

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

economic and political domination. In this case, slavery became essential to the reproduction of the social formation.

The emphasis on the integration of a productive system based on slavery with the means of replenishing the supply of slaves has significance in the reconstruction of the history of slavery in its African context. This framework highlights three historical situations that were partially related and partially autonomous. Firstly, it provides a perspective for analyzing the interaction between Africa and the demand for slaves in the Islamic world of North Africa and the Middle East. Secondly, it emphasizes the connection between Africa and the Americas, where African slaves were essential to plantation production and the mining sector. Thirdly, it allows for a study of the widespread productive use of slaves in Africa, particularly in the nineteenth century after the external slave trade across the Atlantic collapsed. In all three situations, a mode of production based on slavery developed, but specific characteristics differed. The framework adopted here – the distinction between slavery as a marginal feature of society, slavery as an institution, and slavery as a mode of production – is meant to facilitate a study of these three different situations.

The debate in the theoretical literature between Marxists and non-Marxists and among Marxists themselves has inspired this conceptual framework, but there are clear differences in my use of “mode of production” and “social formation” and their use by other scholars. I disagree emphatically with the approach of Samir Amin, Barry Hindess, Paul Q. Hirst, and others who employ a framework drawn from the interpretation of Louis Althusser, because, as these scholars readily admit, their analysis depends on ideal constructs that are ahistorical.¹⁰ Rather, I follow the less dogmatic formulation of Emmanuel Terray, whose purpose is to provide an “instrument of analysis,” which I assume means an “instrument of *historical* analysis.”¹¹ From this perspective, a “slave mode of production” is meant to be a descriptive term whose theoretical significance is not developed here. My purpose is to isolate the place of slaves in production as a first step in historical reconstruction.

The African Setting

Africa was relatively isolated in ancient and medieval times. Before the middle of the fifteenth century, virtually the only contact was along the East African coast, across the Red Sea, and via the Sahara Desert. Those places bordering these frontiers were different from more isolated regions further inland. There were exceptions, depending on natural resources, especially gold, so that five areas of gold production were drawn into the orbit of the non-African world: three in West Africa (Buré, Bambuhu, Volta basin), Ethiopia, and the Shona plateau in the interior of the Zambezi valley. In addition, there was internal trade in luxuries other than gold – kola nuts between the West African forests west of the Volta River and the savanna to the north; copper, which was traded south from the Sahara into the lower Niger valley, and which was also

distributed outward from the southern parts of modern Congo; salt from many sources, including numerous sites in the Sahara Desert, the Red Sea coast of Ethiopia, local centers in the interior of Angola, many places along the Guinea coast, and other sites near the Great Lakes of east-central Africa. Despite its probable antiquity, this regional trade was relatively autonomous from the external sector.

Furthermore, the other major economic developments during the millennium before the fifteenth century were also relatively isolated. The movement of Bantu-speaking farmers throughout central, eastern, and southern Africa, the emergence of pastoral nomadism as a speciality in the northern savanna and down the lake corridor of East Africa, and the spread of iron working and craft production, despite occasional links to the external world as in the case of cotton textiles, were far more influential regionally than between continents.

One characteristic of regional development was a social structure based on ethnicity and kinship. Although the antiquity of kin-based societies is not known, linguistic, cultural, and economic evidence indicates that such structures were very old. The earliest references to kinship, for example, reveal that matrilineal and patrilineal distinctions were already well formed by the early sixteenth century. Much of the West African coastal region was patrilineal, except for the Akan of the Gold Coast. In west-central Africa, people followed matrilineal customs, as their descendants do today. Such continuity, which, broadly speaking, also matches ethnic distinctions, suggests that the interior peoples who were beyond the observations of early observers shared these structures. Thus, the coastal evidence for west-central Africa indicates the probable existence of a matrilineal belt of societies stretching across the continent to the Indian Ocean, just as it does today. Nothing in the historical record indicates that this pattern changed abruptly at any time in the past.¹²

