The Reluctant Move Toward Abolition

By the last decades of the nineteenth century, the African social order was more firmly rooted in slavery than ever before. This meant that Africa and Europe were on a collision course in which slavery was a major issue, even if Europeans did not always recognize it as such. The imperialist momentum thrust a new social and political system on Africa, in which there was no room for slavery. Even though the pressure for change came from without, African societies were far from passive participants. The internal dynamics of the political economy were closely associated with the transformation of slavery into a productive system, sometimes connected with the external market and sometimes part of regional developments. The transformation was far from uniform. In large parts of Bantu Africa, slavery was linked to the regeneration of social and political institutions, as before. But along the East African coast, in the northern savanna, and on parts of the West African coast, slavery had become essential to the organization of production, no matter what social and political roles were also satisfied through slave use.

The greater use of slaves, involving a transformation in the means of production, demonstrates an adjustment to the world economy of the nineteenth century. Unfortunately, alternatives to slavery were not seriously considered until late in the century, and then primarily as a result of European pressures on the African political economy. The long history of slavery had established the flexibility of the institution in controlling people, organizing production, arranging marriages, and bypassing custom. As long as slaves were readily available, they could be used in every conceivable capacity. Only when the source of slaves and the means of distributing them within Africa were undermined did slavery cease to be a viable institution. From the middle of the nineteenth century, the European colonial role was to whittle away at the means of enslavement...
and distribution. Despite a mythology of abolition, this role was not readily accepted. If there was a passive agent in the history of slavery during the nineteenth century, it was Europe, not Africa. Africa struggled to reform slavery in a changing context. The various European colonial powers did their best to avoid or circumscribe the commitment to abolition, reluctantly pursuing the fight whenever compromise proved impossible. Abolition was eventually achieved not so much because of the desire to end slavery but because the modern industrial system and a slave-based social formation were incompatible. In Marxist terms, the clash was based on the contradictions between different modes of production. The demise of slavery was inevitable in the context of absorption into a capitalist world economy.

European colonial regimes instituted conflicting policies that were, at best, confusing. European territory was free, so that fugitives should have been free once they entered a colony, but European administrations often returned fugitives to their masters. Furthermore, the British distinguished protectorates from colonies in terms of the legal status of slaves. In British colonies, slaves were technically free after 1834. In protectorates, British law did not apply, and slaves were not free, even though the slave trade was outlawed. Slaves seldom recognized these fine distinctions. Massive flights from slavery were clearly discouraged by the oscillation in European actions and policies, but slaves still saw European outposts as possible havens of freedom.

Some scholars have argued that African servility depended on attitudes quite unrelated to the concept of freedom. African thought, they claim, did not consider freedom a desirable or possible status.² There can be no mistake about this matter. The desertion of slaves throughout the nineteenth century, and especially at the end of the century when European conquest was well underway, demonstrates that many slaves knew exactly what they wanted, and it was not to “belong” to their master. They wanted to escape and they did so. In this sense they knew what freedom was. It is perhaps possible to quibble over definitions, but one point is clear: Slaves wanted a status other than that of slave. When they had the opportunity, many people took advantage of it to escape, despite the uncertainties of flight, given that European governments were only nominally committed to emancipation and abolition.

In seizing the initiative, the slaves themselves were largely responsible for changing the social and economic structures of Africa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Only in a few places was slavery altered significantly before then. European laws and actions, often contradictory but nonetheless encouraging, provided the chance. Slaves ran away; they opened new lands for farms; they provided migrant labor for agriculture and mining; they served as hired porters before railways and roads could break the transportation bottleneck. The aim of slaves was freedom, not the modification of the conditions of slavery, and this often placed Europeans in the position of reforming the institution so that its demise would occur gradually and not in one, single revolutionary action. The colonial regimes became the defenders of slavery, albeit
reformed in many respects, and as a result, the greatest single impediment to full emancipation was colonialism.

Missionaries, reformers, and some business circles prompted the mystique that Africa would be uplifted by the three “Cs”: civilization, Christianity, and commerce. Commerce, as we have seen in previous chapters, had the opposite effect: It increased the number of slaves within Africa. The remaining Cs – civilization in the form of the European colonial conquest and Christianity through the actions of missionaries – had a more profound impact, although not always intended. European rhetoric pushed in the direction of abolition and emancipation; European experience encouraged complicity and often openly supported slavery on the pretext that “domestic slavery” was different from slavery elsewhere.

