

Slavery in the Political Economy of Africa

Slavery as a Mode of Production

In analyzing the role of slavery in the political economy of Africa before 1900, I have applied a number of concepts (including “mode of production,” “social formation,” and “transformation”) to examine the expansion of productive slavery. This emphasis draws on the contributions of Marxian theorists,¹ particularly those who have explored different modes of production.² Although a number of scholars have recognized the importance of slavery to the political economy, only a few have argued that slavery assumed a crucial role. Foremost among these has been Emmanuel Terray.³

According to Terray, “a social formation cannot be understood except by beginning with an analysis of the relations of production which are its base,”⁴ and for Gyaman, and indeed for Asante as a whole, Terray establishes “the decisive importance of the exploitation of captives in the functioning of the social formation”:⁵

We have tried to bring to light the existence of an Abron social formation with a mode of production based on slavery, which organizes a considerable part of the work in three essential sectors of the economy: agriculture, gold mining and transport [portage]. But one must immediately point out that this mode of production contains specific characteristics concerning the reproduction of the social relations which constitute it. We have already alluded to these peculiarities, which can be summarized as follows: there is no natural or biological reproduction of the captive population.⁶

This last point is crucial to Terray’s model. The inability of the social formation to maintain itself without the acquisition of new slaves illustrates one of the essential characteristics of the slave mode of production, the need for continued enslavement and slave trading to sustain the social order and the economic base of the state.

The concept “mode of production,” therefore, involves a complex interaction between economy, society, and the state in a form that reproduces these relationships.⁷ The essential ingredients include the prevalence of slave labor in vital sectors of the economy, the development of class relationships based on the relegation of slaves to the bottom of the social order, and the consolidation of a political and commercial infrastructure that can maintain these forms of exploitation. Slaves need not predominate in every sector of the economy, but they must be involved in production, whatever other functions they may also fulfil. Slave owners may have many sources of income, but a substantial portion must derive from activities related to enslavement, trade in slaves, and the appropriation of the product of slave labor. When these activities are important to the political economy, then other relationships, such as those based on kinship, tribute, taxation, and plunder, are usually affected and may become dependent on relationships associated with slavery. For example, kinship structures among free peasants may become stronger as a result of the danger of slave raids. Tribute payments and taxation were often alternatives to enslavement, and the power of the state could be used to punish those who failed to maintain such subordinate relationships.

This study has pursued Terray’s formulation in the following ways: It has considered where and when slavery was a fundamental aspect of the social formation of different African societies. As a theoretical construct, a slave mode of production prevailed whenever slavery was crucial to the productive process in general or to some sector of the economy, particularly if that sector was tied to the export trade. Often this condition involved the exploitation of slave labor on a large scale, on plantations, in mines, and in the harvesting or gathering of wild products. Each of these situations involved considerable differences in the organization of production. To characterize them under a common conceptual label is to emphasize the basis of the social division of labor, not the degree of market development in the economy. The cultivation of agricultural goods under plantation conditions sometimes reflected extensive market development and sometimes not. Plantation output could be used to feed armies and palaces or it could be exported. The low level of technology meant that there was relatively little investment in capital or the improvement of land, although either form of investment could occur, as in Madagascar (hydraulic works) or Zanzibar (clove trees). Gold mining, as in Asante or Buré, could involve an even stronger market orientation than plantations. There was an investment in pits, and hence production required some inputs beside the labor of slaves. Nonetheless, because the technology was relatively simple, this investment was virtually destroyed by the rains every year, so that labor was the key variable too. The gathering of wild produce, such as gum arabic, beeswax, and rubber, was even more labor intensive. Other than in very rudimentary tools, there was no investment in technology for maintaining or increasing production. In all three situations, therefore, the crucial aspect of production was the

coordination of labor to exploit economic resources. Labor was almost the only resource that could be mobilized in a manner to affect production.

Slavery was an effective alternative to other forms of organizing labor, and hence when slavery was crucial to the productive process, we can distinguish a slave mode of production from other modes. The extraction of tribute from free peasants, the coordination of labor on the basis of kinship, the output of independent peasants in response to limited market opportunities, the development of a labor pool through debt bondage, and other means of production existed alongside slavery. The identification of a slave mode of production does not diminish the importance of these methods of labor organization, but it correctly establishes the dynamic portion of the political economy in the period from 1000 to 1900.

