

Epilogue

The transformations in slavery that have been examined in this book have highlighted the centrality of historical change in Africa. It has been argued that the transformations were in response to external influence, both from the Atlantic world and from the countries of Islam, as well as the internal dynamics of African societies. In emphasizing “transformations,” this study has demonstrated the pervasiveness of slavery in African history and the significance of the transition that occurred under colonialism. As argued, the idea of this centrality can be encapsulated in the concept of “mode of production” that places enslavement, the trade in slaves, and the use of slaves in productive activities in articulation with each other. The significance of ending institutionalized enslavement and trade under colonialism is thereby highlighted. Slavery was not abolished outright but rather allowed to disappear gradually through the criminalization of enslavement and trafficking in humans, but not the emancipation of slaves. Those born under colonial rule were declared to be born free. Hence slavery was undermined as an institution; the “mode of production” linking enslavement, slave trading, and the use of slaves was broken. Although colonial officials referred to the “natural” death of the institution, slavery did not end.

Historically, intercontinental slavery was transformative in the countries and places that received enslaved Africans, both the Americas and the Islamic world. In the Atlantic world, slavery became the basis of a labor system associated with European expansion and colonization. It can be said that slavery was a means of peopling new lands that were being developed as colonies of European imperialism. In this sense, enslavement and transport brought Africans into a colonial world, albeit in almost all cases outside of Africa. The transformations of slavery in Africa evolved as a form of colonialism, in which enslaved Africans become the population of the European colonies of the Americas.

A similar population resettlement influenced the course of change in the Islamic states and empires, both within Africa and beyond. Africa became one of the frontiers from which Islamic societies organized forced immigration and assimilation of non-Muslims. Whether in North Africa, the Middle East, the Indian Ocean, or within Africa, this reliance on slavery can also be considered a colonial project, although different from European settlement of their colonies in the Americas. For the Islamic states and empires, whether the Ottoman Porte, the Sokoto Caliphate, or others, slavery was a means of bringing non-Muslims populations under the political control of the state and the influence of conversion.

Historically, Africa has witnessed a steady, if varied, drain in population – an outward emigration that was forced and that was not matched by an influx of population of comparable numbers, except perhaps in South Africa. The impact of this demographic loss has to have been considerable. The multidirectional migration out of Africa, both to the Americas and to the Islamic lands of North Africa, the Middle East, and the Indian Ocean, lasted for hundreds of years before c. 1900, and largely was a consequence of slavery. There was no comparable immigration of people to Africa. Even though commercial outposts and an embryonic plantation economy were established in some places, the net demographic movement was out of Africa. Much of its young and productive population left the continent, whereas a significant number of people died in wars and raids that involved enslavement, or in famines that followed political upheaval. This demographic profile shaped the transformations that occurred in the different regions of Africa since the fifteenth century at least. Moreover, because of the long-term impact of the enslaved migration, some parts of Africa were closely associated with specific places in the Americas. The close link between Brazil and Angola comes to mind, whereas the consolidation of Islamic states, such as the Ottoman Porte, relied on frontiers from where enslaved people came. Large parts of Africa were thereby demarcated. Hence, the history of Africa after c. 1500 cannot be disentangled from the history of the circum Atlantic, the Indian Ocean, and the central Islamic lands.

In the twentieth century, colonial officials and anthropologists, often government-appointed, discovered that slavery was widespread almost everywhere in Africa. Despite efforts sometimes to describe “slavery” as something different from slavery elsewhere in European colonies, especially slavery in the Americas, it was clear to all that slavery continued, in modified and reshaped forms, in many places.¹ That the trade in Islamic regions persisted and, indeed, that its frequency even increased in some locations indicates that colonial policy was far from effective. The emancipation of slaves often occurred because individuals took action themselves. Despite political motivations underlying the reports of the League of Nations in the 1920s and 1930s, slavery was still widespread, to such an extent that some colonial regimes tried to cover up its presence. British administrator, Lord Frederick Lugard, who served in Uganda and most notably in Nigeria, phrased the transition the “slow death” of slavery,

which was expected to last the whole of the twentieth century.² Despite the massive desertion of slaves at the time of the European colonial conquest, Lord Lugard has been proven right. Slavery has persisted, even if its legality has been ended.

More recently, since the independence of African countries in the 1960s and 1970s, slavery has become largely a subterranean force, no longer legal in most countries but continuing in various contexts, just as slavery has persisted elsewhere in the world. Some countries that include territory in the Sahara, such as Mauretania, Niger, and elsewhere, have been particularly reticent in ending slavery, and when slavery has been suppressed, dependent relationships arising from former servitude have persisted, limiting the access of the descendants of slaves to land and other resources.³ Moreover, in some cocoa-producing areas, such as Côte d'Ivoire, children have been enslaved to harvest crops.⁴ In some Muslim areas, such as Niger and northern Nigeria, the continuation of concubinage has also sustained the demand for enslaved women. These contemporary issues highlight the continuation of slavery in Africa well into the twentieth century, despite apparent colonial and postcolonial efforts to undermine and eliminate the institution. In these cases, the trade in enslaved children and women is illegal, but impossible to suppress.

Today, we know more about the origins of enslaved Africans who went to the Americas and to various parts of the Muslim world than ever before. Moreover, the relationship of slavery to the history of Africa, and the factors that made possible the establishment of identifiable communities of enslaved Africans in the Americas, and indeed in North Africa, the Sahara, and in West Africa itself, is much more clearly understood. As everywhere, slaves in Africa resisted their bondage as best they could. The methods of trade and marketing, either by Muslims or non-Muslims, and the impact of slavery on society and economy more generally are major themes in the reconstruction of the African past. That trans-Atlantic slavery was indeed devastating for many parts of Africa is clear.

Migration through slavery reveals a legacy of violence and insecurity that has punctuated the African past. Domestically, there were transformations as a result of population loss in specific places and at specific times through loss of life associated with wars and enslavement. There were adjustments in social, religious, and communal life that can be identified as responses to and protection from slavery. The formation of an African diaspora in the Islamic world and the Americas each in themselves represents the legacy of slavery, as is the continuing history in Africa of ethnic and religious strife, and indeed achievement, under colonialism and in the period of independence since then. Slavery has survived. Distinctions arising from an association with slavery have continued through the colonial and postcolonial eras into contemporary times. A preoccupation with trans-Atlantic slavery or the African diaspora in the Americas risks losing perspective on the long trajectory of slavery in Africa and indeed the Indian Ocean. The arrival of Africans in the Islamic world and the

Americas definitely affected economic and social development. This book has intended to provide an introduction to the study of slavery in African history. From an African perspective, such a study includes the history of the victims of slavery and where they were taken and how they were able to retain memories and sometimes direct connections with the homeland.

Contemporary slavery differs from the slavery of the past because of its illegality.⁵ We all understand how enslavement differed over time and depending on location, but for anyone who is enslaved, such subtle scholarly distinctions hardly matter. The voices of those who are enslaved are often silenced. What we have to accept is that slavery has not been abolished in the world today, but it must be. The continuity in practices of servility in West Africa is a legacy, different from the legacy of the Americas, but no less real for the people who are affected. We have to increase the level of awareness among scholars, and indeed the public at large, about the differences and similarities in the experiences and conditions of the enslaved through history. We have to close the gap in knowledge dissemination to restore the dignity of peoples who have suffered the experience and legacy of slavery.