The Colonial Occupation of the Western Coast

Nowhere was this contradiction more apparent than along the West African coast, where the British, followed by other European countries, concentrated their early efforts in the abolition campaign. That campaign had several aspects. First, thousands of slaves were taken off European ships and set free in Sierra Leone, thereby establishing a policy of emancipating slaves. The total number of liberated slaves landed between 1810 and 1864 was about 160,000. Of these, the British accounted for 149,800; the United States and France were responsible for the rest. This presence of ex-slaves was a potentially corrosive influence on the institution of slavery in Africa.

Secondly, British policy and later that of the other colonial powers involved the negotiation of anti-slave-trading treaties with African governments, usually as part of more general commercial agreements. By the closing decades of the nineteenth century, virtually all merchants and rulers along the West African coast had agreed to such provisions, sometimes under direct threat of military intervention, but often more willingly. These treaties abolished the export slave trade only and specifically exempted the domestic slave trade and slavery. The naval instructions of 1844 and 1866 recognized “the distinction between the export of slaves to which Great Britain is determined to put an end and the system of Domestic Slavery with which she claims no right to interfere.” Here was a major retreat in the struggle against slavery, for this distinction between the domestic trade and the external trade was premised on the ignorance of the European public, which knew nothing about African affairs other than the European dimension, if that. When Europeans began to report more fully on events in the interior, this permissive attitude toward the internal market was no longer politically acceptable, and a new policy, based on total abolition of slave trading, had to be adopted.

Thirdly, the establishment of freed-slave settlements, first in Sierra Leone and later in other places, was conceived within the same framework that distinguished between internal and external trade. The history of Freetown, the first
and most important settlement, provides a striking example of this contradic-
tion. Despite its name, the settlement was a free town only for those slaves taken
off European slave ships and others repatriated from the Americas. The laws
abolishing slavery in British colonies were not applicable to the Protectorate of
Sierra Leone, where slavery continued to flourish until very late. Slave dealing
was not abolished until 1896, and slavery itself was outlawed only in 1926.\footnote{5}
Freetown, despite its name, was the capital of one of the last bastions of slavery.
This scandalous situation could only prevail because of the myth that domestic
slavery was different and therefore acceptable.

Sierra Leoneans had a far greater impact on other parts of West Africa,
particularly the Bights of Benin and Biafra, than on the immediate interior of
Freetown. Many ex-slaves returned to their home countries, often as Christian
converts. The Church Missionary Society (CMS) established itself in Freetown
in 1804; the Wesleyan Missionary Society opened a mission in 1811. These
missions were successful in converting a majority of freed slaves landed in
Sierra Leone, so that when the ex-slaves began returning to their home coun-
tries, they spread ideas associated with Christianity. Between 1839 and 1842,
500 ex-slaves went back to Yorubaland, and thereafter the number increased.
The returnees became merchants and farmers.\footnote{6} A few were missionaries them-
selves, and Yoruba ex-slaves (Saro) even came to dominate the government
of Abeokuta through an association known as the Egba United Improvement
Association. Although the Sierra Leoneans disagreed among themselves on the
issue of slavery – some were convinced abolitionists; others were moderates;
and still others were in favor of a mild form of domestic slavery – the combined
activities of the Sierra Leoneans spread the antislavery debate, but not until the
1850s, long after the founding of Sierra Leone. The repatriation of the Sierra
Leoneans occurred largely as a result of the initiatives of the ex-slaves them-
selves. The British government was reluctant to commit itself to any substantial
support, and the EUIA was even seen as an embarrassment and openly opposed
on many issues. Even though the CMS and Wesleyans encouraged the exten-
sion of Christianity through the medium of the repatriates, neither missionaries
nor government wanted the Sierra Leoneans to lead the fight against slavery.

The establishment of Liberia was an even more cautious step toward abo-
lition, which had important implications in the United States but virtually no
impact on ending slavery in West Africa. Founded in 1821 as a colony for freed
slaves from the United States, only 1,430 Afro-Americans arrived in the first
decade. Several times that number arrived in the 1830s, and some slaves seized
by American ships off the Guinea coast were landed at Monrovia, too – the
total number of “recaptives” only reached 5,722. In part, the impact of the
Liberians was minimal because they were located on a stretch of coast domi-
nated by the Kru, where there were few slaves; as a community of immigrant
farmers and merchants, they were also relatively isolated from local African
society. Unlike the Sierra Leoneans, moreover, the Liberians did not attempt
to return to their ancestral homes, so that their influence remained confined
Transformations in Slavery

to Monrovia and a few smaller settlements along the Liberian coast. The U.S. government provided small subsidies to Liberia (which became an independent republic in 1847), but the American influence was otherwise marginal in the fight against slavery.\(^7\)