A wide historical and geographical perspective allows an identification of the two prerequisites for a slave mode of production. First, a slave mode of production required instruments of enslavement, and these had to be institutionalized on the political level. Specific wars may not have been fought for the sole purpose of acquiring slaves, but the enslavement of prisoners had to become an acceptable, indeed a likely, fate for captives. The ransoming of prisoners and elaborate justifications for determining who could and could not be enslaved only serve to demonstrate that such adjustments took place relatively early wherever the export of slaves was possible, and indeed in other places too. Legal, religious, and economic methods of enslavement, as varied as these were, only highlight the institutionalization of enslavement even further. Secondly, the distribution of slaves, especially through trade, also had to achieve a comparable level of organization. Slaves could be dispersed as tribute or war booty, but the market mechanism was most important in this aspect of slavery. Those who controlled these mechanisms of supply and distribution invariably were the ones who benefited from slavery as an institution. Their economic and political position was based on control over the “means of destruction,” to employ the terminology of Jack Goody, and the mechanisms of commercial exchange.⁸

Enslavement and slave trading were essential because slave populations did not reproduce themselves. Data on this demographic failure are clearest from the nineteenth century, but it is likely that wherever slavery was the basis of a mode of production, a continuous influx of new slaves had to be maintained. Morton's work on the East African coast, for example, demonstrates that slave mortality was as high as 20 percent on Pemba (1883), 10–12 percent on Zanzibar (1883), and 10 percent at Malindi (1873). He estimates that mortality was probably higher in the 1850s.⁹ Despite other important factors, slave families appear to have been reluctant to have children. Harms reports similar conclusions for the Bobangi on the Congo River; people did not want children, in part because it limited mobility and in part because it was cheaper and easier to buy children. The Bobangi population, therefore, was an unstable population

demographically.¹⁰ Comparable patterns are evident in Madagascar, the western Sudan, and elsewhere. The incorporation of women through marriage and concubinage (whose children were considered free) accounts for the necessity of acquiring new slaves to some extent, but as Meillassoux has argued, even when the freed offspring of slave women are taken into consideration, the birthrate was very low.¹¹ Slavery was simply not a self-sustaining institution through biological reproduction.

The external trade was an essential sector of this infrastructure. Not all slaves were captured with export in mind. Nonetheless, it was necessary that most slaves be moved a considerable distance from their point of enslavement. Here was a “push” factor in the economy that fed the export sector. Whether or not the external market provided a “pull” for slaves, there was an indigenous force that moved captives. When external demand influenced price, then it was only logical that the two factors should reinforce the flow of slaves from Africa. Once the link to the export market became established, and indeed while it continued to expand, the political economy invariably became more intimately connected with the export trade. The same logic suggests that the collapse of the external market would have equally profound effects on the internal slave system, as indeed has been shown in the preceding chapters.

In broad outline, this external trade included both the export of slaves to the Muslim countries outside black Africa and the shipment of slaves across the Atlantic to the Americas. Indeed, the development of the trans-Atlantic trade resulted in changes in the political economy of the Guinea coast, and the history of slavery in the different portions of that coast can only be understood in the context of the export trade. Indigenous institutions were either developed or modified to accommodate that trade, and the result was the evolution of distinctive slave systems that varied as much one from another as they differed from the type of slavery that predominated in the Muslim regions.

The recognition of the importance of the external market for slaves permits a fuller analysis of slavery during the period when the forces of abolition began to affect the nature of the institution. The abolition movement highlights the crucial impact of the external market in reverse. The collapse of that market and the extension of abolitionist doctrines presented a serious challenge to those social formations in which slavery was a major institution. The impact varied, and the form of change differed considerably, as outlined in the preceding chapters. Nonetheless, the transition from a slave mode of production to capitalism has involved fundamental structural changes in the social formation. The recognition that the nature of this transition involved a shift from a political economy based on slavery to one in which slavery withered away has considerable theoretical significance, as well as empirical accuracy. The mass escape of slaves, the colonial accommodation with slave owners, and the reluctance of the colonial regime to enforce abolition until the capitalist economy could absorb the labor released by emancipation all demonstrate this significance.