Those societies based on kinship have variously been described as ones characterized by a “lineage” or “domestic” mode of production.¹³ This mode of production had the following features: age and sexual distinctions were fundamental divisions in society, there being no class antagonisms. Elders controlled the means of production and access to women, and hence political power was based on gerontocracy. Given that women were often the principal agricultural workers in this type of social formation, production and reproduction were closely associated.¹⁴ The maintenance of society depended on the fertility of the women and the output of their labor. The crucial variables for gerontocratic domination included the number of women married to elders, the number of children born to each wife, the ability to secure cooperation from junior kin and affines, and access to the nonhuman resources of the lineage, including land, trees, wild products, game, and water. In this situation, slavery did not alter the essential basis of the social formation. Slaves could add to the size of the population and thereby increase the number of people mobilized by the elders, but slaves performed virtually the same functions as lineage members.

Slavery was one of many types of dependency, and it was an effective means of controlling people in situations where kinship remained paramount. Slaves lacked ties into the kinship network and only had those rights that were granted on sufferance. There was no class of slaves. Although slaves undoubtedly performed many economic functions, their presence was related to the desire of people, either individually or in small groups of related kin, to bypass the customary relationships of society to increase their influence. Slavery was, therefore, essentially a social institution in small-scale societies where political influence depended on the size of social groups. If they were allowed to do so, slaves could become full members of these groups, or they could be kept as voiceless dependents, but their welfare was related to the fortunes of their master and his kin. In this setting, people had slaves along with other types of dependents, but society was not organized in such a manner that slavery was a central institution. These were not slave societies.¹⁵

Beside slavery, there were other categories of dependency, including pawnship, in which persons were held for security for debts, and junior age-sets, in which younger kin were not yet allowed to participate fully in the decisions of the lineage. Even marriage and concubinage were institutions of dependency. Dependents were mobilized in the interests of the lineage as determined by the male elders. They performed cooperative work in the fields, formed hunting expeditions, defended villages against aggression, and participated in religious ceremonies. Because land was often held in common and because marriage involved payments that were too large for most youths to finance on their own, ties of kinship were strong. In times of difficulty, these connections provided insurance. Junior kin, in particular, were most vulnerable. On the one hand, they needed the family because they often were not wealthy enough or old enough to be on their own. On the other hand, they were the first to suffer in troubled times.

As pawnship demonstrates, ties other than those based on kinship were important because they supplemented or bypassed genetic connections.¹⁶ As individuals held as security for a debt, pawns had kin connections, but not usually with the creditor. Hence their value was based on the expectation that their relatives would repay the debt and thereby release the pawn from bondage. Pawns could be used in this capacity because they were directly related to the debtor. Children were usually the ones forced into pawnship, and while they stayed with a creditor their labor was his. They were redeemed when the debt was settled. Because their family was known, pawns were not usually mistreated. Legally, they could not be sold. They were a pledge, and they expected their term of servitude to be brief. For the creditor, pawns were an investment. Here was an additional dependent, not related by kinship, who could be called on to perform a variety of beneficial functions. There was little to lose. If the pawn should die, another had to be provided, as long as there had been no serious mistreatment.

In all societies, a man could have control over many women, including slaves, pawns, and free.¹⁷ Marrying a free woman required payments to her family, and hence a father with some wealth and authority could augment his position through the arrangement of good marriages for his daughters or nieces, depending on patrilineal or matrilineal customs. Furthermore, a man could marry pawns and slaves and thereby avoid bride-wealth payments. In marrying a pawn, the debt was cancelled, and usually there were no obligations to the pawn's family. The cost of marrying a slave was the initial purchase price and, considering that her family was seldom known, the woman was completely dependent on her husband. These unions with pawns and slaves were seldom the most preferred marriages; contracts between cousins were often the most desired unions because such marriages were between free people and strengthened kinship ties. Nonetheless, once a respectable marriage was established, a man could then seek additional wives who were pawns or slaves.

