

The Enslavement of Africans, 1600–1800

The growth of the export market, particularly the spectacular surge of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, could not have taken place without a corresponding increase in the ability to enslave people, and, consequently, an intensification of political violence.¹ While this adjustment implies disorder in the social framework wherever the external trade was important, the effective organization of slave supply required that political violence be contained within boundaries that would permit the sale of slaves abroad. The inherent contradiction in this situation was resolved through a separation of the commercial infrastructure from the institutions of enslavement. On the one hand, the disruption in the process of enslavement was associated with political fragmentation. On the other hand, the consolidation of independent commercial networks permitted the movement of slaves within Africa and beyond. Both dimensions were necessary features of the emerging system of slavery in this African context. The export of about 11.7 million slaves from 1500 to 1800, including the astronomical increase between 1650 and 1800 in the Atlantic sector, could not have occurred without the transformation of the African political economy. The articulation of the supply mechanism required the institutionalization of enslavement, which was disruptive (examined in this chapter), and the consolidation of a commercial infrastructure, which was integrative (examined in the next chapter).

A Politically Fragmented Continent

The most pervasive feature of African history in the period from 1600 to 1800 was the inability of military and political leaders to consolidate large areas into centralized states, despite the presence of many small polities. In the sixteenth century, only Songhay and Borno can truly be called empires. The other states of the period were much smaller than these, and large areas had no states at

all. In 1800, there were no large empires, although the number of states as a whole had increased, and the area of stateless societies had been reduced. Political fragmentation accompanied by instability was characteristic of the period. This political environment was well suited for enslaving people.

The savanna region, where Muslim states had long been established, underwent a transformation in the sixteenth century that at first might seem to disprove this generalization. Songhay, for example, extended its boundaries over much of the West African savanna, and its influence reached even further. Undoubtedly it was the largest state in Africa before the nineteenth century, truly an empire on a grand scale. In the Lake Chad basin, Borno also consolidated a large sphere of influence, although not as large as Songhay's. In the upper Nile valley, the Funj Sultanate of Sennar almost achieved similar results, while a Muslim holy war threatened to destroy Christian Ethiopia, thereby consolidating the Ethiopian plateaux into a strong, Islamic state too. Finally, in the interior Zambezi basin, Muanamutapa had united the gold-producing region into a single state. It seemed as if political centralization, not fragmentation, was the order of the day.

All of these achievements promised more than they produced. In 1591, a Moroccan army crossed the Sahara and attacked Songhay. Morocco was not able to consolidate its own rule, nor was Songhay able to expel the invaders. As a result, the vast area that had been controlled by Songhay was thrown into a state of confusion and political instability. Borno actively engaged in slave raiding to finance trade with the Ottoman Empire in North Africa in the dubious hope that a political alliance would legitimize and extend Borno's hegemony south of the Sahara. Such a policy impressed some, but the costs of continuous slave raiding surely undermined Borno's influence in the affected areas and limited the spread of Islam. The Ethiopian *jihad* failed to generate a large state. Instead, a few Muslim principalities were all that were left after Christian Ethiopia regained parts of the highlands, whereas the Funj of Sennar only consolidated an area around the confluence of the Blue Nile and the White Nile. Once more, Muslims were not able to establish large states or empires within the world of Islam, Dar es Salaam. Nor did Muanamutapa, which was connected to the Muslim world through trade, survive; instead it disintegrated into several smaller states.

The general pattern of political disintegration and small-scale states prevailed along the whole Atlantic coast, in precisely those areas where the influence of European demand for slaves, gold, and other commodities was most profound. Kongo collapsed in civil war in the 1660s, after a century of gradual decline. Rivalries along the Guinea shore from the Gold Coast to the Niger delta resulted in the concentration of political power, but states remained small and belligerent. In the interior of the Niger delta and the Cross River, there were not even any states, despite a dense population, extensive trade, and strong cultural similarities. Between 1650 and 1750, several states emerged in this coastal zone: Oyo after 1650, Asante after 1700, and Dahomey after 1724, but these states were never very large. They have often been called "empires,"

but by comparison with the countries of Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, with their vast provinces and colonies, they appeared small. Asante, Oyo and Dahomey did not even remotely parallel the wealth and power of Ottoman Turkey, Ming China, Moghul India, or the British, Dutch, French, and Spanish empires.

In this situation of political fragmentation, the characteristic figure was the soldier, who lived as a parasite off the turmoil of the continent. The record of warfare that fills the accounts of past states and rulers may not seem very different from the history of contemporary Europe or Asia, except that here the enslavement of people was the result, and no large states emerged that could provide some semblance of unity and safety. Even the economic and technological developments of the period promoted this political environment. The major technological improvements were in military organization, new food crops, and commercial organization. Guns and breeding horses facilitated the emergence of the soldier as the dominant historical figure. The introduction of new crops from the Americas increased food production and thereby helped maintain population levels despite the export of slaves. Advances in commercial institutions, including credit facilities, currency, bulking, and regularized transportation, assisted in the movement of slaves. Africa remained the poor cousin in the world community, despite its partial incorporation into a global political economy. The continent delivered its people to the plantations and mines of the Americas and to the harems and armies of North Africa and Arabia. The most accurate depiction would characterize this period of African dependency as one of warlordism. Who were the warlords? How did they operate? Why were they successful in their perpetuation of rivalries that effectively placed Africa in a state of retarded economic and political development?

The Muslim Tradition of War and State

Between 1500 and 1800, approximately 3 million people were sold as slaves across the Sahara, the Red Sea, and the Indian Ocean, which represented approximately 30 percent of the total departures of slaves from Africa. Another million or so were sent to the Americas from Muslim areas in the interior of the Senegambia and the upper Guinea coast, which represented an additional 10 percent of the traffic. Hence the Muslim trade accounts for perhaps as much as 40 percent of the slaves who left Africa between 1500 and 1800. The number of departures during the sixteenth century can largely be attributed to wars of political expansion, whereas the scale of the traffic for the next two centuries primarily resulted from wars of political fragmentation.

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the glorious tradition of Islamic empire had been checked; instead, the many small states struggled among themselves to acquire slaves and land. None was successful in creating a new empire, but many slaves changed hands. The three patterns that prevailed in these two centuries included: first, wars between Muslim states and non-Muslim people;

secondly, wars among nominally Muslim governments; and thirdly, Islamic holy wars against established authorities of all kinds. Whether Christian, Muslim, or pagan, all the states of this period augmented the slave population through their military actions, and these states had substantial slave populations themselves. Despite variations, the conception of slavery conformed more or less to the Islamic norm, even in Christian states – most of whose markets and most of whose merchants were, in any case, Muslim.