The association of slavery with the external trade clearly distinguishes my interpretation from that of many scholars who argue that the export sector had a marginal impact on African society and economy.¹² The threat of sale to merchants associated with the export trade was as important in the control of slaves as the fear of whipping was on the plantations of the Americas. The interaction between the external trade and the indigenous institution was a dialectical relationship. Both changed over time, and the influences of these changes flowed both ways, constantly producing a new situation in the two spheres. The long-term effects could be significant indeed, as a comparison between west-central Africa and the Islamic savanna reveals. Where women and children could be absorbed easily, as in the societies of west-central Africa, slavery remained associated with a mode of production based on kinship. Males were exported in disproportionate numbers, and women and children were placed in subordinate positions within a lineage. The means of production were not specifically associated with slavery, for most agricultural labor was the responsibility of women and children anyway. In the northern savanna, by contrast, the external market was for women and children, despite a domestic preference for these very same slaves. Unlike west-central Africa, the domestic market and the external market were in competition, and the value of male slaves was depressed accordingly. It was possible in this context to employ males in productive activities, thereby changing the organization of production. Another important difference directly related to the external trade was the scale of exported slaves, usually a steady but relatively modest stream for the northern savanna, but a more substantial movement from west-central Africa, particularly in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This variation suggests that the pattern of slavery found in west-central Africa was reinforced and indeed extended farther into the interior, so that the use of slaves in productive capacities that required a fundamental shift in the social formation did not occur. During this same period, the northern savanna was relatively stable; the existing social formation continued to function as it had for centuries.

These generalizations help confirm the important role of the external trade, including the significance of the scale of exports, the link to the institutions of enslavement and trade, and the negative and positive associations of the trade with the political fragmentation of Africa. The numbers being traded help establish the scale of slavery in the domestic sector as well as the number of people actually taken from Africa – both the domestic population and the export population resulted from the same mechanisms of slave supply. This interrelationship was characteristic of the slave mode of production along the Guinea coast and other areas feeding the trans-Atlantic traffic in the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries, but the existence of the export trade was not necessary for the continued functioning of a slave mode of production, even though the rise of slave exports had contributed to the transformation of slavery.

The Transformation of Slavery

Slavery was transformed in Africa, to recount Finley's crucial distinction examined in Chapter 1,¹³ once slavery became an important component in production, particularly agriculture. Finley's insight accords well with Terray's discussion of a slave mode of production, for Terray, too, emphasizes the role of slaves in the productive process. I have expanded on Finley's notion, moreover, just as I have elaborated Terray's model. The transformations were many, and they often involved changes that affected production in the narrow sense that Finley describes. The origins and development of various plantation systems, the use of slaves in mining and handicrafts, and the employment of slaves in livestock breeding are all manifestations of this transformation of slavery into an instrument of production. Finley has indeed identified a crucial element in the reconstruction of slavery in African history. Slavery was transformed, and slave societies emerged. I have referred to this transformation in terms of the development of a social formation that incorporated a slave mode of production.

The transformations in slavery were more complex than the essential one identified by Finley, and the theoretical significance of this concept is particularly useful in distinguishing between the various kinds of changes that occurred in the history of slavery in Africa. The emphasis on transformations helps identify important factors in the evolution of slavery, including changes in the external market, different responses to export demand, and particular adjustments in the availability of slaves for domestic assignment. Slavery could be transformed into a productive institution, but the social formation itself could be transformed in different ways in conjunction with the development of slavery.

In order to consider these transformations, it is necessary to distinguish once again between the three sectors of the African slave system: the process of enslavement, the mechanism of slave distribution, and the role of slaves in the social formation. The history of slavery in Africa reveals transformations in each of these sectors, sometimes individually and sometimes in combination. These differences become clearer when various regions of Africa are contrasted. In west-central Africa, institutions of enslavement and trade developed that resulted in fundamental changes to the structure of the political economy. The region became a source of supply for the trans-Atlantic trade, and slavery was transformed into a productive institution in scattered enclaves close to the slave supply system. Slaves were used in production, based on a sexual division of labor that characterized the organization of work among lineage members – that is, women did most of the agricultural labor anyway; hence the acquisition of women enabled men to combine their desires for labor, sexual access, and children. Slavery became essential to production, so that the kind of transformation that Finley identifies as crucial in the development of a slave society took place. Slavery was central to the social formation. Slaves were an

item of export, and enslavement was a means of social control in a political system based on tributary relationships between a military elite and dependent lineages. Within this system, slavery filled a variety of functions, including military conscription, portage in long-distance trade, marriage, and funeral sacrifices. The transformation in the productive process followed the transformation in enslavement and trade. Here the dominant mode of production was based on the extraction of tribute, often in the form of slaves. Tribute collection involving slaves was also prevalent along the West African coast and in the northern savanna, where slavery clearly assumed a productive dimension as well.