These marital practices explain why servile women were in great demand. The nature of such relationships promoted assimilation, not segregation. Women became part of the family. Those whom the master did not marry or take as concubines were given to his male dependents – sons, nephews, loyal followers. In all these cases, female slaves effectively became free dependents, especially after they bore children by a free man. By contrast, the slave wives of male slaves retained their servile status. In these situations there was usually no act of emancipation, nor could there be because kin ties were determined by birth. Full incorporation into a lineage, which corresponded to emancipation, came gradually, depending on the degree of acculturation, marriage to full lineage members, and individual expressions of loyalty. In the absence of articulated classes, the slave status evolved in a manner similar to the changes in other social categories. Young people eventually became elders; slaves or their descendants gradually became members of the lineage.

Because many domestic slaves were women or girls, these observations on marital customs help explain this evolution toward full assimilation. Women and slaves born in the family were easily assimilated, and the sale of such individuals was rare. Those taken as slaves when they were children also were seldom sold. These slaves were treated very much as members of the household. Their tasks may have been more menial, but they were often granted responsibilities in trade, craft production, or other occupations. Second-generation slaves could fare as well or better.

The emphasis on dependency could be reflected in religious practices; sacrifices, for example, were interpreted as an expression of continuity between this world and the next and the need for dependents in both. The killing of slaves and the quest for outsiders – or their heads – also emphasized dependency through the symbolism attached to such acts. These had no productive function but were indicators of social and economic standing. The demand for victims to be killed at funerals, religious rites, and political ceremonies could be haphazard and hence occasional, or it could become regularized and hence

institutionalized. Funeral sites at Igbo-Ukwu suggest that the ninth-century ancestors of the Igbo had already developed a demand for sacrificial victims that could be supplied through the institution of slavery.¹⁸ Archaeology cannot determine the social status of those buried along with nobles – they could be free wives, children, volunteers, or others. At some point in time, nonetheless, slaves did become the main source for such victims.

The Islamic Factor

The existence of slaves in societies that emphasized kinship and dependency permitted their integration into a vast network of international slavery. This integration probably stretched far back into the past, but only for those areas closest to the Mediterranean basin, the Persian Gulf, and the Indian Ocean. By the eighth, ninth, and tenth centuries, the Islamic world had become the heir to this long tradition of slavery, continuing the pattern of incorporating black slaves from Africa into the societies north of the Sahara and along the shores of the Indian Ocean. The Muslim states of this period interpreted the ancient tradition of slavery in accordance with their new religion, but many uses for slaves were the same as before – slaves were used in the military, administration, and domestic service. The names of titles, the treatment of concubines, and other specifics of slavery were modified, but the function of slaves in politics and society was largely the same. Despite the ancient tradition, the principal concern here is with the consolidation of slavery in its Islamic context; for more than seven hundred years before 1450, the Islamic world was virtually the only external influence on the political economy of Africa.¹⁹

Initially slaves were prisoners captured in the holy wars that spread Islam from Arabia across North Africa and throughout the region of the Persian Gulf. Enslavement was justified on the basis of religion, and those who were not Muslims were legally enslaveable. After the early caliphates were established, slaves came largely from frontier areas where holy war was still being waged. Hence an early division was established between the central Islamic lands and the frontier, and a degree of specialization entered into this system of slavery. The central provinces of Islam provided the market for slaves; the supplies came from the frontier regions. Slaves were not necessarily black, although black slaves always constituted a significant proportion of the slave population. They came as well from western Europe and from the steppes of southern Russia. They were often prisoners of war, non-Muslims who had resisted the expansion of Islam. Slavery was conceived of as a form of religious apprenticeship for pagans. Early on, resident Jews and Christians were given special status as “people of the book,” recognized as free men subject to special taxes and limitations on civil liberties but exempt from enslavement. Some Christians were enslaved during war, especially in western Europe, but most slaves came from elsewhere.

The nature of the demand for slaves reveals some important features of the trade. Women and children were wanted in greater numbers than men. They were also more likely to be incorporated into Muslim society. Boys, either eunuch or virile, were trained for military or domestic service, and some of the more promising ones were promoted. Females also became domestics, and the prettiest ones were placed in harems, a factor that strongly influenced slave prices. Adult males and the least attractive women were destined for the more menial and laborious tasks, and their numbers had to be constantly replenished through new imports. This slavery was not a self-perpetuating institution, and those born into slavery formed a relatively small proportion of the slave population. Most children of slaves were assimilated into Muslim society, only to be replaced by new imports. Emancipation, concubinage, domestic servitude, political appointment, and military position also militated against the establishment of a slave class with a distinct class consciousness. Race, too, was minimized as a factor in the maintenance of servile status.