Local warfare and periodic drought combined to create a cyclical pattern of history that was closely related to the institution of slavery. War and drought, while impeding political and economic expansion, provided a solution to the inherent problem of finding new sources of slaves. The warlords of the savanna seized captives, settling them around their capitals or selling them to merchants. Although some captives were exported from the savanna, the general movement resulted in the concentration of population, at least temporarily. During periods of drought, however, people had to move to save themselves, whether they were slave or free; defeat in war could also lead to a similar flight. This demographic shift replenished lands stripped of people by slave raids and war and made it possible for later warlords to enslave or reenslave people once climatic and political conditions stabilized.

Droughts were common in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, although, ironically, the period as a whole was relatively wet. As a climatic epoch, however, these two centuries experienced drastic shifts in rainfall conditions that reinforced the cyclical pattern.² The wetter era is apparent in the level of Lake Chad, which was at record highs, and in the vegetation patterns along rivers and lakes, whose remains demonstrate a lush period. The first serious drought struck from 1639 to 1643. It was reported in the Senegambia and Niger bend regions and may have coincided with a period of famine remembered in Borno as *dala dama*. There were other bad years: 1669–1670 in Senegambia; 1676, 1681, and 1685 in the Niger bend; and sometime in the 1690s, perhaps simultaneously with the drought in the Niger bend, at Agades, and possibly in Borno. Drought probably caused a seven-year famine in Borno in the second half of the century. The drought of 1639–1643 in the western Sudan was probably the worst, but it does not seem to have affected the central Sudan or the Nile valley and Ethiopia.³

The climate of the eighteenth century was more dramatic for all regions, there being two and perhaps three major droughts and many localized ones. The first drought appears to have occurred in the middle Niger valley from 1711 to 1716 and was also reported in Borno, where it lasted seven years. The second drought struck in the early 1720s: 1721–1722 in the middle Niger valley and 1723 in the Senegal basin. The most severe drought of the century, and indeed probably the longest and most disastrous one in recorded history, took place in the middle of the eighteenth century. It lasted from 1738 to 1756 in the middle Niger valley; in Senegambia, it was serious from 1747 to 1758; it hit Borno in the 1740s and 1750s. Famine was recorded as far south as the

middle Volta basin, most notably in 1745–1746. The remainder of the century included more droughts: 1770–1771 in the Timbuktu area, 1786 along the Gambia, and the 1790s for the central Sudan. None of these appears to have been as disastrous as the Great Drought of 1738–1756, however.⁴

The population displacement accompanying these droughts was severe. As in periods of political instability, there was opportunity for slaves to escape; sometimes they had to flee. Because most slaves were at the bottom of society, they were often the first to suffer when food became scarce. Furthermore, many people, not just slaves, found themselves in a desperate condition, as traditions from the Senegal River valley demonstrate for the middle of the eighteenth century, when the number of slaves apparently increased as a result of this suffering. Similarly, half the population of Timbuktu reportedly died during the famine accompanying the same drought. Self-enslavement to avoid starvation and the sale of children were both possible at such times.

Wars between Muslims and non-Muslims continued the tradition of militant Islam, which held that enslavement and military action were proper methods of conversion. The political reality of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries conflicted with this ambition, for Islamic governments did not possess the power to subjugate much non-Muslim territory. Consequently, enslavement was conceived as a necessary means of pursuing the same goal. In this period, Borno presented itself as a caliphate, allied to the Ottoman Empire; Sennar pictured itself as the advance guard of Islam, having smashed through the vestiges of Christianity in the upper Nile valley where Christian Nubia and Ethiopia had checked the spread of Islam. Adal continued to harbor hope that its abortive holy war of the previous century could be revived. Other states, including Dar Fur and Wadai between the Nile valley and Lake Chad, pushed forward the frontiers of Islam against pagan populations, and again Islam was used as a rationale for war.

Muslim states organized official slave raids, known as *ghazwa* or *salatiya* in Dar Fur and Sennar.⁵ The Sultan of Sennar appointed an officer to oversee the expeditions there. Each noble organized his own contingent, usually consisting of his private slave army. The Dar Fur sultan issued certificates that designated where raiding parties were allowed, so that competition between units could be minimized. He also placed expeditions under officials, and specific units included volunteers as well as slave soldiers. The Borno armies pillaged the lands to the south of Lake Chad, some raiding into the hill country of Mandara and others sweeping into the plains of the Benue, Shari, and Logone River valleys. These sultans claimed half the booty, which they were then free to dispose of as they saw fit. Some women were placed in harems; some men were drafted into the army; still others were settled on plantations; and the rest were sold. Such organized slave raiding reflected the dependence of the political economy on slavery. Slave catching was a business. For the Sultan of Sennar, it was his second largest source of revenue, after direct taxation of the peasantry.

Christian Ethiopia accepted Portuguese military support to counter this Muslim danger, but the Portuguese alliance proved to be a mixed blessing.⁶ The

Portuguese neutralized Ottoman influence on the Red Sea, thereby isolating Adal and other Muslim sultanates on Ethiopia's flank and assuring Ethiopian independence, but it was necessary to expel the Portuguese, too. Jesuit missionaries were intolerant of local interpretations of Christianity and were forced to leave. Ethiopia then found itself in an unenviable position. With Muslim states on the east and west and the Red Sea trade severely depressed, the Christian monarchy became weaker and weaker. The nobility fought among themselves, employing immigrant Galla nomads in their private armies. The nobles raided for slaves, sometimes against the Muslims and at other times into the pagan lands to the south. When necessary, the monarchy could secure cooperation to check Muslim inroads. Nonetheless, political instability was so pronounced by the last half of the eighteenth century and continuing into the first several decades of the nineteenth century that this period is remembered as the "era of princes" in recognition of the absence of strong central government. Moreover, the economic situation continued to be unfavorable. Some gold, perfume, and other luxuries were exported, but slaves were the most important commodity. And these depended on Muslim markets.

The most serious enemy of Borno was Jukun, a pagan confederation in the Benue River valley. Jukun periodically marched on Borno and the tributary Hausa cities of Katsina and Kano. These attacks were so feared that the defeat of one Jukun force by Borno was celebrated in verse by the seventeenth-century Katsina scholar and poet, Dan Marina:

Ali has triumphed over the heathen, a matchless
triumph in the path of God.
Has he not brought us succour? Verily, but for him
Our hearts had never ceased from dread of the unbelievers.
Narrow had become to us the earth pressed by the foe,
Till Ali saved our children and their children yet unborn.
He drove back to their furthest borders the army of the Jukun,
And God scattered their host disheartened ...
Give thanks again for what our Mai Ali has wrought;
For he has ransomed the whole Sudan from strife.⁷

Jukun stormed Kano, sacking the city, in the seventeenth century, although the walled towns of Borno and Hausaland were usually strong enough to prevent such severe incursions. Slaves were taken, however, no matter whether Muslims or non-Muslims were the aggressors.

