REVIEW ARTICLE

SLAVERY AND THE SLAVE TRADE IN COLONIAL AFRICA

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The European conquerors of Africa found themselves to be rulers of slave populations whose numbers reached into the millions. The new rulers, rather than emancipate the slaves they encountered, adopted gradualist policies; they abolished overt slave trade, and later de-legalized slavery. While censuses of interwar slave populations were hardly feasible, it may be that several million Africans remained in slavery in 1920, a total perhaps comparable to the number of New World slaves in 1860.1

This collection of essays addresses directly the problem of slavery in twentieth-century Africa.2 The title emphasizes the end of slavery, yet the content of the chapters gives almost equal emphasis to the continuation of slavery well into the colonial era. Suzanne Miers, co-editor of a well-known collection which focused on nineteenth-century slavery, has now joined with Richard Roberts to produce this sequel.3 Roberts and Miers introduce the book with an interpretive dilemma: ‘Slavery in Africa sometimes ended suddenly, causing widespread disruption, and sometimes pattered out with apparently minimal repercussions. Some scholars, therefore, see its demise as precipitating a crisis, while others view it as a “nonevent”.’4

Did the world of African slave-holders end with a bang or with a whimper? Various contributions to the volume support each alternative. Raymond Dumett and the late Marion Johnson, contesting Gerald McSheffrey’s earlier analysis, argue that the ending of slavery in Gold Coast ‘must be one of the quieter social revolutions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries’. Jan Hogendorn and Paul Lovejoy emphasize Lugard’s careful efforts to ensure a gradual and smooth end to slavery among the Hausa. Richard Roberts, in contrast, provides

2 The two main recent monographs on twentieth-century slavery are Frederick Cooper, From Slaves to Squatters (New Haven, 1989); and John Grace, Domestic Slavery in West Africa, with Particular Reference to the Sierra Leone Protectorate, 1896–1927 (New York, 1975). In particular, the volume under review picks up at the continental level the questions of the transition from slavery to systems of ‘free labour’ which Cooper laid out for the Kenya coast.
3 Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff (eds.), Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives (Madison, 1975).
4 Richard Roberts and Suzanne Miers, ‘The end of slavery in Africa’, in Miers and Roberts, End of Slavery, 3. The unpublished paper by this reviewer which (according to Miers in the Preface [p. xvii]) helped to pose this dilemma is Patrick Manning, ‘The conventional wisdom of African slavery’ (Montreal, 1972).
precise data on the flight of slaves from the Banamba and Gumbu regions of French Soudan, their return to their natal regions, and the reluctant move of their abandoned masters and mistresses back into the fields. Dennis Cordell’s study of Ubangi-Shari confirms the continuation of slavery until the enforcement of French rule in 1911, followed by the rapid collapse of the slave trade and the return of agriculture to the region.

Roberts and Miers, in an effort to explain the variety of these experiences, address a series of related issues. They observe that colonial policy in Africa followed the British India model, ending the legal recognition of slavery, rather than emancipating slaves according to the British West Indies model. The results deepened the ambiguities of the end of the African slavery. Roberts and Miers consider the degree to which African slavery was benign in its treatment of slaves, the social consequences of the end of slavery, and the nature of ‘freedom’ for African slaves – that is, the labour systems and ideologies shaping their lives after slavery. The editors identify certain general patterns – pawning expanded as slavery declined, and the work of colonial forced-labour projects fell heavily on ex-slaves – but otherwise find little consensus among the contributors. They conclude in perplexity: ‘We suggest that the main lesson of this volume is that we need to treat all evidence with skepticism, and resist the temptation to try to generalize from the few examples we now have.’

In contrast to this comprehensive but tentative introduction, the concluding chapter by Igor Kopytoff provides bold generalizations on a restricted set of issues. Kopytoff argues that Europeans, in a ‘Whiggish amalgam of Enlightenment political philosophy and nineteenth-century bourgeois economism’, misperceived African cultural notions of ‘slavery’ and incorrectly predicted slave rebellion and social upheaval as a concomitant of colonial rule. As a corrective, Kopytoff offers an ‘anthropology of emancipation’ based on identifying ‘a cultural ambience in which dependency was regarded not as onerous or dishonorable but as necessary and desirable’. He estimates ‘a relatively normal desertion rate of 10–25 percent’ among slaves in the colonial era. Thus for Kopytoff, rebellion and alienation offered poor choices to slaves (who, after all, were kinless) as compared with maintaining or revising ties of dependency to their masters. While Kopytoff notes several important reforms brought by the end of slavery, he gives greater emphasis to the ‘remarkable structural continuity through the period of abolition’ in African societies.