The religious requirement that new slaves be pagans and the need for continued imports to maintain the slave population made Africa an important source of slaves for the Islamic world. Since sub-Saharan Africa was initially beyond the lands of Islam, Muslim and other merchants looked to Africa for slaves. Local warfare, convicted criminals, kidnapping, and probably debt were sources of slaves for visiting merchants, who individually gathered slaves in small lots for shipment by boat across the Red Sea or up the East African coast, or joined together to form caravans for the march across the Sahara. The export trade was relatively modest for many centuries before the fifteenth century and indeed did not really expand considerably until the nineteenth century. Exports amounted to a few thousand slaves per year at most times, and because the affected areas were often very extensive, the overall impact was usually minimized, except for those enslaved.

In the Islamic tradition, slavery was perceived as a means of converting non-Muslims. One task of the master, therefore, was religious instruction, and theoretically Muslims could not be enslaved, although this was often violated in practice. Conversion did not automatically lead to emancipation, but assimilation into the society of the master as judged by religious observance was deemed a prerequisite for emancipation and was normally some guarantee of better treatment. One aspect of the religious and related legal tradition was that emancipation as the act of freeing slaves and thereby changing their status was clearly defined. In societies based on kinship, emancipation was a process that was recognized through progressive integration of successive generations through marriage until people fully belonged to the group. There was often no act of emancipation as such. In Islamic practice, there was.

The functions performed by slaves were also different, in part because the structures of Islamic societies were often on a larger scale than among kinship groups. In the large Islamic states of the Mediterranean basin, for example, slaves were used in government and the military, occupations that did not exist

in stateless societies. Slave officials and soldiers often proved loyal because of the dependency on their master for status. Eunuchs comprised a special category of slavery that does not seem to have been characteristic of most non-Muslim societies based on kinship. Eunuchs, who could be used in administrative positions and as overseers of harems, were especially dependent, without even the chance of establishing interests that were independent of their master. Under the influence of Islam, this practice spread into sub-Saharan Africa, along with the employment of slaves in the army and bureaucracy.

The Islamic view of slave women was also different from societies based only on kinship. Islamic law limited the number of wives to four, although only material considerations and personal whim limited the number of concubines. In both Islamic and non-Islamic situations, men could have as many women as they could afford, but the legal setting was different. Islamic custom, again emphasizing a clearer line between slave and free, allowed for the emancipation of concubines who bore children by the master. Legally, they became free upon the death of the master, but they could not be sold once they gave birth. In practice, the wives of slave origin in societies based on kinship were seldom sold either, and their status was closer to that of becoming a member of the kin group, and hence free. The terms of reference differed, but the practice was quite similar.

In many Islamic societies, slaves also performed tasks that were more directly related to production and trade. Certainly the scale of economic activity in the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean basins involved greater exchange, a higher level of technological development, and the possibilities of more specialized exploitation of slave labor than in most of Africa until recent times. In fact, slaves were frequently assigned tasks that were not directly productive but instead supported a political and social hierarchy that exploited a population of free peasants, craftsmen, and servile populations that were not slave. Although slaves were most often used for domestic (including sexual) purposes, or in government and the military, occasionally they were employed in production, such as in the salt mines of Arabia, Persia, and the northern Sahara. Other slaves were employed in large-scale agricultural enterprises and craft manufacturing. The frequency and scale of this labor, even though it was not the major form of production, was something quite different from the use of slaves in the less specialized economies of those African societies based almost entirely on kinship.

These different uses for slaves, the more clearly defined distinction between slave and free, and the occasional employment of slaves in productive activities demonstrate a sharp distinction between the slavery of kin-based societies and the slavery of Islamic law and tradition. The most important difference was that slavery in Islamic lands had experienced a partial transformation of the kind that Finley identifies as significant in the institutionalization of slavery. A fully economic system based on slave labor had not taken place in most parts of the Islamic world between 700 and 1400, despite the importance of

administrative and military slaves in the maintenance of Islamic society. Slave concubines and domestic slaves were common and indeed affected the nature of marriage as an institution and the organization of wealthy households. The adaptation of similar practices in sub-Saharan Africa involved a parallel transformation there.