Muslim slave raids and pagan counterraids accounted for many slaves in the central Sudan, but by no means all. The Muslim states were often at war with each other, despite the concern in Islamic legal circles over such abuses. Ahmad Bābā, in his 1614 treatise on slavery, specifically condemned the Hausa states for conducting such wars:

Sometimes there is disharmony among the chiefs of these lands and one *sultān* might march against another, and invade his country and capture whatever he can from the other's followers, who are Muslims, and he sells the prisoners although they are free

Muslims. Alas! This is much practised among them. The people of Katsina invade Kano and others do the same although their tongue is one and their language is one their conditions are approximate.⁸

Between 1600 and 1800, the five Hausa states of Gobir, Zamfara, Kano, Katsina, and Zazzau fought dozens of wars, sometimes forming alliances and at other times fighting each other directly.⁹ Furthermore, Borno maintained nominal sovereignty over several of these states, collecting tribute or marching its own armies through Hausaland whenever such payments were in arrears. Only at the very end of the eighteenth century were slaves sent from this area to the Guinea coast for shipment to the Americas, and then in relatively small numbers. In general, slaves were marched north across the Sahara or redistributed locally. Nonetheless, the political turmoil of the period and the inability of Borno to transform its hegemony into a strong imperial system once again reflect the general insecurity of the era.

Further west, where the upper Niger and Senegambia basins supplied both the trans-Saharan and trans-Atlantic slave markets, the pattern of enslavement was different in two respects. First, the division between Muslim and non-Muslim had become institutionalized. The commercial and religious community was Muslim, whereas many governments were either pagan or only nominally Muslim. Even when some aristocracies were recognized as Muslim, their armies tended not to be. Secondly, Islamic holy war (*jihad*) overthrew some of these states, establishing in their place theocracies in which the association between political power and paganism was broken. In both situations, slave raiding was an important function of the state; only the rationale for enslavement changed. The *jihads* were significant as an inspiration for a new political order, but in the eighteenth century they only perpetuated the general insecurity that prevailed almost everywhere.

One pagan state that was a major supplier of slaves was the Bambara state of Segu, located on the banks of the Niger River and founded in the early seventeenth century in the wake of Songhay's disintegration.¹⁰ Its first ruler, Kalajan Kulubali, attracted a following of young men who ravaged the countryside, sometimes as mercenaries in the employment of petty rulers and at other times as enslavers interested in the profits and glory to be gained from military action. This tradition of raiding was pursued over the generations because local society allowed young men to form hunting associations that were easily adaptable to illegitimate ends. Bands of men would waylay caravans or kidnap children and the occasional farmer in his field. This tradition was carried to its logical extension under the grandson of Kalajan, the noteworthy Mamari Kulubali, whose military career led from raiding to organized warfare. Mamari Kulubali attracted escaped slaves, debtors, criminals, as well as his own age-mates, whose quest for adventure had provided the nucleus of his army. Before Mamari Kulubali died in the mid-1750s, Segu had raided north to Timbuktu, occupying it briefly in 1727, and south to Kong, near the

forest edge. So many slaves were taken in these campaigns that Segu became a major source of slaves for the European slave ships in the Senegambia basin. Incorporated slaves became the largest contingent in the army and the real power behind the throne, so much so that when Mamari's son and successor proved unacceptable to the army, he was assassinated and replaced by a series of more tractable men.

Royal power in such states in Senegambia as Kajoor, Kaymor, and Saalum depended on slave soldiers (*tyeddo*) whose antipathy toward Islam was pronounced. Those soldiers collected taxes and were responsible for many administrative tasks, as well as the fighting. Their heavy drinking, long hair, bright clothing, and arrogance earned the deep hatred of Muslims.¹¹ In these ways, the *tyeddo* of Senegambia were similar to the Bambara warriors of Segu and other states further inland. Indiscriminate enslavement and export of free Muslims to the Americas and across the Sahara frustrated many Muslims. In the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this discontent crystallized, as Muslim reformers gathered a following that hoped to establish more orthodox, Islamic states. Neither slave raiding as such nor trade with Christian Europe was criticized, only the sale of free Muslims and the lax practices of political authorities in enforcing Muslim law and tradition.

The new theocracies in Futa Bondu, Futa Toro, and Futa Jallon eliminated some anti-Muslim regimes, but only in the Futa Jallon highlands and along the interior stretch of the Senegal River. Futa Bondu, the first and smallest of these states, produced some slaves, whereas the holy war in the highlands resulted in the enslavement of many people, particularly in the 1740s and again in the 1780s. The pattern repeated itself. Enemies of the new regime were enslaved and sold, unless they were free Muslims. Nonetheless, these Islamic governments, despite their intention of initiating a new political and religious order, contributed to the insecurity of the western Sudan. Enslavement continued to be a function of the state.¹²

Warlords of West-Central Africa

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the main source of slaves for sale to Europeans was west-central Africa, especially the Mbundu lands to the south of Kongo, and the area around Malebo Pool on the Congo River. Of the approximately 2.2 million slaves shipped from Africa to the Americas between 1500 and 1700, almost 60 percent came from that region. In the eighteenth century, some 2.4 million slaves were exported from west-central Africa alone; the total migration from 1500 to 1800 exceeded 3.6 million people.

Where did the people come from? How were they enslaved? The analysis of departures in the preceding chapter demonstrated that three phenomena made the migration possible. The first was the disintegration of the Kongo kingdom, which experienced civil war in the last half of the seventeenth century. Kongo was then a major source of slaves. The second involved Portuguese expeditions

into the interior in an attempt to expand the colony and capture slaves. The third was the rise of Imbangala war bands that operated in the area where the Mbundu lived to the south of Kongo. The trend was toward political instability. Whereas once the kingdom of Kongo had dominated the area, now no central authority could enforce law and order. Instead, the period was one for the warlords, whether they were Kongo nobles, Imbangala chiefs, Portuguese commanders, or new warrior princes farther inland. The common element was the emphasis on war and plunder, and the consequence was enslavement on a massive scale. Without doubt, the majority – perhaps the vast majority – of the 1.3 million people dispatched from west-central Africa between 1500 and 1700 were a product of the interaction between these Imbangala, Kongo, and Portuguese warlords. The eighteenth century required the inclusion of areas farther inland to maintain the level of departures, but this meant that other warlords were added to the list of participants in the campaigns to supply slaves for export.

