Vol. 1, Book 2, 630.
[2] Ibid., 654.
[3] Atkins (1970: 53).
[4] Ibid., 58.

to "pledge".[5] Its use, along with *caboceer* – derived from the Portuguese *cabeça*, meaning "head" – showed how important the Portuguese role had been in procuring slaves and negotiating with African authorities. Research has indeed shown how slaves in Atlantic West Africa were usually either seized in warfare, offered for ransom after a raid, or pledged as security for credit and then sold into the Atlantic trade if the credit was not repaid.[6] Atkins's definition of *panyarring* suggests that by the eighteenth century the emphasis was increasingly on violence. As Atkins's compatriot Roberts implied, this process had begun on the African coast adjacent to Cabo Verde.

That this was a focal zone of the early trans-Atlantic slave trade is not a new discovery. Using James Lockhart's estimates for Peru, Philip Curtin suggested that between 1526 and 1550 almost 80 per cent of the slaves in the New World came from the region.[7] J. Ballong-wen-Menuda, Ivana Elbl and John Vogt showed that the early slave trade from Benin, Kongo and the Angola region fed the gold trade at Elmina, the sugar plantations of São Tomé and the trade in domestic slaves to Portugal.[8] This facilitated the prominence of Cabo Verde in the first slave trade to America; it would sit at the heart of early trans-Atlantic movements and ideas.

Yet like most parts of the African Atlantic, the region remains understudied in the early period. It was still possible for one of the key figures in the study of Atlantic slavery, David Eltis, to write not so long ago that the region "did not have strong trade connections with the Atlantic before 1700".[9] The reasons for this lack of emphasis are varied. Anglo-American schools of history have concentrated on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[10] Research on the earlier period is sparse and has concentrated on the lives of slaves in Spanish America.[11] There is therefore

[5] I am grateful for this definition to Everts (forthcoming, 2012: n15).
[6] Baum (1999); Thornton (1999: 3).
[7] Curtin (1975: 13); Lockhart (1968: 173).
[8] Ballong-wen-Menuda (1993) shows that Elmina procured slaves from Benin and São Tomé (Vol. 1, 160), with 800 slaves taken annually from São Tomé to Elmina in the early sixteenth century, (ibid., Vol. 1, 344–57). Elbl (1997)'s work shows that by 1520 most slaves in the Atlantic came from the Gulf of Guinea, bought by the settlers of São Tomé. Vogt (1979: 57–8, 70) describes the inter-regional trade between Benin, Elmina and São Tomé.
[9] Eltis (2000: 167).
[10] On this eighteenth/nineteenth century historiographical emphasis, see Newson/Minchin (2007: 1).
[11] Most recently Carroll (2001); Bennett (2003); Navarrete (2005); Maya Restrepo (2005). Such work builds on Bowser (1974). A recent break with this tradition is Newson/Minchin (2007). Mendes's (2007) doctoral thesis presents important findings on the early Atlantic trade, especially between Senegambia and Iberia. The early trans-Atlantic trade remains without a proper study.

a curious – and important – void. Surprisingly, this book offers the first full analysis of the rise of the trans-Atlantic slave trade from the area I term Western Africa, following George Brooks.[12]

This is a subject whose implications are large. In the fifteenth century, when European ships first arrived on the West African coast to procure slaves, the economic difference between Africa and Europe was not vast; yet by the nineteenth century, there was no denying the gulf.[13] Atlantic slavery had a powerful connection to this nineteenth-century economic discrepancy which had such influence on the colonial and post-colonial histories of Africa, being a necessary though not a sufficient cause of it. In those intervening four centuries, the militarism of large predatory states affected wider productive processes in the West African agricultural sector.[14] The proliferation of wars between states and micro-level conflicts between villages to extract labourers whose productive work benefited the economies of different societies and continents could only be negative. By the colonial era, the impact on the output, economic diversification and political stability of African societies had become apparent. There is therefore no doubting the importance of this subject, and by looking at the rise of Atlantic slavery in Western Africa we may see how it helped to change political economies and social institutions from the beginning, and how trans-Atlantic cultural and economic influences developed very early.