Along the Congo River and in the Niger delta, the most significant transformation was in the relationship between slavery and the commercial infrastructure. Slaves were incorporated into the firms of merchants, and activities directly related to enslavement and production developed thereafter. This transformation of slavery was connected with the export trade in slaves. Again there was a structural change in slavery, with slaves increasingly used in production. In these commercial situations, slaves were crucial to the social formation, because the incorporation of slaves was essential to the operation of business. Slave labor was directly related to the consolidation of the commercial infrastructure that was necessary for the export of slaves. Parallels can be found in the use of slaves as porters and stock boys along the caravan routes of the interior. The use of slaves in commerce was connected to the distribution of other goods too.

For purposes of analysis, it is important to isolate the use of slaves in military service, and hence as an agency in the enslavement process, from the employment of slaves in production. In the military, slaves were not used for productive purposes, except in the sense that soldiers “produced” slaves through wars and raids.¹⁴ The incorporation of slaves into the army was, therefore, essential to the perpetuation of slavery as an institution, but the transformation was related to control over productive activities that followed changes in commercial organization and kinship relationships.

The maintenance of the trans-Saharan, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean trade in slaves, the development of the trans-Atlantic trade, and the abolition of each of these trades involved transformations in the mechanisms of slave supply as Africa first became linked to an international system of slavery and then later was severed from external markets. The establishment of this structure facilitated the emergence of a slave mode of production within Africa. Clearly this transformation required transformations in the supply mechanism whereby people were enslaved.

The international system of slavery that developed after the sixteenth century had its African and non-African parts; it was not confined to the African continent. If west-central Africa is examined in isolation from the Americas, then it might appear that only a partial transformation took place, but if the mechanisms of slave supply are attached to the receiving area for the slaves,

then a full transformation can be perceived. Thus west-central Africa must be seen in conjunction with the development of plantation slavery in the Americas, where slavery was the basis of production but where the institutions of enslavement were often not present, except with respect to the enslavement of the Amerindian population in different periods. Taken together, this sophisticated slave mode of production was separated into distinct parts – enslavement was mostly confined in Africa, whereas productive slavery was concentrated in the Americas – and a mechanism of slave distribution connected the two sectors. Once the forces of abolition began to sever the link in this intercontinental system, slavery was confined to an African context. The separation encouraged developments closer to areas of enslavement, with slaves taken to São Thomé and Príncipe, scattered places along the Angolan coast, and the Arab-Swahili plantations of Zanzibar, Pemba, and the east coast. This transformation presaged the collapse of slavery as an integrated system, for the emancipation of slaves in these locations eliminated the need for continued enslavement to supply them. Those areas where slavery had not been transformed into a productive institution lost the crucial function of supplying slaves. Elsewhere, the separation between slave supply and the use of slaves in production was far less, and it is possible, therefore, to examine the interaction between the separate sectors in the same social formation.

Articulation with Capitalism

In the nineteenth century, slavery was harnessed to capitalism. The pressure on the external trade forced the redirection of slaves within Africa on an unprecedented scale. Commercial expansion resulted in the employment of slaves in trade and production; now Africa internalized slavery as a mode of production, whereas previously African slavery had been part of a larger, intercontinental network. This intensification of slavery, reflected in the vehemence of European antislavery rhetoric, presaged the collapse of slavery as a mode of production in the twentieth century. Conflict was inevitable because the economic interests of Europe, the pressure of abolitionists in the missions and the popular press, and the rivalries of European governments that spilled over into the tropical world eventually undermined slavery. European merchants cooperated with their African counterparts – who were the largest slave owners – when times were prosperous, but during the series of economic crises at the end of the nineteenth century, European firms moved to bypass their African intermediaries to cut costs and increase profits. As African merchants and producers found themselves hard pressed, they demanded more from their slaves. Abolitionists, even when in favor of reform and not immediate emancipation, spread dangerous propaganda among slaves. Even though their missions were little more than symbols of freedom – the actual numbers of fugitives and ex-slaves at the missions were relatively small when compared with the total slave population – African catechists spread the subversive doctrines of freedom and conversion.