The Trans-Atlantic Trade

The rise and expansion of the European slave trade across the Atlantic Ocean had a decided impact on the evolution of slavery in Africa, particularly in those areas along the Guinea coast where the influence of Islam had been weak or nonexistent.²⁰ Whereas the demand for slaves in the non-African parts of the Islamic world had a relatively gradual but steady influence on the spread of Islamic ideas and practices through parts of Africa, the impact of the European market for slaves was more intense over a much shorter period, with a correspondingly different influence. Slave exports rose gradually during the first 150 years of the Atlantic trade. Thereafter, the trade was truly large, on a scale that dwarfed all previous exports from Africa. The total volume for the Atlantic trade surpassed 12.8 million people, a figure derived largely from the records of slaving voyages compiled by David Eltis and his associates (see Table 1.1), which supersedes the pioneering census of Philip D. Curtin.²¹ The pull of the market had the effect of pushing indigenous forms of slavery further away from a social framework in which slavery was another form of dependency in societies based on kinship relationships, to a system in which slaves played an increasingly important role in the economy. In short, this change also involved a transformation similar to the one that Finley has characterized as a fundamental shift in the way slavery can be embedded in a social formation.

The opening of the Atlantic to trade marked a radical break in the history of Africa, more especially because that trade involved the departure of millions of people, perhaps as many as 12.8 million from the late fifteenth century until c.1867. Before this forced migration, the Atlantic shores of Africa had been virtually isolated from the outside world. Some salt and fish were traded into the interior in exchange for food, but by and large the coastline was a barrier. The technological breakthrough of ocean shipping had a tremendous economic impact, making available new sources of wealth for local people and facilitating political change on an unprecedented scale. Slavery here was closely associated with this transformation, not only because slaves were a major export, but also because slaves became far more common in local society than previously.

The impact on the shores of Africa was widespread, with ships embarking slaves at an estimated 192 locations (Table 1.2). Almost half of all departures were concentrated at five locations, however, with Luanda being the largest single port, accounting for about 2,826,000 people – about 22.6 percent of all departures. The five largest embarkation points were Luanda, Benguela, and Cabinda in west central Africa, Ouidah in the Bight of Benin, and Bonny

TABLE 1.1. *Slave Departures from Africa: The Atlantic Trade*

Period	Number of Slaves	Percent
1450–1500	81,000	0.6
1501–1600	338,000	2.6
1601–1700	1,876,000	14.6
1701–1800	6,495,000	50.7
1801–1900	4,027,000	31.4
TOTAL	12,817,000	

Sources: David Eltis, Stephen Behrendt, David Richardson, and Manolo Florentino, *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database* (<http://www.slavevoyages.org/tast/index.faces>), as summarized in Tables 2.3, 3.2, 3.3, 7.1, and 7.5. For the period 1450–1522, I have relied on Ivana Elbl, “The volume of the early Atlantic slave trade, 1450–1452,” *Journal of African History* 38:1 (1997), 31–75, and for the nineteenth century, I have included *libertos* and other enslaved individuals who were disguised under other labels; see Table 7.5.

TABLE 1.2. *Estimated Departures from Embarkation Points in Africa, 1501–1867*

Embarkation Points	Number of Embarkations	Percentage
Luanda	2,826,000	22.6
Ouidah	1,004,000	8.0
Benguela	764,000	6.1
Cabinda	733,000	5.9
Bonny	672,000	5.4
Malembo	549,000	4.4
Anomabu	466,000	3.7
Loango	418,000	3.3
Old Calabar	412,000	3.3
Cape Coast Castle	318,000	2.5
Mozambique	293,000	2.3
Congo River	276,000	2.2
Gambia River	258,000	2.1
Elmina	255,000	2.0
Offra	231,000	1.8
Lagos	230,000	1.8
Ambriz	206,000	1.6
Quilimane	159,000	1.3
Sierra Leone estuary	148,000	1.2
St. Louis	145,000	1.2
TOTAL	10,285,000	82.1
All 192 embarkation points	12,521,000	17.9

Source: David Eltis and David Richardson, *Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), 90.

in the Bight of Biafra. Together these three ports accounted for almost half of all enslaved departures from Africa (48 percent). The implications of this concentration of the traffic in relatively few places are explored in the subsequent chapters.