Many readers will feel that this focus raises concerns as much moral as historical. In present-day Guinea-Bissau, for instance, people are as well aware as any scholar of the significance of this subject. Not far from the modern town of Gabú, named after the powerful pre-colonial state of the same name, a friend once remarked to me: "The slave trade is over. You are not a slaver and I am not enslaved. It was our ancestors who did that, and so we must forget history." When I suggested that forgetting history condemned people to repeat the errors of their ancestors, he replied: "But if I remember, I'm going to get angry."

I hope that my friend will like this book and that it may even help to change his mind. Moral dimensions, as Ralph Austen wrote, "are a

[12] In a path-finding work, Brooks (1993b) uses the term "Western Africa" to include Senegambia (the area between the Senegal and Gambia Rivers), Upper Guinea (the area between the Gambia and Sierra Leone) and Cabo Verde, as I do here. Rodney (1970) dealt with the early Atlantic slave trade in part but omitted the first century of African-European exchanges which was when the trade originated.

[13] Inikori (1982b: 15).

[14] On Upper Guinea, see Baum (1999: 121–3), Hawthorne (2003) and Fields-Black (2009: Chapter 6).

concern behind any production of slave trade history".[15] Slavery has been a universal human institution and remains widespread, but Atlantic slavery holds an unusual importance for thinking about modernity, foreshadowing as it did racial consciousness and the industrialisation of global economies. Ultimately, any study of this process stands or falls on the integrity of its text, and a moral context should not lead to a moralising approach.[16] What we need to grasp is that ours is a world deeply connected to and shaped by the history discussed here, and yet it is irreparably distant from it.

PROBLEMS WITH A QUANTITATIVE APPROACH TO ATLANTIC SLAVERY

This book supports a growing body of work which argues for a shift in the focus of historical studies and the consequent memorialisation of Atlantic slavery. Whereas such studies have often concentrated on the quantitative issue of the numbers of slaves involved in the trade, a tendency which has been enhanced by the online publication of a revised version of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database (www.slavevoyages.org), work by scholars such as Judith Carney, Edda Fields-Black, Walter Hawthorne, Linda Heywood and John Thornton, and Gwendolyn Midlo Hall have shown the significance of a culturally centred approach.[17] Although their work remains controversial and has provoked dispute, it has shown the importance of understanding the histories of West Africa during the Atlantic era from the perspective of changing productive practices and social institutions; it has also emphasised the need to see human transfers from West Africa to the Americas not only through the prism of the labour needs of the plantation economy, but also in terms of identity, production and the built environment.[18] This book is supportive of such work; it argues that a quantitative emphasis distracts attention from seeing how the advent of Atlantic slavery affected African societies, and from

[15] Austen (2001: 236, 239).

[16] As Mendes (2007: 15) notes, discussions of Atlantic slavery tend to be moralising and omit the reality that most large-scale civilisations rely on forced labour. Austen (2001: 243) notes how, in Europe, discussion of the slave trade is approached through the lens of abolition. As the 2007 bicentenary of abolition of the slave trade by the British parliament confirmed, this permits an inauthentic and self-congratulatory moral narrative.

[17] Carney (2001); Fields-Black (2009); Hawthorne (2003; 2010); Heywood/Thornton (2007); G. Hall (2005).