Although Kongo continued to participate in the slave trade in the first half of the seventeenth century, the state was not the source of slaves that it once had been. In part this resulted from the collapse of the Mpinda-São Thomé trade and the shift of trade to Luanda and the direct export of slaves to the Americas.¹³ But the decline also resulted from the inability of the Kongo nobility to reassert state trading, as Afonso I had once done. The Kongo aristocracy was more interested in incorporating slaves into the retinues and agricultural estates of the capital district and Mbanza Sonyo than it was in capturing slaves for export. Occasionally, nobles raided the peasantry to collect taxes, and these captives were likely to be exported. This was especially so in the 1650s, when such raids appear to have been common. This internal conflict reflected cleavages in Kongo society, which intensified to the point of civil war in the 1660s. The coastal province of Mbanza Sonyo invaded São Salvador, and the entire nobility of the capital district then deserted the city, together with slaves and followers. Those slaves who did not escape were seized and taken to Sonyo. The disintegration of Kongo, with the exception of the victorious province, continued after the desertion of São Salvador, as is evident from the increase in pawning, even in Mbanza Sonyo in the 1680s. The nobility also continued to harass – and enslave – the peasantry. Both pawning and raids on the peasantry demonstrate that nobles and peasants alike were hard pressed in these decades.¹⁴

The new commercial system, which had developed with the founding of the Portuguese colony of Luanda in 1576, was largely confined to the commercial corridor that followed the Kwanza River valley into the interior.¹⁵ In this region, a series of Imbangala warlords roamed the countryside, living off what they could plunder. By 1601, some Imbangala had come into contact with the Portuguese, forming temporary alliances to capture slaves in exchange for imports. By the second decade of the seventeenth century, these arrangements had become permanent, and the Imbangala in effect were transformed into

mercenaries for the Portuguese. Some Imbangala remained in southern Kongo and elsewhere near the coast; others founded states in the interior.¹⁶ These included Kalandula, Kabuku ka Ndonga, and Kasanje.

The Imbangala operated from fortified camps and recruited members through enslavement. Initiates were restricted to uncircumcised males, which effectively meant that only boys were incorporated and trained in the rituals and military techniques of the organization. Circumcised males and women were usually sold to the Portuguese or Dutch, except for those women taken as wives and other captives who were killed. The practices of the Imbangala were designed to terrorize the general population and to encourage the martial skills – valor in war, total loyalty to the leader of the camp, and a denial of kinship relations. These practices included the killing of slaves before battle, cannibalism, and infanticide. The Imbangala based their military superiority on a psychological advantage over the peasantry. They perpetuated customs that were abhorred by most Mbundu farmers. They had no kin. Symbolically and ritually, they renounced human reproduction and kinship, which were at the heart of the lineage-based societies of the Mbundu and Kongo.

Kasanje and Matamba, the most important of these small interior states, maintained a monopoly of the export-import business. That their officials were more than state merchants is revealed in the importance they placed on war and organized slave raids. These activities demonstrate that warlordism remained dominant in the political arena. Kidnapping, raids beyond the borders of the state, and periodic wars indicate a political order that relied on violence and lawlessness. The peasantry was not exempt from this affliction. Periodic levies that had to be paid in slaves were imposed on the lineages. The Matamba and Kasanje warlords wanted to ensure that no challenge to their supremacy could develop. Failure to pay tribute was punished by raids, whereas compliance reduced the number of people in each lineage.¹⁷

Slavery in Kasanje, therefore, was essential to the political and economic structure of the state. Because slaves were regularly sold to Portuguese firms for export to the Americas, all slaves in the state faced the real possibility that they were next on the list. The lineage, knowing that they were subject to tribute payments, kidnapped strangers and organized raids to acquire slaves. When possible, they purchased slaves, for slaves represented an investment against future exactions from the government. The Kasanje rulers maintained the most respected oracle in west-central Africa, so famous that the surrounding Mbundu chiefs sent troublesome rivals and other undesirables to suffer judgment before the Kasanje “great *ndua*.” Guilty defendants, sometimes with their families, were sold into slavery. The Kasanje rulers also weakened rivals within the state by requisitioning slaves from among them – a special tribute that had to be paid to prevent a punitive raid.¹⁸

The turbulence of west-central Africa spread inland further still, ultimately affecting the inner basin of the Zambezi too. From the last decade of the seventeenth century onward, a series of wars erupted and so fed the slave routes to

the coast. These wars were associated with the consolidation of several states, the most important being Luba, Lunda, Kazembe, and Lozi.¹⁹ Luba was probably the first to institute changes that resulted in the emergence of a class of warlords. It was located in the Lomami and Lualaba valleys, from where splinter groups of aristocrats spread to the west and south. One of these imposed itself in the area that became Lunda, centered between Luba and Kasanje and hence well situated to profit from the slave trade to the coast. The ruler of this state, the *mwant yaav*, founded a capital district (*mussumba*) from where Lunda armies raided outward, capturing slaves. In due course, a number of provinces and other small states were established under Lunda warlords, who channeled slaves to the *mussumba*. These dependencies were located throughout the valleys of the Kasai, Kwango, and Luapula and hence dominated most of modern eastern Angola, southern Congo, and northern Zambia. Two of these states became important in their own right. Kazembe, located in the Luapula valley south of Luba and southeast of Lunda, was founded in the 1740s and expanded eastward. By the end of the century, Kazembe was trading with Portuguese and other merchants from the Zambezi valley, as well as sending slaves to Lunda for transshipment to Angola. Hence by this time, the interior supply system of the Lunda and Luba states provided slaves to both the east and west coasts, and probably for the first time a continuous network stretched across this part of Africa. The last state of note, Lozi, was located in the interior flood plains of the Zambezi valley, south of Lunda. Here, too, slaves were available for export to both coasts, although Lozi was more conveniently situated than Luanda as a supply area for Benguela.