The transformation in slavery that accompanied the expansion of the European demand for slaves was largely independent of Muslim Africa. This relatively separate impact introduced a new force that modified slavery in ways different from the changes that had taken place as a result of the Islamic connection in the northern savanna and along the East African coast. There was no tradition of Islamic law, nor were there other features of Islamic slave practice, including concubinage, eunuchs, and political-military officials with Islamic titles. One important result of the European trade, therefore, was the consolidation of a distinctively non-Muslim form of slavery. Slavery underwent a transformation from a marginal feature of society to an important institution, but in most places slavery continued to be interpreted in the context of lineage structures, and this is here identified as 'lineage slavery'.

As an institution, lineage slavery shared the same basic features as all types of slavery: the property element, the alien identity, the role of violence, and productive and sexual exploitation. The striking difference was the remarkable absence of foreign influence on the ideological plane. There was almost no internalization of European attitudes towards slavery, as Islamic theories and practices had been adopted elsewhere. The impact of the market did effect some changes that can be traced to European influence, but this factor operated more on the economic level than in the realm of ideology. Slavery continued to be conceived in terms of kinship, even as slaves were assigned new tasks. Slaves were increasingly used in government, trade, and the military, in ways that were similar to the use of slaves in Muslim countries. The framework and titles were different, but the function was the same. The same was true in the control of women. Polygamous rules allowed men to have as many wives as they could acquire. There was no rationalization of this practice through laws governing the number of wives and the status of concubines, as there was in Islamic law. Nevertheless, the results were similar. Important men had many wives, some of whom were slaves, and this uneven distribution of women within society was an element of social control, particularly since women were often the principal agricultural workers as well as the reproducers of kin. Control of women enabled the domination of production and reproduction. This aspect of slavery had an important impact on the export trade. Europeans wanted field-hands and mine workers. They did not really care about their sex, although they perhaps had a slight preference for males. Africans wanted women and children. Therefore, the enslaved population was divided, with European merchants buying approximately two men for every woman, and sometimes even a greater proportion of men. The European trade was significantly different from the Muslim trade across the Sahara, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean. Muslims, too,

wanted women, not men, as is evident in the higher prices for women in the Muslim trade.

The transformation of slavery in non-Muslim areas was related to the size of the export trade and the extent to which politicians and merchants catered to that trade through enslavement and the commercialization of the economy. As the number of slaves increased and the ability to maintain a sustained supply was established, it became possible to use slaves in new ways, not just using more slaves in the same ways. These new ways were sometimes related to increasing the scale of production, including gold, agricultural goods, craft commodities, and salt. In the nineteenth century, this productive use of slaves became important in many places. Irrespective of the difference in ideology from the European plantation economy of the Americas, slavery became firmly associated with an agricultural society that was based on large concentrations of slaves. There were many places where slavery was still conceived in terms of kinship and where slavery remained marginal to the basic organization of society. None the less, the more intensive enslavement of people and the growth in the slave trade affected the institution of slavery almost everywhere.

The interaction between the indigenous setting, Islamic influence, and the European demand for slaves provided the dynamics in the development of slavery in Africa over the past millennium, but these were not always independent variables. The indigenous setting, for example, cannot be reconstructed merely by stripping away the Islamic heritage or by temporarily ignoring the European market for slaves. That slavery probably existed in Africa before the diffusion of Islam is relatively certain, although its characteristics are not. If by slaves we mean people who were kidnapped, seized in war, or condemned to be sold as a result of a crime or in compensation for a crime, then slaves there were. Structurally, however, slavery was marginal.