The contributions separating the introduction from the conclusion focus significantly on the continuum separating revolution from reform in the end of slavery. But they address other issues as well, and in varying time perspectives. One group of studies analyses the early colonial years, from the end of the nineteenth century to World War I. Michael Twaddle’s insightful study of Buganda highlights the well-chosen political decision of the Protestant chiefs to call for the abolition of slavery in 1893, and effectively contrasts the ‘new order’ of peasant farmers under estate-holding chiefs to a previous order in which slavery had been expanding dramatically. Martin Klein details the decision of slaves in Rio Nunez to cease working for their masters in 1908. He notes that they were perhaps alone among those in French Guinea to rebel, but he argues that in so doing these slaves significantly redressed the balance of social forces in the colony. David Northrup traces, for the Eastern Congo, the succession of Zanzibari enslavement, Congo Free State labour recruitment, and heavy Belgian taxation. He argues, in effect, that social revolution need not entail emancipation.

5 Roberts and Miers, ‘End of Slavery’, 51.
A second group of studies carries the story of the end of slavery through the interwar years. Suzanne Miers and the late Michael Crowder trace the end of Basarwa 'slavery' in colonial Bechuanaland, and show that the administration and Tshekedi Khama, regent of Bamangwato, had conflicting ideas on how the 'new order' (to appropriate Twaddle's phrase) should be structured. Thomas Herlehey and Rodger Morton tell the remarkable story of the WaMisheni, a mission-based maroon community which grew up on the Kenya coast around a Bombay African missionary and whose members achieved considerable upward mobility for two generations. Lee Cassanelli notes that Somali client cultivators and East African slaves (ranging from Yao to Kikuyu) in Somalia came, after Italian abolition of the slave trade, to be confounded as *liberti*, and that both were recruited for forced labour. James McCann documents the continuation of slavery and the slave trade in northern Ethiopia into the interwar years, and the relationship of slavery and anti-slavery to Ethiopian political factions. Slaves in Mauritania became *haratin* or ex-slaves with the arrival of the French shortly after 1900: E. Ann McDougall shows the continuing influence of this servile status, as she traces the poverty and prosperity of the haratin for another fifty years. Don Ohadike notes both the continuation of small-scale enslavement and the links between slavery and forced labour among the Igbo after World War I.

Two studies on Portuguese territories highlight the mid-nineteenth-century efforts of Lisbon to abolish slavery in its African territories, and the utter failure of those efforts in the face of a new wave of enslavement late in the century. In Mozambique, according to Allen Isaacman and Anton Rosenthal, the Chikunda slave warriors of the *prazos*, once freed in about 1850, become ivory hunters, then slave dealers, and some of them later became the *sepaís* or police of the growing colonial structure. In Angola, as Linda Heywood shows, slavery was transformed and expanded between 1890 and 1910, and this transformation was followed by a struggle among settlers, the state, and Ovimbundu leaders for control of labour.

The approach of the authors and editors of this volume focuses on a narrative and descriptive approach to the end of slavery. In emphasizing sensitivity to the many twists and turns on the road to abolition, they have provided an overall picture of a half-century of gradual and incremental change. The years from 1880 to 1940 appear as one long, transitional period: the gradual demise of a continental system of slavery, with myriad local variations and occasional outbursts of protest.

If the editors had taken a more analytical and comparative approach, they might have found a pattern more specific than the gradual dissolution of slavery. In particular, if they had discussed more explicitly the relations among slavery, slave trade and state power, they would have highlighted the institutional changes in African slavery as it entered the twentieth century. And if they had compared their studies with studies of nineteenth-century slavery in Africa and the Americas they would not only have sharpened their own analysis, but could have pointed out problems in these other literatures. To state the critique in positive terms, the contributors to this volume have shown that slavery can survive without the slave trade and without state support: the editors should have given greater attention to these results.