The Zambezi corridor to the Indian Ocean was an old route, dating back to the medieval period when gold was the principal export from the interior of south-eastern Africa. In the eighteenth century, gold was still exported, along with some ivory, but slaves commanded an increasingly important share in the value of trade. Slaves brought from Kazembe and Lozi, while demonstrating the links that crossed the continent by the last decades of the eighteenth century, were never a major portion of the Indian Ocean trade; most slaves from Kazembe and Lozi went west. The catchment area for the Indian Ocean was in the Zambezi valley itself and the area around Lake Malawi. Two routes connected the interior with the coast: one down the Zambezi valley to Quelimane or branching overland to Mozambique Island; the other stretching from Lake Malawi to Kilwa. These two routes became a major source of slaves in the 1770s, principally for the French sugar islands in the Indian Ocean.²⁰

The pattern of enslavement in the south-eastern portion of central Africa was similar to that in west-central Africa: Warlords operated on a relatively small scale, collecting slaves from exploited populations and shipping these slaves to the coast. As in Angola, the Portuguese were actively involved in enslavement. Portuguese warlords, whom Isaacman has called *prazeros*, operated as far inland as the commercial center of Zumbo.²¹ Their landed estates, won from the local population and sanctified by the Portuguese crown, served

as bases for slave raiding in the interior. Further north, along an axis connecting Lake Malawi with Kilwa on the coast, local African warlords fulfilled the same function as the *prazeros*. Various Yao warriors in particular emerged as strong men who raided their less well-organized neighbors, although nearer the coast, wars among the Makonde and others accounted for some slaves for export.²² In none of these cases did a large centralized state evolve; the Yao were divided among warlords who rose to prominence for brief periods, and the tenuous links between the *prazeros* and the Portuguese crown hardly qualified as a strong political bond that could provide the basis for a colonial state. South-eastern Africa remained a frontier region in which enslavement was a product of frontier instability.

Whereas Zambezia and the Lake Malawi region provided many of the slaves for the Mascarenes, Madagascar was the source of virtually all the rest. Once again, the development of Madagascar as an exporting region represented a further extension of the slaving frontier. This island, and the Comoro archipelago – located between Madagascar and the mainland – had been involved in the commercial patterns of the Indian Ocean since the medieval period, but the developments of the late eighteenth century were different from the earlier trade.

Various Muslim sultanates controlled the Comoro Islands, and these catered to passing ships in the Indian Ocean until the late eighteenth century, when invasions from Madagascar upset their commercial prosperity.²³ The raids were directed from Sakalava, which, together with Betsimisaraka and Imerina, was locked in a power struggle for control of Madagascar. Until the end of the eighteenth century, Sakalava and Betsimisaraka had succeeded in apportioning most of the island; the rise of Imerina in the central highlands upset this balance of power. Sakalava raided the Comoros, as well as its own frontier on Madagascar, in search of slaves and other booty. The slaves were sold to the French for use in the Mascarenes, and the proceeds were used to buy firearms. The Sakalava even raided the East African coast, including Kilwa. Imerina's rise was based on land-based military expansion and an attempt to capture the French slave-market. Already by the 1790s, Imerina had become the main source of Madagascan slaves in the Mascarenes. The importation of firearms enabled the Imerina aristocracy to continue its imperialist drive to control the island, although Sakalava still maintained its independence in 1800. The Betsimisaraka League had largely lost its autonomy by this time, however.²⁴

Politics of Slave Trading on the West African Coast

Perhaps as many as 4,192,000 slaves were exported from the West African coast in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Table 4.1). Of this number, almost 1.5 million slaves – approximately 35 percent of total West African exports – came from the Bight of Benin. This number of slaves reflected political developments in the interior, including the rise of Oyo in the second half

TABLE 4.1. *West African Slave Departures across the Atlantic, 1650–1800*

Region	Number of Slaves	Percent
Senegambia	445,000	9.5
Upper Guinea	207,000	4.4
Windward Coast	291,000	6.2
Gold Coast	1,121,000	24.0
Bight of Benin	1,545,000	33.1
Bight of Biafra	1,054,000	22.6
West Africa	4,663,000	

Sources: Eltis et al., *Slave Voyage Database*.

of the seventeenth century, emerging as the dominant power in the region, and the power struggle along the coastal lagoons, resulting in the defeat of Allada and the conquests of Dahomey. Another million slaves (24 percent of West African exports) came from the Bight of Biafra, thereby establishing this region as a major source of slaves for the first time. Slaves were exported almost entirely through two ports, Bonny and Old Calabar, and almost entirely on British ships. Moreover, the sudden emergence of this region as a major source of slaves depended on the expansion and consolidation of Aro merchants in the Biafra interior. The Gold Coast was also a significant source of slaves in the eighteenth century. Slightly less than a million slaves (23 percent of West African exports) came from the Akan area along the Gold Coast (including exports that were probably a result of the Baule wars to the west). This traffic reflected the continuing wars among the various Akan states, the destruction of Denkirya and Akwamu, and the emergence of Asante as the dominant power. The stretch of territory where the Akan, Aja, and Yoruba states were the dominant powers, including the areas that experienced wars caused by refugees or other enemies of Oyo and Asante, supplied about 2.4 million slaves, or 58 percent of West African exports. The remainder of slave exports from West Africa, another 750,000 people, came from the long stretch of the western coast as far as Senegambia. These last exports have been discussed in the section on enslavement in Muslim areas.

The vast majority of slaves from the interior of the Bights of Benin, the Gold Coast, and Senegambia were taken in wars. By contrast, those slaves who came from the Niger delta and the Cross River – the Bight of Biafra – had a more varied background, although warfare was also a factor. Instead, raiding, kidnapping, judicial conviction, defaults on pawnship, and religiously sanctioned enslavement were the main sources for their enslavement.

The expansion of Oyo began in the middle of the seventeenth century and is reflected in the export figures for slaves.²⁵ The Oyo aristocracy, composed of the king and a council of nobles, had learned the secret of military success in

the savanna the hard way. The horse had to be the basis of the military. Oyo had suffered defeat at the hands of Nupe, which controlled the Niger River valley in central Nigeria in the early seventeenth century. Forced into exile in the neighboring Bariba states, the Oyo leadership slowly reconstituted its army. Once Oyo reoccupied the district near the Niger, where a fortified capital was built, the king and nobles pursued policies to guarantee access to horses for the cavalry. Oyo established commercial relations with the coastal ports to sell slaves and import cowries, textiles, and other goods. These in turn were used to purchase horses from the north.