It took European colonial expansion to provide slaves with the opportunity to escape. During the chaos of conquest, law and order temporarily broke down; slave masters who had opposed European expansion were in no position to assert their authority over their slaves, and the new colonial regimes could not prevent individuals and small groups from leaving.

This process of intensified slave use and then the collapse of slavery reveals a wider phenomenon: the articulation of a slave mode of production with capitalism. This articulation began with the incorporation of the Guinea coast into the southern Atlantic system of slave supply for the Americas. Africa was invariably tied to the Americas until this supply function was terminated in the nineteenth century; hence developments in slavery along the Guinea coast were subordinate to the emergence of productive slavery in the Americas. Commercial links with Europe and India demonstrate the extent of this involvement, but the nature of the exchange in itself served as a barrier to the transfer of capitalism to Africa. At the height of the slave trade in the eighteenth century, Europe, the Americas, and Africa formed three distinct sectors of the world economy; capitalism emerged triumphant only in Europe, whereas the Americas and Africa remained subordinate partners.

This subordination shaped slavery in the Americas – which many scholars have recognized – but it also shaped slavery in Africa, at least in those parts of Africa catering to the export trade.¹⁵ In this case, slavery developed within the context of slave supply: the retention of greater numbers of women and children, the use of slaves in the military, and the employment of slaves in production related to the maintenance of a class of merchants and warlords who were essential to the functioning of an international system of slavery in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This interaction continued into the nineteenth century; only the abolition crusade increasingly hampered the ability to supply slaves.

The strongest economic forces in the nineteenth century were capitalist – the expansion of world markets for “legitimate” commodities. The growth of the market for oils, ivory, ostrich feathers, and other goods – some for luxury consumption associated with European prosperity and others for the industry that characterized the capitalist order – provided a ready outlet for slave labor. Masters assigned their slaves to the production of export commodities, although production for household consumption and regional markets continued as before, as did the continued use of slaves in noneconomic functions. Hence the transformation was more relative than absolute. Slaves were already used in economic capacities; now more slaves were so employed. Older forms of slavery associated with slave supply – military position, administrative appointment, commercial agency – were still important because it was still necessary to supply slaves for the African market, but the relative importance of these functions declined in comparison with the productive employment of slaves.

The emergence of a slave mode of production in Africa was very different from the development of the slave systems of the Americas, despite the fact

that both were subordinate to capitalism and ultimately associated with the consolidation of capitalism. In the American context, slavery was introduced from outside and always relied on the importation of slaves and the continued identification of masters with Europe. In Africa, slavery evolved from indigenous institutions, and, except for the relatively small plantation sector in central, eastern, and southern Africa that was controlled by European immigrants, slave owners were also Africans. Furthermore, the African social formation always included an important – often dominant – regional orientation, whereas the Americas were more closely integrated with the world market than Africa, and the regional economy was comparatively unimportant. The reliance on race as a method of social control was also peculiarly a feature of slavery in the Americas, although African slave owners established their own methods of domination. These and other differences are crucial in distinguishing the form of slavery.

There were significant variations in slavery as a mode of production in different parts of Africa too. Plantation slavery was most widespread in the northern savanna, where religious motivation had been successfully channeled to justify the economic exploitation of captives. Regional economies were by far more important than the export sector, except for the Senegambia area. Hence the articulation between slavery and capitalism was weakest in the northern savanna, even though the number of slaves was greatest. Along the West African coast, slavery was a significant factor in production, although in the Igbo-Ibibio palm-oil belt – the largest source of palm products – slavery was not as important as elsewhere along the West African coast. It is clear from these variations that the dominance of slavery was not a requirement for the integration into the world economy. Local factors had a strong influence on the role slavery played. Where state structures were particularly centralized, as on the Gold Coast and in the Bight of Benin interior, slaves were more numerous than in the Biafra hinterland, which lacked centralized states. Finally, in southern, central, and eastern Africa, the external enclaves relied on slavery to produce commodities for the market, whereas there were virtually no foreign enclaves that relied on slavery elsewhere (in the Turco-Egyptian Sudan, the indigenous slave owners dominated production; the colonial state was not a major factor in production). The articulation of slavery with capitalism was more pronounced in these enclaves than anywhere else, but the expansion of these enclaves was relatively limited. Except for a few places along trade routes, slavery remained incompletely transformed in most of the interior.