Claude Meillassoux's brilliant analysis of slavery in the precolonial Western Sudan seems to reflect a world apart from that pictured in the Miers and Roberts volume. Meillassoux asserts that slave populations were unable to reproduce themselves, because of the extremity of their exploitation; servile populations which reproduced themselves, in these terms, were *serfs* rather than *slaves*.\(^7\) He set aside as special cases the nineteenth-century New World systems where slavery

continued after the abolition of the overseas slave trade (yet where domestic slave dealing continued). But the Miers and Roberts volume makes clear that in Africa, too, slavery lasted as long as fifty years beyond the abolition of the slave trade. This makes it appear that Meillassoux overstated his case in arguing that slavery becomes serfdom once the recruitment of new slaves ends. Here is one issue for which it would have been helpful if Roberts and Miers had emphasized sharp distinctions as well as multiform gradations in social status: which persons were slaves and which were ex-slaves in twentieth-century Africa? Clearly, many African slaves became ex-slaves of one sort or another once the colonial era began. But just as clearly, many Africans remained slaves, if now in ‘benign’ systems of slavery newly adjusted to current conditions. To know the rough proportions of each would be to learn much about the adaptability of slavery as a social system once slave raiding is ended.

On the other hand, while American and African cases show that abolition of the slave trade need not halt the reproduction of slave systems, Meillassoux’s analysis certainly makes clear that the mode of reproduction of slavery must change when slave imports cease: demography, prices, division of labour and relations of deference all changed. Confronting Meillassoux with Miers and Roberts shows that, where Meillassoux has given us one analysis of the political economy of slavery, we need two: one with slave imports and one without. We also need an analysis of the socio-economic transformation from the first to the second.

The closest we have to an analysis of the transformation is in the literature on Caribbean slavery. The works of B. W. Higman and Michael Craton, together, give ample evidence of the changing structure of prices and demand in the last years of the slave trade, and the increased emphasis on keeping slaves alive. They document the rapid change in the sex ratio and the decline in total slave population. In addition David Eltis has recently shown, for the Atlantic trade, the increasing demand for female and child slaves in the last days of imports, and the rising prices of slaves once imports are cut off. Several chapters in the Miers and Roberts volume show equivalent responses in twentieth-century Africa: McCann, Cassanelli and Heywood note the increase in slave prices once imports are cut off, and McCann notes the changes in age and sex structure of slave demand, as well as in the division of labour. Yet the well-developed Caribbean literature and the new work on Africa remain sketchy in the area where Meillassoux’s theory is strongest: the social relations of master and slave, parent and child, in a slave system. For both the Caribbean and Africa, data surely exist which could be applied to studying the social character of the transition from slavery with the slave trade to slavery without the slave trade.

The literature on slavery in the United States, in contrast, has concentrated heavily on the half-century of slavery without the slave trade (1868–1963), and almost not at all on the adjustments made when slave imports ended. The American transition was made easier, certainly, by the high rate of population growth among slaves there. But the literature on eighteenth-century American slavery opens the possibility for investigating changes in institutions of slavery there with the end of the slave trade.  


The links of slavery and the slave trade are intricately bound up in relations between slavery and the state. It appears from the chapters in *The End of Slavery in Africa*, however, that slavery was able to survive in Africa without the support of the colonial state. This is contrary to the theories of Meillassoux and of Orlando Patterson. The issue is confounded for two reasons. First, in numerous cases (as the chapters in Miers and Roberts show), colonial states did support slavery, by returning slaves to their owners and by actually enslaving persons. Second, after abolition of the legal status of slavery, colonial states chose to deny the continuing reality of slavery by announcing tautologically that anyone wishing to have his or her freedom could have it. A third complication was the ambiguous and changing nature of colonial frontiers and colonial legal systems. The question of who held state power was not resolved unambiguously in some corners of the colonies until late in the interwar years.

British, French, and American slavery in the New World entailed unambiguous relations between state and slave-holder. Even when overseas movement of slaves was abolished, the state protected the property rights of slave owners, including the right to sell their property. This appears to contrast sharply with most African cases, where the colonial state provided only reluctant support for the rights of slave-owners. Slavery in the former Spanish colonies of the New World, however, ended with a succession of gradual reforms remarkably similar to many African cases.