[18] For some of the disputes which have arisen, see the discussion on "Black Rice" in the *American Historical Review* (115/1), January 2010.

thinking through what the cultural, political and social consequences of this phenomenon were.[19]

To make this point, I concentrate primarily on events in Western Africa itself. This requires engagement with cultural histories. Slaves sold into the Atlantic system via Cabo Verde in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries came from present-day Sierra Leone, Guinea-Bissau and the Casamance region of what today is southern Senegal. In the late fifteenth and first half of the sixteenth centuries, they also came from the Jolof and Sereer peoples who lived between the Senegal and Gambia Rivers in Senegambia.[20] The deep interconnections between these sub-regions of Western Africa emerge in accounts of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The Caboverdean trader André Alvares d'Almada described in the 1590s how dyes were procured in the Nunes River (present-day Guinea-Conakry) and shipped north to the São Domingos River (present-day Guinea-Bissau), where they were exchanged for slaves and provisions.[21] The Dutch sailor Dirck Ruiters wrote in 1623 how salt was taken from the Caboverdean islands of Maio and Sal to Sierra Leone and traded there for gold, ivory and kola nuts. The goods obtained in Sierra Leone were then taken north of the Gambia to Joal and Portudal, where kola was traded for cotton cloths. The Caboverdean traders then went south to Cacheu on the São Domingos River, where the rest of the goods from Sierra Leone were exchanged for slaves. From Cacheu, the traders returned to the archipelago.[22]

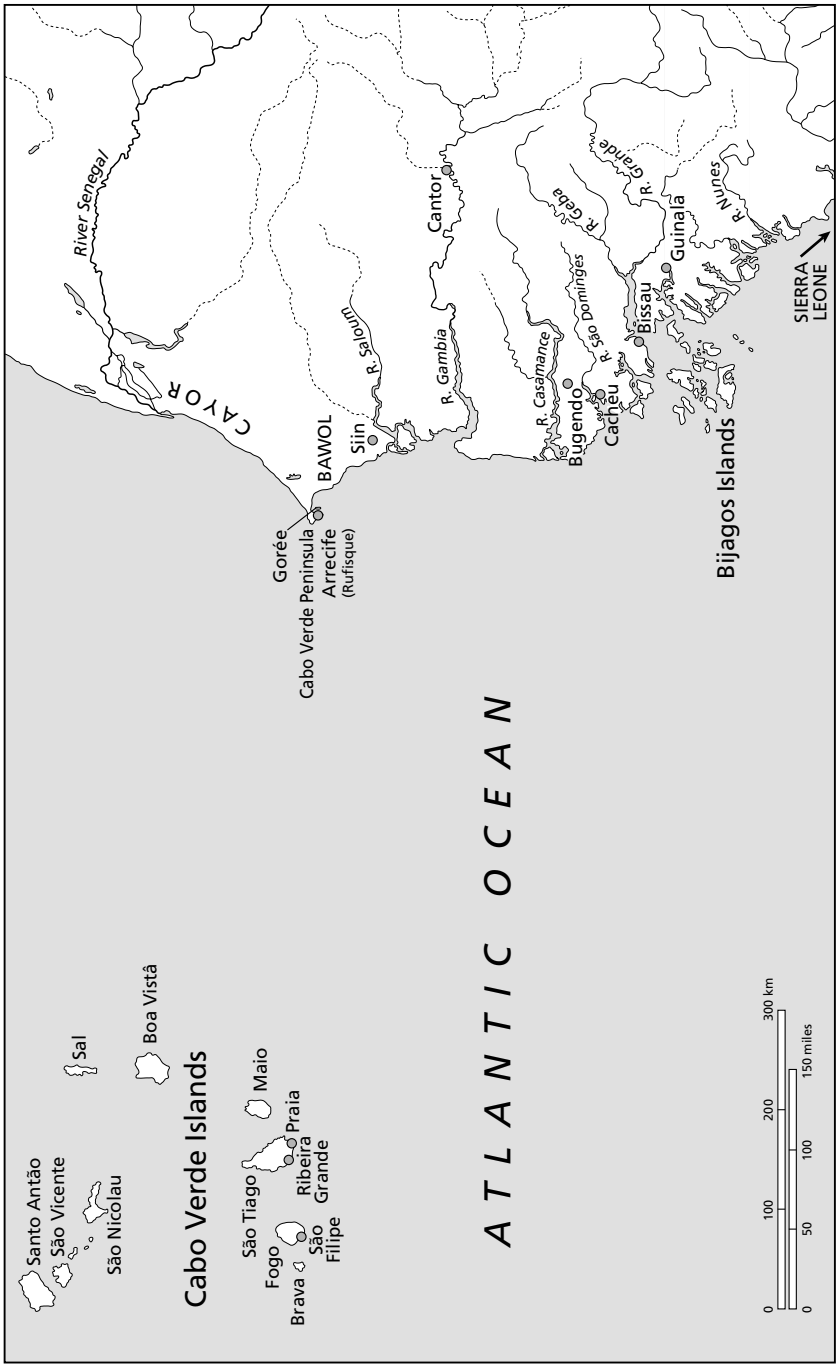
This rich network of trade could not have developed without some pre-existing frameworks of both commercial and cultural exchange. It turns out that the former great wealth of Cabo Verde, alluded to by the Englishman George Roberts in the eighteenth century, depended not only on the commercial realities of slavery but also on those cultural exchanges which allowed the slave trade to develop in the first place.

