I first attempted an overview of the history of slavery in Africa in 1979, in a paper first published in *Historical Reflections*, with responses from Igor Kopytoff and Frederick Cooper. Since then, there has been a great outburst in the study of the history of slavery, both within continental Africa and in the context of the development of the African diaspora in the Americas, the Islamic world, the Indian Ocean, and indeed Europe. My initial synthesis was prompted by the dialogue between francophone and anglophone scholarship, as represented in the collections of essays edited by Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff, *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives*, and by Claude Meillassoux, *L'Esclavage en Afrique précoloniale*, both published in 1975. Moreover, my reflections and then considerable study of the topic were also set in the context of a series of informal seminars, largely held on the floor in Martin Klein’s living room in Toronto, where a number of kindred souls read and studied Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, and then his “precapitalist modes of production.” The group was attempting to come to terms with the preponderance of evidence about the pervasiveness of slavery in African history and society. It was clear that historical and anthropological research were in the process of confronting slavery. Given that Philip D. Curtin and Jan Vansina had been my mentors at the University of Wisconsin during my graduate school days, this trajectory is perhaps not surprising.

The purpose of this preface is to evaluate the progression of research on the history of slavery since the initial publication of *Transformations in Slavery* in 1983, and its updated second edition, published in 2000. My initial intention was to focus research on continental Africa to counter the false impression that Africa’s involvement in the slave trade was somehow passive, ahistorical, and only of interest in examining victimization and seemingly progressive underdevelopment. Somehow, a careful reading of the anthropological and historical literature revealed that this approach was not connected with African history.
The challenge, therefore, was to make sense of what we know about the history of slavery in the context of political and economic change in Africa over the past several hundred years and how that related to the external traffic in enslaved Africans.

Since then, there has been a growing appreciation of the interconnectedness of African history with the development of the African diaspora, particularly in the Americas. Hence to examine how the study of the history of the descendants of Africans has progressed, it is now necessary to examine how African history was carried into diaspora. The study of slavery in Africa cannot be confined to continental questions any more than diaspora questions only require the study of how people adjusted to the oppression of enslavement.

There has been a great expansion in the study of slavery, as represented by the success of the journal *Slavery and Abolition*, and reflected in many other professional journals, scholarly series with publishers, and the establishment of programs, departments, centers, and institutes devoted to the study of slavery and the African diaspora. This scholarly output has been usefully combined into a bibliography that is annually updated in *Slavery and Abolition*, building on the early, pioneering bibliography of Joseph D. Miller. As a result, the bibliography in this revised edition has been shortened, and reference is made to the online bibliography. The activities of the UNESCO “Slave Route” Project also have highlighted the international focus on slavery, especially in relation to Africa. Significantly, UNESCO took the initiative in exploring the African past, first through the History of Africa project, but subsequently through a recognition of the African cultural heritage, such as at Ouidah in 1992, and more particularly in launching the UNESCO “Slave Route” Project in 1994. This initiative has strongly influenced my own commitment to demonstrating the importance of slavery in African history, as represented in this book and its revisions. Similarly, the persistence of contemporary forms of slavery has broadened the focus from the history of the African diaspora of the Americas, Asia, the Indian Ocean, and the Islamic world to issues of social justice.

An overview of developments in historical scholarship, particularly since the publication of the second edition in 2000, demonstrates the wealth of documentation that is available on the subject of slavery and its importance in the history of Africa. It is no longer acceptable to generalize about slavery in Africa in some anthropological present or indeed timeless past. It is possible to document change and difference. The new scholarship is sensitive to gender issues, religion, and the varied nature of historical information and sources. My reading of much of this literature confirms the general-transformation thesis of my original publications, including an insistence on the recognition of regional differences and temporal trajectories. An overview of the published literature since the publication of the second edition of this book, let alone the first, would require a full-length study in itself. It is my general sense, nonetheless, that the “transformation thesis” propounded in the first edition has had an important influence on the course of research.
There is reason to publish a revised, third edition of *Transformations in Slavery* because of the trajectory of slave studies over the past thirty years. This book was conceived in the 1970s, when the presence of slavery in Africa was only beginning to draw the attention of scholars. Since then, there has been an explosion in the study of slavery, whether historically or in contemporary anthropology. It is now widely recognized how important slavery has been in the history of Africa, and indeed extending through the colonial era to the present, in some places.

The third edition updates the overview of the history of slavery in Africa and provides an assessment of recent research. The references in the notes and the bibliography have been updated to reflect the great expansion in the research and publication on slavery in Africa. The third edition specifically incorporates the revised estimates on scale and direction of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and reassesses the implications of the new data in terms of the regional impact on Africa. There have been important advances in studying the migration of Africans to the Americas, which is reflected in the slave voyage database, initially published by Cambridge and now online.

*Transformations in Slavery* specifically and deliberately focuses on continental Africa. Initially, the purpose was to confront the reality that there was slavery in the history of Africa, at a time when some romantic visionaries and hopeful nationalists wanted to deny the clear facts. The launch of the UNESCO “Slave Route” Project in 1994 marked a shift in research focus. It is now generally recognized that Africa and its people were fully enmeshed in the international system of slavery that stretched across the world and specifically tore at the fabric of African life. How to assess the changes that affected Africa and its people and the transformations that resulted from the web of slavery and its expansion was and remains the purpose of this book. The transformation thesis emphasizes the interplay between local, regional, and intercontinental forces and interactions that have affected the history of slavery in Africa, and by implication everywhere that Africans were taken.

Despite the focus on continental Africa, the study of the transformations in slavery in Africa has enormous implications for understanding the history of the African diaspora, both in the Americas and everywhere else. Any focus of slavery that privileges the Atlantic stands accused of failure in understanding the diaspora of Africans elsewhere. It is essential to know where enslaved Africans who went to the Americas came from and what their departure meant to the history and society in Africa, just as it is for Africans who went to the lands of the Indian Ocean or the Islamic world of North Africa and the Middle East.

The first edition of *Transformations in Slavery* drew on Marxist concepts to highlight the complexity of the slavery past. The reference to “modes of production” is not archaic, I would suggest, because the intellectual debate on the various social formations that have developed historically, and how these formations were transformed, remains the central preoccupation of our
attention. The fact that there were at least as many enslaved people in Africa as there were in the Americas at any time in the past requires careful reflection. At the outbreak of the U.S. Civil War, there were probably more slaves in the Muslim states of West Africa than in the Confederacy, or indeed in Cuba and Brazil. The Sokoto Caliphate alone probably had as many slaves as the United States and continued as a major slave-owning economy and society until the crisis at the time of European occupation after 1897. The system of production and the social formation of the Sokoto Caliphate had similarities with the slave societies of the Americas and warrant comparison. We may call this comparison of “modes of production” a way to examine “modes of exploitation” that occurred on a massive and global scale. Breaking the silence about the implications of slavery in history is the aim of the Durban accord of 2002 pronouncing slavery “a crime against humanity.”

Paul E. Lovejoy
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