The relations among slavery, the slave trade and the state in colonial Africa would have been clarified somewhat if the editors had analysed more of the terminological issues arising in the various contributions. The editors and contributors use the term 'abolition' to refer to the end of slavery as well as to the end of the slave trade. It might be said that they have opted for a 'North American' usage (in which the term *abolitionism* refers to all anti-slavery activities) rather than an 'Atlantic' usage (which distinguishes the *abolition* of the slave trade from the *emancipation* of slaves). Miers and Roberts ought not only to distinguish abolition from emancipation, but should add a term for what might be called 'de-legalization' of slavery. That is, the 'abolition' of slavery in Africa generally meant abolition of the legal status but not the social institutions of slavery. Colonial officials used the term 'abolition' of slavery to obfuscate the continued if extra-legal existence of slavery. Modern scholars need not propagate this obfuscation. Raising this distinction leads only to the suggestion of more: abolition of the slave trade must be divided, for Africa, into the abolition of the overseas slave trade, the

10 Meillassoux, *Anthropologie de l’esclavage*; Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), 2–3. Patterson, however, places greater emphasis on the role of violence in maintaining masters’ dominance over slaves than he does on the need for imports to sustain slave populations.


abolition of slave raids which recruited new slaves in Africa, and the abolition of ‘slave dealing’ or the sale of persons earlier enslaved.

Roberts and Miers wisely distinguish pressures for ending slavery from the various colonial governments, on the one hand, from ‘international’ pressures of other governments or from international public opinion. In some cases African slaves were emancipated by an act of the state; in more cases, slaves emancipated themselves through court action or through desertion once slavery was de-legalized. Here the dichotomous New World terminology distinguishing slaves from freedmen needs to be replaced with more gradations. The terminological arena encompasses both the process of change in slave status (e.g. revolt, flight, desertion, renegotiation, accommodation) and the resulting status itself (e.g. peasant, freedman, wage labourer). For those slaves who remained in place after de-legalization – clearly the majority of the total – identification of their social status is a difficult matter, since it was defined in terms of ‘customary’ law which itself experienced great change under the colonial aegis. Some of these became ex-slaves: the haratin in Mauritania and the squatters in coastal Kenya achieved a servile status distinct from slavery. Many others, however, seem to have lived out their lives in slavery.

In sum, the authors and editors of The End of Slavery in Africa have contrasted two models of the end of slavery: its incremental dissolution as against its transformation through discrete stages. For both approaches, they have glossed over the first stage (the abolition of the slave trade) and have focused on the second main stage (the emancipation of slaves). Igor Kopytoff emphasizes that the latter transition was peaceful, in that most slaves sought a new condition of dependency rather than expose themselves to losing everything in revolt. One could argue that the earlier transition to slavery without the slave trade was also peaceful, in that enslavement declined sharply and slaves generally declined to rise up in revolt. Yet the relative social peace of these transitions should not obscure the fact that each represented a major change in the institutions for reproducing African social orders, and it should not inhibit historians from discovering and describing those institutional changes.

Kopytoff has emphasized the uniqueness and the resilience of African social formations and African ideology as reasons why the survival and the fall of slavery are to be understood differently for Africa than for other regions. The argument is compellingly expressed, yet an interesting alternative to it is to be found in Joseph Miller’s recent study of the Angolan slave trade. Miller too argues for the importance of culturally specific social formations and ideology in Angola, yet also gives emphasis to the repeated restructuring of African views and social structures as a result of their participation in the network of Atlantic slave trade. In short, Afrocentricity need not mean cultural continuity.

Thus the ever-present theme of continuity and change in African society presents itself in yet another reincarnation. It is to the credit of Miers and Roberts that they have precipitated a new discussion of this old issue by drawing together a wealth of information on slavery and its demise in twentieth-century Africa. They have documented the variety of local experiences in the end of slavery and in the transition to new systems of labour. The success of the authors in specifying these changes should help focus more attention on changing labour systems and legal systems as factors in Africa’s modern social history. As important as the new empirical data, finally, is the potential this book reveals for the use of twentieth-century African cases in the analysis of the more general relationships among slavery, the slave trade and state power.