[19] Though some scholars have criticised "culturalist" paradigms as static and homogenising of the complexity of human societies, I share the view of Ulf Hannerz (1996: 31–63) that the idea of "culture", though imperfect, is ultimately one of the best explanatory ideas we have to understand how human societies operate in both material and ritual terms. Hannerz powerfully argues that culture is acquired in social life; thus its acquisition varies according to social contexts which themselves reflect shifting material and ritual patterns of given times and places; this shifting context allows cultures to change along with that context, so that the idea of "culture" does not enforce a static view.

[20] For a fuller description of these sub-regions of Western Africa, see below, Chapter 1, Introductory Section.

[21] MMAII: Vol. 3, 342.

[22] Cit. Brooks (1993b: 157).



MAP 1. Map of Western Africa: Rivers of Guinea and Cabo Verde Islands.

Here we glimpse why studies of Atlantic slavery in an African context must focus on cultural questions as well as on quantitative data.

The quantitative focus derives from Philip Curtin's famous "census" of Atlantic slavery.[23] Yet although Curtin made many important contributions to the study of African societies, his estimates of slave exports for the sixteenth century were far too low. His figures proposed an average of 1,098 slaves a year leaving Senegambia and Upper Guinea (cf. note 12 for definitions of both these geographical zones) for America and Europe between 1526 and 1550.[24] They suggested an annual average of only 421 slaves exported from all of Upper Guinea in the period 1551–1595.[25] However these figures are unsustainable. They take no account of the vast contraband trade, in which evidence shows that slave exports were four and even five times the officially registered cargo.[26] They also ignore the evidence implying social change in Upper Guinea which does not tally with these low numbers. Moreover, it is impossible to square these figures with the labour needs of the New World following the demographic collapse of the Native Americans in the sixteenth century, a need which could not have been met by such a small influx of African labour.

Rightly, these figures have been derided as indicative of a "great level of underestimate".[27] Historians have attempted to recalibrate them. Eltis suggests doubling Curtin's estimate of 75,000 slave exports for the sixteenth century to 150,000.[28] The new Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database proposes a revised estimate of 196,940 slaves shipped to the Americas between 1501 and 1590 at an annual average of 2,188, of which 143,316 came from the part of Africa examined by this book, producing an annual average of 1,592.[29] Yet even this does not do justice to