Other forms of labor – share cropping, migrant labor, pawnage – existed alongside slavery in the nineteenth century, and these forms of labor were often associated with slavery. This association can be demonstrated with reference to four examples. Senegambian migrant farmers were sometimes slaves, and whether slave or free, they – or their masters – had access to land through the payment of 10 percent of their peanut harvests to their landlords, who were usually the largest slave owners employing slaves on their own.¹⁶ The leasing of

slaves on the Gold Coast and elsewhere solved a bottleneck in the movement of labor from those who had excess manpower to those who needed temporary workers, such as European commercial firms, but the slaves did not have control over their earnings.¹⁷ Migrant labor became important in South Africa in the 1870s; some migrants were slaves by origin, but many were free men who were able to seek employment on European farms and in the new mines of Kimberley because slaves were employed in domestic tasks back home.¹⁸ Pawnage – which already shared center stage with slavery – had become a source of slaves when customary laws were ignored, but in the late nineteenth century and continuing into the twentieth century, pawnage assumed a new importance as a method of labor mobilization. The incidence of pawnage actually increased as slavery began to die, at least in Yorubaland, the middle Niger valley, and perhaps Asante.¹⁹ The erosion of slavery as a mode of production freed these alternative forms of labor, which in one way or another marked the transition to a more complete articulation with capitalism. The transformation of these forms occurred under colonialism.²⁰

The conquest of Africa and the extension of European economic domination proceeded together under the banner of antislavery. As has been demonstrated, however, the antislavery cause was a reluctant one, seldom providing the motivation for European economic or political action. Nonetheless, as an ideology, the antislavery rhetoric of missionaries and reformers provided a rationale for expansion that was logically connected with the progression of capitalism and imperialism.²¹ The literature of nineteenth-century missionaries, explorers, diplomats, and reconnaissance officers maintained the antislavery cause. Such authors as Buxton, Schoelcher, André, Berlioux, and Lacour wrote books specifically on the slavery issue, whereas the antislavery movement of *Lavigerie* and the various societies for suppression of slavery played an active role in promoting expansion by justifying intervention in the name of abolition.²² Although missionaries and colonial officials in Africa were usually more cautious, political expediency and safety dictated a gradualist policy anyway. Slavery was an explosive issue best left alone, despite its value for propaganda.

Nonetheless, the ideology of antislavery was an accurate indicator of larger changes that were inevitable, and as such the observations and aims of reformers and reactionaries alike reveal changes that were taking place, often against the wishes of the observers themselves. The flight of slaves, the hiring of slaves to secure a wage-labor force, reforms imposed on local practice to appease the abolitionist movement, and other developments were important steps in undermining slavery as an institution. The rhetoric influenced the nature of social change and thereby contributed to the transition from a social formation in which slavery was important to the peripheral capitalism of the colonial era.

The imposition of colonialism terminated slavery as a mode of production and marked the fuller integration of Africa into the orbit of capitalism. Imperialism used the rhetoric of antislavery, but the crucial developments

involved military expansion and the commercial supremacy of European firms in Africa. Even though Africa remained on the periphery of capitalism, the colonial dictatorship nonetheless facilitated the final transformation of slavery – the slave mode of production was dismantled by ending the major forms of enslavement and curtailing most slave trading. Kidnapping and smuggling continued for several decades – and still continues on a small scale in a few places – but slave raiding, warfare, and public slave marketing ceased virtually everywhere by the first decade of colonial rule. Because of the essential functions of enslavement and trade in the maintenance of the slave population, the curtailment of these activities resulted in a rapid decline in the number of slaves. The flight of slaves and reformed emancipation procedures also reduced the slave population, so that kidnapping, slave smuggling, and the birth of children to slave parents whose servile status was retained could not sustain slavery as a mode of production. European administrators could afford to accommodate slave masters in the interests of social stability because the abolition of slavery was on an irreversible course.

Africa remained peripheral to capitalism, even as slavery was disassembled. The new forms of labor organization – migration, peasant production, colonial coercion through taxation and *corvée* projects, and military conscription – were associated with the colonial dictatorship.²³ By the time anthropologists and historians concentrated on studying slavery, only the legacy of a slave mode could be found.