Oyo's conquests were along the savanna corridor that stretched from the Niger to the coast. The Yoruba and other people who lived within striking distance of this route were raided, and the prisoners were sold to Europeans. By the last half of the seventeenth century, Oyo controlled much of the territory south of the Moshi River, which was the border with the Bariba states to the north, and east to Igbomina, along the forest-savanna divide through Yoruba country. The whole of the upper Ogun River valley was under Oyo control, as was the region westward to the Opara River, which separated Oyo from Sabe. In the southwest, Oyo had direct control of the northern Egbado and Anago areas. It may well be that parts of southern Bariba and Nupe country were tributary, while Oyo raided southwestward into Allada, Dahomey, and Weme, perhaps receiving tribute from these states too. By the early eighteenth century, Oyo dominated the interior of the Slave Coast.²⁶

Early reports indicate that most of the slaves exported from the Bight of Benin before the middle of the eighteenth century came from a region that stretched from the coast a distance of no more than 200 to 300 km inland, and the ethnic origins of the slaves were largely Aja and Yoruba.²⁷ One reason for this preponderance of coastal people was the struggle for power among the Aja, who vied for position in the trade with Oyo and the north and who attempted unsuccessfully to assert some order in Aja society itself. There were many ports on the coast here: Allada, with its ports of Offra and Jakin, and Hueda, with its port at Ouidah, were the most important from the end of the seventeenth century until the 1720s; Akwamu dominated the coast from Winneba through Accra on the Gold Coast after 1681, and as far east as Ouidah by 1700. Hueda and Allada were well placed to tap the trade north along the natural corridor of savanna country that reached the coast at this point and thereby facilitated travel between the coast and the interior. Akwamu dominated the routes north along the Volta River and also had access to gold supplies, and, because of its expansion eastward, was a factor in the politics of the Slave Coast.²⁸

The emergence of Dahomey inland from Ouidah and Allada and adjacent to Akwamu was both a product of the power struggle on the Slave Coast and contributed to the further export of slaves.²⁹ The area had been subject to raids from the coast, but an enterprising warlord, Agaja, organized a tight military machine, based on firearms, and attacked Allada in 1724 and Hueda in 1727. The immediate cause of the invasions was the efforts of the two coastal states

to tighten their administrative control over the export trade in slaves, thereby reducing the benefits to such inland contributors as Dahomey. By resorting to arms, Dahomey secured control of the ports of Jakin and Ouidah and now, along with Akwamu, dominated the coast.

To maintain its own coastal interests, Oyo intervened in Dahomey between 1726 and 1730, forcing Dahomey to pay tribute as a guarantee that the trade routes would remain open. In 1727, Oyo was still trading at Jakin, but in 1732, Dahomey once again moved on the port, destroying it and thereby endangering its own relationship with Oyo. Despite the tributary status of Dahomey, the Oyo government and principal traders began to develop alternative outlets to the sea. In the 1720s, Epe was one alternative; by the early 1730s, Apa emerged as a port; after 1736, Badagry absorbed the earlier port. In the 1750s, refugees from Allada, which had been destroyed by Dahomey, resettled at Porto Novo, which rapidly became the principal outlet to the coast for Oyo. After the 1760s, Lagos also became active, although it was not important until the nineteenth century.³⁰

Because of this political jockeying, it is no wonder that many of the slave exports in the late seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth centuries came from the immediate interior of the coast. In the peak decades of slave exports from 1690 to 1740, perhaps 80 to 90 percent of those slaves sold on the coast were Aja captives or imported slaves from farther north who had been at least partially acculturated.³¹ Virtually all the rest of the slaves were Yoruba. Without doubt these estimates of ethnic origins are distorted; they probably disguise a higher percentage of Yoruba in particular, and it is likely that at least some slaves were brought from further north.

After the middle of the eighteenth century, the origins of slave exports changed. Whereas Aja and Yoruba still predominated, reflecting the same likelihood as in the earlier period that Aja, Yoruba, and imported slaves who were at least partially acculturated were the majority of exports, now slaves from farther north appear regularly in the registers of slave ships. Those speaking Eastern Voltaic (from the Bariba states and Atakora Mountains), Nupe, and Hausa emerged as identifiable categories of slaves, although their numbers remained small by comparison with the total volume of exports, amounting to about 183,000 slaves for the last half of the eighteenth century. These ethnic labels also implied a more varied background for the slave population, but the presence of these categories suggests that now a significant percentage of exports did not experience a period of acculturation before being sold to Europeans.³² The frontier of enslavement had thus moved inland. This expansion of the catchment area was a logical feature of the large-scale, sustained export of slaves.

This expansion was also directed westward to the Gold Coast, where Akwamu had already participated in the early growth of slave exports through its involvement in the politics of the Slave Coast.³³ Although Akwamu was an Akan state, with its capital, Nyanaoase, located west of the Akwapim Ridge,

its expansion had been directed eastward. Its closest access to the coast was at Winneba, but between 1677 and 1681, several Akwamu armies invaded Accra; thereafter, the European trade castles there became the major outlets for its gold, ivory, and slave exports. By 1700, as previously noted, Akwamu controlled the whole coast as far east as Ouidah. During the next decade or so, as many as fifty to sixty ships stopped at Accra each year, whereas others stopped at lesser points to the east. Given that slaves were also transported along the coastal lagoon to Ouidah, the number of slaves dispatched from Akwamu was probably a considerable portion of total exports from the Bight of Benin–Gold Coast region between 1700 and 1730.

Akwamu also faced west, where there was a power struggle equal in intensity to the struggle in the interior of the Slave Coast. After 1650, Akwamu shared power with many Akan states, the most important of which were Akyem and Denkyira. The main economic goal was control of gold, not slaves.³⁴ Intermittent warfare between these states ended in a stalemate, until a new state, Asante, gradually emerged as the dominant power after 1700. Denkyira and Akyem formed an alliance against Akwamu and Asante, but the destruction of Denkyira in 1701 left Asante free to expand. Other wars followed, now that Asante, Akyem, and Akwamu were the dominant powers, and these accounted for the export of slaves. This power struggle for control of the gold, kola, and slave resources of the region was narrowed further when Akyem defeated Akwamu in 1730.³⁵

Asante's principal campaigns in the north included the conquest of Bono-Mansu, the early Akan state where the old Muslim town of Bighu was located, in 1724, and the invasion of the trans-Volta, resulting in the occupation of eastern Gonja in 1744–1745. These thrusts increased the power of Asante considerably, because slave exports could be used to purchase firearms in preparation for the final defeat of Akyem in 1742. Once Asante had consolidated its position in the south and the northeast, all that remained was the extinction of the remaining independent states, the most important of which was Gyaman in the northwest, defeated in 1746–1747.³⁶ Thus by mid-century, the Akan wars had devastated the region, thereby accounting for most, if not all, of the approximately 375,000 slaves exported from the Gold Coast between 1700 and 1750. The volume of exports was maintained at about this level for the rest of the century, with a notable expansion in the 1780s and 1790s, when Asante attempted to occupy the Fante coast.