[23] Curtin (1969).
[24] Ibid., 101.
[25] Ibid., 108–10; Bühnen (1993: 83).
[26] For evidence on this, see Green (2007b: 246); and also Wheat (2009) for the seventeenth century. Cf. also below, Chapters 6 and 7. Mark and Horta's analysis of the contraband trade in the second decade of the seventeenth century also suggests the need to substantially increase estimates for exported slaves from Upper Guinea (Mark/Horta 2011: 165–71).
[27] Inikori (1982b: 20); see also Barry (1998: 39–40).
[28] Eltis (2001: 23–4); see also Mellafe (1975: 72–3), who suggests doubling the ratio of slaves/tonnage of shipping allowed for by Curtin to account for the contraband trade. Curtin criticises this because it is double the ratio permitted by the contracts (Curtin 1969: 24 n.13). However, Mellafe's strategy brings us much nearer the reality than Curtin's approach.
[29] www.slavevoyages.org, data accessed May 15, 2011. Much of this important new research was carried out by António Mendes. See Mendes (2007: 451–73) and Mendes (2008).

the need to rethink this early trade. It is still possible for scholars to imply that Western Africa was not a region where enslavement for the Atlantic trade was commonplace.[30] Moreover, these figures themselves still represent significant underestimates. They only allow a 10 per cent surplus for contraband and nothing at all for undocumented illegal voyages.[31] Yet several important scholars of the sixteenth-century Atlantic trade are broadly agreed of both the importance of the contraband trade and the difficulties of using official figures as a benchmark to estimate them.[32]

This book shows that this approach is unsatisfactory. Important new documentary records which I discuss here reveal that even to raise these annual average estimates from Western Africa to approximately 2,500 slaves per year from 1525–50 and 5,000 per year from 1550–1590 represents a conservative approach (cf. Chapters 6 and 7). Yet these are not the sort of records which can readily be accommodated by the requirements of existing tools of quantitative analysis, such as those on which the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database are founded. It may indeed be that the records used in this book indicate the methodological problems inherent in trying to produce a database, broadly using the same techniques, when that database covers a vast temporal period in which the institutional context of metropolitan power lying behind the production of records varied enormously.

So in spite of the significance of the quantitative findings in this book, I do not take a quantitative approach. The problem is that the quantitative approach "remains locked into the same questions that scholars have asked since the publication of Philip Curtin's *The Atlantic Slave Trade*".[33] In general, a reliance on quantitative methods depends on the comprehensiveness of imperfect European bureaucracies, as Hall and Hawthorne have argued.[34] It may well be that, as Joseph Miller once suggested, gross export figures "have no meaning either in human terms or in perceiving the operational complexity and diversity of the [trans-Atlantic slave] trade".[35] As António Mendes has written, the responses of societies to this trade are a great deal more complex than the mechanical

[30] Heywood/Thornton (2007: 48) – "West Central Africa … was the one region in Africa … where enslavement for the Atlantic trade was commonplace".
[31] Mendes (2007: 470) and (2008: 80) allows 10 per cent surplus for contraband.
[32] Amaral (1996: 68) argues that the contraband from Angola to Brazil was very large from 1575 onwards; and Torrão (2010: 8) notes the difficulties of the separation of official figures from the contraband trade.
[33] G. Hall (2010: 139).
[34] G. Hall (2010); Hawthorne (2010a).
[35] Miller (1976b: 76).

compilation of the statistics of the trade can allow.[36] The database is of course important, and it is proving extremely useful to historians trying to match up origins of slaves in Africa and destinations in America, which can show how African skills were employed in the Americas. And of course, David Eltis and David Richardson are right to suggest that there are connections between quantitative discoveries and cultural patterns and influences. Indeed, this is exemplified by this book's argument for an increased volume of trade in the sixteenth century, which is of course connected to the increased patterns of violent disorder in Western Africa and the consequent socio-political corollaries emphasised here.[37] Other approaches, however, need to be considered. Indeed, as Eltis himself has perceptively written elsewhere, "in the end any economic interpretation of history risks insufficient probing of the behaviour of people. At the very least, it will run the risk of missing the cultural parameters within which economic decisions are made".[38]