The Legacy of Slavery

When slavery has been a central institution in society, its legacy lives on, and with it problems confronting Africa. Reports of kidnapped children, young girls taken to Mecca as “pilgrims” but who end up in harems, and the insistence of some old men that they are still slaves because of the status and benefits that such an assertion still holds, attest to this legacy.²⁴ Now, however, there is no institution of slavery, despite the evidence for individual cases of slavery that persist into the twentieth-first century. By the 1930s, abolition was well on its way to becoming an accomplished fact virtually everywhere. Even when slaves were not formally emancipated or locally were not recognized as free, the social and political setting had changed irrevocably.

Within Africa, the legacy has often been apparent, although issues of the past are now disguised under new labels. Differences between Muslims and Christians can well relate to who was raiding whom for slaves, a division revealed to me in the mid-1970s when university students began to argue among themselves over the historical significance of this religious difference.²⁵ Many questions about this legacy are being examined in the course of current research, particularly the relationship of slave ancestry to migrant labor, the movement of people to the towns and cities, ethnic identification, as well as religious conversion. These and related topics are beyond the scope of this book.

One aspect of the history of slavery and abolition should be readily apparent. Those who focus on slavery in the Americas without reference to slavery in Africa have neglected a major problem in the history of Africans. Africans experienced slavery not only in the Americas but also in Africa. Furthermore, emancipation came much later in Africa. To concentrate on the struggle for freedom in the United States, the West Indies, or other parts of the Americas without recognizing the plight of slaves in Africa introduces a major distortion into our understanding of slave history. The emergence of an international system of slavery tied the Americas and Africa together, just as the earlier history of slavery in Muslim countries had drawn some parts of Africa into the Islamic orbit of North Africa and the Indian Ocean. The disassembly of that international system required more than the freeing of slaves in the Americas, and the legacy of oppression and racism in the Americas is only one aspect of the tragic heritage of slavery.

In the African context, the legacy of slavery has been so enormous that it has only recently become obvious. To focus on specific historical and cultural problems, scholars failed to recognize or blurred the larger issue of social organization until recently, whether they were conscious of this distortion or not. The colonial dictatorship, the role of the international economy, the racial dimension involved in the relationships between Europeans and Africans, the struggle for political independence, the consolidation of military rule, the revolutionary struggle in southern Africa, and other topics have to be analyzed in a historical framework that draws on dependency theory, Marxist analysis, and the interdisciplinary interaction between anthropology, economics, political science, sociology, and history. Cooper's early work was an important exception until recently; most scholars concerned with the development of a labor force in the colonial and postcolonial periods did not usually realize the importance of slave labor in the precolonial era. Yet it is now clear that the transition to colonial rule and political independence occurred in the context of the collapse of slavery.²⁶ The degree to which this transition marked a major departure in history is still being analyzed. Where old elites survived, despite the turmoil of the colonial years, the transition was less abrupt. Where the old elite was eliminated, slaves could sometimes assert themselves sooner and more fully. Nonetheless, the question is not whether or not there was a dramatic break with the past, but the ways in which people were able to shape the new order – preserving the old or rising above it. Much colonial and postcolonial scholarship now has the problem of abolition in mind.

On the political level, biographical studies have established the ancestry of the African leaders of the past eighty years. How many are of slave descent? How were they able to rise above the handicap? Are there any patterns in the policies that individuals of various backgrounds have pursued? With a military heritage involving the recruitment of fugitive slaves into the colonial armies, it might well prove important to examine the backgrounds of subsequent military

personnel, again checking for a link with the slave past, not only the colonial regimes of dictatorship.

The concentration on economic relationships and changing forms of dependency has tended to focus on the role of African entrepreneurship in social transformation and the impact of the world economy on a technologically backward continent. This orientation has resulted in the accumulation of considerable knowledge of foreign firms and their means of domination. The extent to which African merchants, farmers, and workers have been able to resist or adjust to this adverse situation has led to considerable understanding of class formation and ethnic stratification. The correspondence between these developments and the legacy of slavery is now recognized as crucial to our understanding of African history. Because slavery was such a crucial dimension of the past, the colonial economy and society marked a major transformation of the precolonial economic order – a process of change that is still being analyzed.