In the interior of the Bight of Biafra, the pattern of enslavement was remarkably different from that on the Gold and Slave Coasts. Here, no strong state comparable to Oyo and Asante emerged, but the possibility of political consolidation was there. Like the ports of the Slave Coast and the towns of the Gold Coast, the Bight of Biafra had its commercial centers: Old Calabar on the Cross River, Bonny and Elem Kalabari in the Niger delta, and Aboh on the lower Niger. However, none of these centers was able to transform commercial supremacy into territorial rule, nor did any interior polity try to control

the ports. Even though warlords were present, they usually acted as agents for the merchants. Neither the merchants nor the warriors created a centralized state.³⁷

The most significant development in the interior was the emergence of the Aro as leading merchants supplying slaves to the coast. In origin the Aro claim to be an amalgamation of Ibibio and Igbo settlers who founded the town of Aro Chukwu on the escarpment overlooking the Cross River.³⁸ The earliest settlers – called Akpa – were warriors, suggesting a mercenary role that may have been an early manifestation of the trans-Atlantic trade. They are remembered as coming from the coast and being the first people in the interior to use fire-arms, which in turn suggests a mid-seventeenth-century origin. Aro expansion occurred rapidly in the eighteenth-century, closely associated with the growth in slave exports from the Bight of Biafra after the 1730s. Early Aro settlements in the interior, including those at Afikpo, Ndizuogu, and Ndikelionwu, were initially slave-raiding centers before becoming important market towns in the Aro network.

In the absence of a centralized state, the Aro turned to the manipulation of religious institutions to secure slaves. Their oracle (Ibinukpabi) at Aro Chukwu was directly or indirectly responsible for the transfer of thousands of slaves to European ships waiting at the coastal ports.³⁹ This shrine was respected throughout much of the hinterland as a particularly powerful agent of the supernatural. In fact, the Aro carefully coordinated the oracle with military and commercial institutions they controlled, and thereby monopolized the markets and fairs of the populous Igbo and Ibibio countryside. There was no need for a centralized state with its warlords, tribute payments, and courts. Instead, groups of villages, closely connected through kinship, formed alliances, marital and commercial, with other sets of villages. This local orientation required close cooperation, but friction between communities could erupt in warfare when disputes over marriage, sorcery, or crime were not settled. Tensions were relieved through mediation as well as violence, and it was the role of the oracles and other intermediaries to placate communities and so reduce the level of potential disruption.

The Aro clans inserted themselves into the vacuum that a centralized state could have filled. They negotiated alliances with various sets of villages that allowed them to monopolize trade and establish marketplaces and fairs, and they promoted their oracle as a supreme court of appeal in judicial and religious matters. The oracle itself was widely recognized to speak for the supreme god of the religious pantheon, and as such was respected among the three dominant ethnic groups of the region, the Ijaw of the Niger delta, the Ibibio of the Cross River valley, and the Igbo of the densely populated country astride the lower Niger River. The religious oracle and the commercial network both filled a structural need in the region. The oracle settled disputes and legitimized agreements, in part through divine interpretation of the social order and in part through secular deals based on information supplied by the commercial

network of the Aro traders. The force needed to impose decisions and protect the merchants in their travels was furnished through alliances with other sets of villagers who acted as mercenaries. This loosely structured federation dominated one of the heaviest concentrations of population in Africa.

Slavery was fundamental to the successful operation of this federation. Firstly, slaves were a major item of trade, and the prosperity of the Aro depended on the sale of slaves to European merchants on the coast. Secondly, slaves were used as porters in the trade of the interior, and they farmed the lands of the merchants at Aro Chukwu. Thirdly, enslavement was the ultimate sanction of the oracle, payment often being in slaves. The oracle was even known to seize parties who had humbled themselves before it. Fourthly, failure to respect the decisions of the oracle and physical abuse of Aro merchants and their property were sufficient grounds to expect a lightning raid from the mercenaries. Indeed, these warrior bands enslaved people whenever called on, and the slaves were turned over to the merchants via the oracle.

The manipulation of religious institutions is now obvious. There were many shrines, but only that at Aro Chukwu achieved such renown. Its location at the bottom of a steep hill in the thick jungle of a stream that flowed down the escarpment from Aro Chukwu to the Cross River strategically marked the transfer point from the plateau of Igbo country to the valley of the Ibibio. This stream cut the high terrain where the Aro villages were located, so its secrets were well understood locally but must have seemed awesome to strangers. Plaintiffs who had traveled to Aro Chukwu to face the oracle were housed in one of the Aro villages, paying lodging fees and being filled with stories of the horrible sight that awaited them. Once the visitors descended the slippery hillside, they faced a tall cave on the bank of the stream where the oracle spoke. The opening had been hollowed out to allow for a lining of human skulls, a sufficient warning that the required sacrifices could well include slaves as their victims. The priests informed the terrified delegations why they were there. It was not necessary to plead a case, thanks to the intelligence relayed from Aro merchants, and it certainly was not widely known, if it was known at all, that the slaves “eaten” by the oracle in recognition of the services rendered were easily passed along a path that followed the stream to the Cross River and the waiting ships of the Europeans.

The Dynamics of Slave Supply

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there were four patterns in the development of a slave-supply mechanism. Firstly, wars and large-scale slave raiding by centralized states stripped surrounding areas of their population; these states expanded, but in doing so reduced the possibility of acquiring slaves as the enslavement frontier was pushed back. Secondly, wars between neighboring states in which no single state established its ascendancy resulted in the enslavement of people without the necessity of expanding the enslavement

frontier. Thirdly, the spread of lawlessness, as demonstrated in kidnapping and small-scale raiding, led to the random enslavement of people without the creation of depopulated zones. Fourthly, the spread of enslavement as a punishment for convicted criminals, witches, and other miscreants became a means of supplying slaves from within a society, again without affecting the population density in a dramatic way. The sanctions of religious oracles fitted into this category. Structurally, these methods of enslavement affected the demographic profile of particular areas differently.

Individual states could not expand their frontier for enslavement indefinitely. Either the state had to turn to other methods of providing slaves, such as through criminal prosecutions, or it had to abandon its function of enslaving people. This function could be passed on to tribute-paying provinces or to merchants who brought slaves from elsewhere. In west-central Africa, the Imbangala warlords raided for slaves for the first few decades of the seventeenth century; thereafter, the slaving frontier moved inland, until in the eighteenth century the Lunda aristocracy filled the role once occupied by the Imbangala. In the interior of the Slave Coast, Oyo collected slaves through its own raids and political expansion, and this involved the extension of the catchment area for slaves. By the end of the eighteenth century, however, Oyo had shifted from enslaving people to trading for them.

When wars raged between neighboring states over a prolonged period, as they did along the Slave and Gold Coasts during the late seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth centuries, then eventually new slaves had to be imported to restore the demographic balance, or else there was a net loss of population. The internecine wars between the many coastal states on the Slave and Gold Coasts provided a continuous stream of slaves for about five decades; this strife resulted in the enslavement of many people without pushing back the enslavement frontier. Nonetheless, by 1800, the region as a whole was relatively densely populated, in part because Oyo and Asante emerged as the dominant states, checking the population drain, and in part because the exported population was replaced by new slaves brought from further inland.