The influence of Islam and the European market, and indeed many other political and economic developments, has affected the course of slavery. Once such factors had an impact on particular societies, the nature of slavery changed, and the result was a different indigenous setting. In short, the history of slavery was dynamic, and the changes that took place resulted in the emergence of slave societies in places where previously there had only been a few slaves in society. That is, slavery became a central institution and not a peripheral feature. Africa could be integrated into a network of international slavery because indigenous forms of dependency allowed the transfer of people from one social group to another. When kinship links were severed, as they were in the case of slavery, then it became necessary to move people from the point of enslavement to a more distant place. The trend of this movement was toward the external slave markets, those of the Islamic world and the Americas. Slaves tended to go from the periphery to areas of more extensive economic and political development, both within Africa and outside Africa. With exception of some slaves brought from Asia to South Africa, slaves were not imported into Africa; they

were exported. To repeat the crucial dimension of the argument – the integration of Africa into an international network of slavery occurred because Africa was an area of slave supply. In Africa, therefore, there was a structural link between this ability to supply slaves for external use and the domestic employment of slaves.

The scale of this export trade demonstrates its impact. More than 12.8 million slaves left the shores of the Atlantic coast of Africa; perhaps as many more found their way to the Islamic countries of North Africa, Arabia, and India. Even though the focus here is on the history of slavery within Africa, not the fate of Africans abroad, the volume of this trade was so substantial that it reveals an essential element in the social control of slaves, and indeed other dependents, in Africa. Export was one possibility that faced slaves; domestic exploitation was another. These were closely related structurally. Slaves were usually sold if they failed to perform their duties, and sale, not only across the Atlantic but also across the Sahara Desert, the Red Sea, and the Indian Ocean, was a form of punishment and hence a threat that helped control the actions of slaves. The trade entailed great risks for slaves, including forced marches, poor food, exposure to disease in a condition of exhaustion and hunger, and bad treatment. Death and permanent physical damage were common, and slaves knew it through personal experience.

As a source for the external trade since time immemorial, Africa has been a reservoir where slaves were cheap and plentiful – indeed they were there for the taking. This feature, enslavement, was another dimension of slavery in Africa that strongly affected the history of the institution there. It is inaccurate to think that Africans enslaved their brothers – although this sometimes happened. Rather, Africans enslaved their enemies. This conception of who could be enslaved served the interests of the external market, and it enabled the political ascendancy of some Africans as rulers and merchants on the continent. Warfare, kidnapping, and manipulation of judicial and religious institutions account for the enslavement of most slaves, both those exported and those retained in Africa. Unlike other places where slavery was common, particularly the Americas and the central parts of the Islamic world, enslavement on a regular basis was one essential feature of slavery as an institution. Slave masters in the Americas and the major Islamic states relied on trade for most or all of their slaves, except those born into slavery. Slave owners in the Americas and the Islamic states of the Mediterranean and Persian Gulf were not usually responsible themselves for the direct enslavement of people. In Africa, the enslavers and the slave owners were often the same. Europe and the central Islamic lands looked to areas on their periphery as a source for slaves, and Africa was such a peripheral region – virtually the only one for many parts of the Americas and a major one for the Islamic countries. Slaves also moved within Africa, from areas that were more peripheral to places that were more central, but enslavement was usually a prominent feature everywhere. There was no separation in function between enslavement and slave use; these remained intricately associated.

This connection reveals a fundamental characteristic of slavery in Africa, and when fully articulated with the use of slaves in production, slavery was transformed into a distinct mode of production that integrated enslavement, the slave trade, and the exploitation of slaves. Hence, the history of slavery in Africa involved the interaction among all three components. An examination of this interaction demonstrates the emergence of a system of slavery that was basic to the political economy of many parts of the continent. This system expanded until the last decades of the nineteenth century. The process of enslavement increased; the trade grew in response to new and larger markets, and the use of slaves in Africa became more common. Related to the articulation of this system, with its structural links to other parts of the world, was the consolidation within Africa of a political and social structure that relied extensively on slavery. Production depended, in varying degrees, on slave labor. Political power relied on slave armies. External trade involved the sale of slaves, often as a major commodity.