This is a work of synthesis. As such, it suffers from the same deficiencies that all studies of its sort do. I have examined some parts of the continent in much greater detail than others in preparing this book, and I have relied on secondary sources extensively, although there has been some use of primary material. Very likely there are points with which specialists will disagree, because the scope of the topic makes it impossible to be fully aware of the debates that affect particular periods and areas. Nonetheless, the study of African history, and more specifically the analysis of slavery in Africa, has suffered from the opposite problem to that of oversynthesis. There is virtually no historical framework in which the reconstruction of the history of slavery can be set. The numerous local studies that exist are uneven in quality and frequently are presented in a quasi-historical setting that is fraught with enormous methodological difficulties. Often studies of adjacent areas make no reference to each other. Sometimes, analysis is divorced from all outside influence, as if slavery in Africa existed in a vacuum. There are some brilliant local studies that have their own implications in terms of the study of slavery in general, but these, too, suffer from a failure to place the particular case in the context of Africa as a whole, or even specific regions within Africa.

With these problems in mind, I set out to write an interpretative essay, titled “Indigenous African Slavery,” which was presented at a conference on new directions in slave studies at the University of Waterloo in April 1979. I uncovered so much material that a more extensive project was necessary to consider the issues identified. That essay is in part a bibliographical study that can be used to accompany this book. It is incomplete, even with respect to relatively available materials, and it does not examine the extensive archival information that can be used for a study of this sort, although some archival material has been surveyed. In short, the collection and examination of source material continues, but the present volume is a necessary step in the further study of slavery.
This book attempts a more sophisticated interpretation than was possible for the Waterloo conference. The same basic framework will be evident: an effort to delimit regions within Africa that enable meaningful analysis and a periodization that identifies major turning points in the history of slavery. It will be clear that detailed studies of particular topics and areas are still essential. This is not a substitute for such research. Rather this book provides a thematic study of African history from the perspective of slavery. Its major thesis is that slavery was transformed, in part because of external influences and in part because of the dynamics of internal forces. On the most general level, it argues that Africa responded to outside influences to a greater extent than it influenced the outside world. The more important questions of how Africans shaped that response and the means through which outside influence was minimized are considered in detail. The implication of this thesis is that slavery was a central institution in many parts of Africa, and the study examines where and when this became the case.

The book should be seen as an introduction to the history of slavery in Africa. More specialized studies already exist that treat particular problems, often for much more limited periods. These include the analysis of the overseas slave trade, the abolition crusade, and the relationship between slavery and imperialism; but even these are often limited even within the general theme of study. The following scholars, whose works are cited in the bibliography, deserve special mention. Philip D. Curtin pioneered the study of the trans-Atlantic slave trade when he attempted a preliminary census in 1969. Today this study is out of date, superseded by more detailed research summarized in the appropriate chapters below. Of the many abolition studies, those of Suzanne Miers, Seymour Drescher, Roger Anstey, and François Renault are the most important here, but each has its drawbacks. Miers concentrates on the British and the last decades of the nineteenth century. Drescher and Anstey each focus on the forces of abolition in Great Britain, although their studies of the slave trade and the effects on Africa have modified the earlier work of Curtin. Renault provides the most comprehensive examination of French abolition by concentrating on Cardinal Lavigerie and his movement. Renault and Miers provide a good introduction to slavery in Africa during the era of European abolition. All of these studies assist in the historical reconstruction of African slavery, but invariably their treatment of slavery in Africa is of secondary importance to their main purpose: the external trade and European attitudes. These valuable contributions have been particularly useful here because, in the interpretation presented later in the book, the external trade and European abolition are both considered extremely important influences on African history and the evolution of slavery.

Humphrey and Allen Fisher, John Grace, and Frederick Cooper have completed book-length studies of slavery in Africa. The Fishers’ interpretative essay on the Islamic heritage of slavery in Africa is based primarily on the observations of Gustav Nachtigal from the 1870s. It is broadly conceived but draws on very limited sources. Grace’s work is largely on Sierra Leone, with some
information on other areas of British influence along the West African coast. It is historical but not balanced. Cooper’s study of plantation slavery in East Africa, summarized later here, is the most perceptive treatment of an individual slave system. This case is unique, for the major slave owners were not Africans but Omani Arabs, and hence some care has to be taken in order to place Cooper’s study in the larger African setting.

Essays on slavery in different contexts have been collected into several published volumes, including those by Claude Meillassoux, Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff, James L. Watson, John Ralph Willis, and myself, and others will be forthcoming shortly. These cover diverse cases and present various thematic approaches. The Meillassoux volume contains the interpretations of a dynamic school of French Marxist anthropologists, and Meillassoux published a theoretical study that was an outgrowth of his association with the contributors to this volume. Miers and Kopytoff have done comparable work in the English-speaking world; their introduction provides a theoretical perspective as valuable as that of Meillassoux and his associates. The Willis volume includes specialized studies of slavery in the Islamic context, whereas Watson’s collection provides a comparative perspective for Asian and African cases. My own collection focuses on ideology, providing a forum for discussion between those who have been most strongly influenced by the French Marxists and those who are most influenced by Miers and Kopytoff. The trouble with all these short studies, invaluable as they are, is that as the number increases so does the confusion for the nonspecialist.

This brings us back to the present endeavor. It is an intermediate stage in research and analysis. Its contribution is intended primarily on the historical level, that is, on the plane of chronological reconstruction, although the chronological framework is a bare beginning. Because historical reconstruction has been so minimal in earlier studies, there are bound to be mistakes here. Furthermore, the context of recent research has contributed to the general problem of interpretation in three ways. Firstly, the climate of research has been romantic. The aim of many historians has been to glorify the African past for reasons related to the emergent nationalism in Africa and the sentiments of people of African descent in the Americas. This has made it difficult to discuss the inglorious past. Secondly, the development of African history as a subdiscipline has grown from almost nothing to a large body of data and analysis. This development requires periodic syntheses such as this one; however, the speed with which new material becomes available inhibits such synthesis and furthermore reveals the thin base on which much earlier work has relied. Finally, the political climate in Africa has been a difficult one in which to do sensitive, critical research, both for foreigners and nationals. The hazards of examining archival materials and interviewing elders vary as always, but these have often been the least of a researcher’s problems in recent years. Police pressure, university censorship, and academic rivalries in close quarters have sometimes been more serious obstacles.
This will not be the last interpretation of the history of slavery in Africa. Indeed, my own interest in the subject has grown with the writing of this book. The quantity of material that is available in published and archival form is so voluminous that different thematic studies become more and more desirable. Some of these possibilities will be readily apparent, as will the need for a more detailed examination of specific aspects of local and regional history. This book, therefore, is an assessment of the topic initially brought forth in 1982.

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