This book thus looks primarily at cultural, political and ritual changes in Western Africa, dealing step by step with the early trans-Atlantic trade. It does not discuss the details of European individuals holding licences to ship slaves and the operation of their financial arrangements.[39] That is not to say that in an African context economic issues do not matter; they illustrate the problems of economic development which hamper African societies today, the origins of which may be related to the nature of the economic exchanges connected to the Atlantic slave trade and the trajectory of agricultural production in Africa (cf. Chapter 3). Yet the cultural, political and social consequences of that trade matter as much, if not more, from an African perspective. For if, as Stephan Bühnen notes, in the second half of the sixteenth century 20 per cent of all New World slaves came from just one Upper Guinean people – the Brame – one must ask why.[40] This is a question which debating Curtin's figures or analysing the credit operations in the European banking system will never answer. It is a question which forces us to go beyond the narrow focus of "number".

[36] Mendes (2007: 15): "*les réponses sont plus complexes que ne le laisse entendre la compilation des chiffres monstrueux de la traite atlantique*". This is also recognised in Eltis (2000: 2).
[37] Eltis/Richardson (2008b).
[38] Eltis (2000: 284).
[39] This is the subject of a book very soon to be published by Maria Manuel Ferraz Torrão of the Instituto de Investigação Científica Tropical of Lisbon, who in her research also deals with issues of quantification, destinations of slaves in the Spanish Americas and the interplay of Portuguese and Spanish empires in the early Atlantic.
[40] Bühnen (1993: 101); see also O'Toole (2007) for more data on the Brame in Peru and for a nuanced picture of Brame "ethnicity" in the Americas.

CREOLISATION AND THE SLAVE TRADE IN WESTERN AFRICA

Bühnen suggested that the reason for the predominance of Western Africa in the Atlantic slaving networks of the sixteenth century lay in local factors, and surely he is right.[41] Yet we must also go beyond local explanations to look at a more pervasive Atlantic phenomenon: that of creolisation. For the beginning of this major phenomenon in world history – the trans-Atlantic slave trade – cannot be separated from the development of one of the first Creole societies in the Atlantic world.

In this book, I support the culturally centred body of literature on Atlantic slavery mentioned in the previous section through the development of creolisation. By looking at the phenomena of creolisation and the slave trade together, we see how the two were related. The relevance of local factors to this process may relate to how existing cultural formations in Western Africa facilitated the rise of what was, along with São Tomé, the first Atlantic Creole society. By also showing the importance of Western Africa to the early trans-Atlantic slave trade, I argue that this region's experience created patterns which helped to set the tone for the trade from West-Central Africa to the Americas recently analysed by Heywood and Thornton.[42]

Indeed, the importance of these early developments in Western Africa emerges most fully when we consider the broad influence this period had. As Curtin wrote with regard to plantation slavery, this period "established the relationships that continued into the period of more extensive trade that was to follow".[43] Yet the relevance of the sixteenth century is not confined just to practicalities. It also relates to ideological transformations, as the English borrowed wholesale from the Iberians in their ideas concerning the New World. Explorers such as Raleigh borrowed Spanish phrases such as "*tierra firme*" to describe their findings.[44] From the early sixteenth century onwards, they discussed widely with the Spanish in the Americas.[45] Once installed in Barbados in the 1620s, the English turned to Brazil to borrow both the techniques of sugar plantation and refinery as well as the use of enslaved African labour to maximise sugar

[41] Bühnen (1993:102).
[42] Heywood/Thornton (2007).
[43] Curtin (1998: 43). Torrão (2010: 1) also holds study of the sixteenth century as key if we are to understand how the systems of the seventeenth century emerged.
[44] Hakluyt (1904: Vol. 8, 298): "we arrived upon the coast, which we supposed to be a continent and firme lande".
[45] Ibid., Vol. 10, 2, on English presence in Puerto Rico in 1516. On the early influence of the Spanish on the English in America, see Elliott (2006: 11–12, 15).