The erosion of custom through the spread of kidnapping, raiding, and the sentencing of convicted criminals to slavery was another means of solving the slave-supply problem. Organized slave raiding – as distinct from war – and kidnapping both became more prevalent along the West African coast and in west-central Africa in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries than in earlier periods. Kidnapping is a small-scale activity, often lost to history, whereas slave raiding is sometimes hard to distinguish from punitive expeditions against recalcitrant subjects or for the harassment of enemies. Nonetheless, both activities are general indicators of a prevailing lawlessness, which the absence of central government made possible.

This political fragmentation had its impact on all walks of life. The times were insecure. The enslavement of people was easy. Without centralized authority that could safeguard personal liberties and property over large areas,

individuals had to face the risks of travel if they wanted to pursue a commercial undertaking, and communities always feared the dangers of war, kidnapping, and raids. In many cases, it is difficult to separate the desire to capture prisoners for slavery from economic and political rivalries not directly related to enslavement.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, warfare was by far the most important source of slaves. The three centuries from the sixteenth through the eighteenth are filled with the rise and fall of states. Some of these have been chronicled earlier to demonstrate their contribution to the slave population.

The problem was not simply one of legality. State violence, either through war or raiding, was usually justified on religious or political grounds. The punishment of criminals, sorcerers, and political opponents was also perceived as a legitimate method of protecting society. Kidnapping was often illegal, but attempts to stop it often failed. Social pressure also prevented many abuses, including the sale of pawns.

Olaudah Equiano, an Igbo slave who was kidnapped in 1756 and was ultimately sold to European slavers, provides a clear picture of the efforts of local people – his father included – to protect people from illegal seizure and sale. The account is particularly important because Equiano's father owned slaves himself and was involved in the enslavement of criminals. Hence this is not the account of an innocent bystander but of an active participant in a society that accepted slavery within clearly defined limits. Equiano came from the west bank of the Niger River, perhaps not too many kilometers from Aboh, the major slave-trading port on the Niger. He remembered that merchants frequently passed through his village:

They always carry slaves through our land; but the strictest account is exacted of their manner of procuring them before they are suffered to pass. Sometimes indeed we sold slaves to them, but they were only prisoners of war, or such among us as had been convicted of kidnapping, or adultery, and some other crime, which we esteemed heinous. This practice of kidnapping induces me to think, that notwithstanding all our strictness, their principal business among us was to trepan [ensnare] our people. I remember too they carried great sacks along with them, which not long after I had an opportunity of fatally seeing applied to that infamous purpose.⁴¹

In this case, of course, Equiano's father was not involved in an investigation of his son's status, and because poor Equiano was traded to a blacksmith and subsequently to Europeans, it is clear that not everyone accepted the responsibility of determining the legality of a slave's status. Nonetheless, the attempt to examine the origins of slaves is instructive. It reflects an attitude that was concerned with the abuses of the slave trade.

There were similar concerns elsewhere. In sixteenth-century Kongo, King Afonso established courts of inquiry designed to investigate illegal enslavement.⁴² He wanted to protect the rights of aristocrats, not enemies of the state or convicted criminals. He knew well that most slave traders were only too ready to buy anyone and ship them to São Thomé as quickly as possible.

Afonso attempted to regulate the trade to control it. The king was not against the trade in principle, and his efforts at monopoly failed because it was easy for local officials and Portuguese merchants to violate the directives of the king. The consequence was not the elimination of illegal enslavement but the greater disintegration of central authority and an increase in slave exports.

The debate over legitimate enslavement also involved Muslims, who traced their right to enslave people back to the Qur'an and other early legal and religious texts. Only Muslims and members of subject groups paying a special tax were exempt from enslavement. Violation of this code was a major preoccupation of such scholars as Ahmad Bābā of Timbuktu. Ahmad Bābā's treatise on legitimate enslavement is an important indication that the question of slavery was a difficult one, but one that involved the attention of the most learned scholars of Muslim society.⁴³ For Ahmed Bābā, neither Muslims nor the subjects of those states that he recognized as Muslim could be enslaved: The cause of slavery is nonbelief, he wrote in 1614.⁴⁴

The basic concern of Ahmad Bābā was shared by other thoughtful Muslims of his day both north and south of the Sahara, and sometimes abuses were corrected. For example, Medicon, a slave from Borno, one of the Islamic lands that Ahmad Bābā specifically mentioned, was freed in North Africa only a few decades after Ahmad Bābā wrote his treatise. The slave, a nephew of the Borno ruler, had been enslaved during civil strife in Borno and was subsequently sold in North Africa. Once he was identified, as a result of his uncle's efforts, he was redeemed from bondage. Despite his illegal enslavement, merchants were unwilling to accept his previous status until forced to do so through royal intervention. Medicon was either redeemed or given his freedom outright, probably in return for some compensation to the master.⁴⁵ South of the Sahara, freeborn captives could be ransomed. This became a lucrative business, so that once again the effort to protect people from the abuses of slavery was undermined.

These attempts to check abuses reveal a strong tradition that tried to limit the worst effects of slavery. Here was a heritage, both Muslim and non-Muslim, that came close to considering the inherent evils of slavery. The questions people were asking related to the efforts to stop the practices of unscrupulous merchants and the activities of thugs. In general, however, these efforts failed. Individual wrongs were rectified, but the debate over enslavement continued. Slavery had become pervasive and morally destructive to many institutions.

This moral battle affected legal procedures, as can be seen in the shift of punishments toward enslavement and away from communal penalties, material compensation to wronged parties, and death to murderers and others convicted of particularly serious crimes. Enslavement increasingly became the most commonly imposed penalty. Francis Moore observed the consequences of this tendency in the Senegambia, where he bought slaves in the 1730s:

Since this Slave Trade has been us'd, all Punishments are changed into Slavery; there being an advantage on such condemnations, they strain for Crimes very hard, in order

to get the Benefit of selling the Criminal. Not only Murder, Theft and Adultery, are punished by selling the Criminal for Slave, but every trifling case is punished in the same manner.⁴⁶

Moore had no moral difficulty in participating in such subversion of custom; like other merchants, it was not in his interest to question slaves about their origins. Similar observations to those of Moore were made elsewhere. Criminals, debtors, and sorcerers were condemned to slavery. This general erosion of society must be understood within its political context. The lack of strong governments that could impose a system of law over a wide area was a serious obstacle in preventing the steady increase in the number of slaves.