As in Sierra Leone, the British tried to pursue a policy of nonintervention in the domestic affairs of African states elsewhere along the Guinea coast, although the naval blockade of the coast meant that the British were involved, whether they liked it or not. The blockade strained relations between Great Britain and Asante, for example, and given that the British controlled a number of trade-castles on the Gold Coast and acquired others from the Danes and the Dutch, the strained relations with Asante even broke out into open warfare several times in the nineteenth century.\(^8\) Because Asante had to adjust to the collapse of its export trade in slaves, the government had to manage its economy carefully to compensate for the decline in revenue. Gold and kola production were increased, but commercial policies associated with this effort antagonized coastal merchants and invariably drew the British into conflict with Asante. Asante was relatively successful in managing its foreign trade as a means of limiting the economic dislocation caused by the ending of slave exports, judged by the European accounts of Asante prosperity in this period, but commercial policies required tight control of the slave population.

Slave discipline was a serious problem. Not only were slave revolts greatly feared, but slaves appear to have escaped to religious shrines and to European posts on the coast in sufficient numbers to warrant official Asante measures to check these incidents. A royal proclamation issued at the time required “that all slaves who place themselves in fetish shall be immediately handed over, or the fetish priest will be punished as a thief.”\(^9\) To prevent flights to the coast, the Asante government signed at least one agreement with a European factor – the Dutch – in 1816, which stated “that fugitive slaves shall be given back.”\(^10\) Even more drastic measures were taken to control the slave population. Many slaves were killed in the early decades of the century, and large numbers of slaves living near Kumasi were relocated elsewhere to reduce the concentration of the slave population.\(^11\)

On the coast itself, the British became the sole European power once Danes, Dutch, and Brandenbers were bought out. It fell to the British, therefore, to set the pace for further social change, and despite a brief flirtation with the idea of emancipating fugitive slaves in the 1840s, the British shied away from the slavery issue. Abolitionists charged the local British official, George Maclean, with complicity in sanctioning slavery on the Gold Coast. Sometimes he harbored fugitive slaves, or paid their market value; sometimes he returned them to their owners. British nationals were allowed to own slaves, as the estate of one deceased merchant and the practice of hiring slaves from their masters (common from the 1820s) made clear. One consequence of the debate over Maclean’s behavior was to confirm a policy of nonintervention, which did not please the abolitionists.\(^12\) By attacking the moderate practices of Maclean, the
abolitionists inadvertently pushed the British government into a position more tolerant of slavery.

The extradition proceedings worked out by Maclean and others began to break down by the 1850s. Under the governorship of Sir Benjamin Pine, a dedicated abolitionist, fugitives were allowed sanctuary, although efforts were made to keep the numbers small and avoid attracting attention to escapees. Pine and others became convinced that slaves and pawns who were returned to their masters would be sacrificed – a not unlikely fate considering the need to maintain control over the servile population. Despite the attempt to minimize the problem of slavery, the contradiction between an embryonic colonial system that could no longer accept the legality of slavery and an indigenous social formation in which slavery was a central institution was bound to cause a clash. Pine recognized this in 1856, when he observed that “Our courts could not decide a case of disputed succession or scarcely any other case in which property is concerned without taking consequence of slavery. Slavery meets us at every point.”

On the Gold Coast, the significant rupture with the policy of minimal confrontation did not come until 1874, when the defeat of Asante was accompanied by a proclamation abolishing slavery on the Gold Coast.

In the period before 1874, the inconsistency in British policy, both on the Gold Coast, in Sierra Leone, and elsewhere, derived from the difficulty of remaining neutral, especially when Christian missionaries or merchants needed naval protection. The desire was for nonintervention, but if British subjects were in danger or if it could be shown that African slave owners were involved in smuggling slaves past the naval blockade, then the British did intervene directly. In the 1850s, for example, when slaves rebelled at Old Calabar, the Presbyterian missionaries were endangered because they supported the insurrection. The slaves, particularly those who lived on the plantations outside the town, opposed human sacrifices at funerals. The crisis came to a head in 1854, when fifty slaves were killed at one sacrifice. After a series of riots, the navy bombarded part of the town. Thereafter, the practice of killing slaves became less common. Despite the favor this gained among the slaves, the missions were largely isolated as a result of their pursuit of this and other reforms. Consequently, only 1,671 people had been converted by 1875.

The slow pace of conversion had a sobering influence on mission activities, both at Old Calabar and elsewhere.

At other places along the coast, the general policy remained nonintervention, unless local events assumed preeminence and forced some modification. The British occupied Lagos in 1851 but refused to confer a legal status on this action until 1861, when Lagos became a protectorate. The port was seized to disrupt the slave trade, which was the usual rationale for military action. Until 1859, domestic slavery was accepted. Benjamin Campbell, the British Consul at Lagos from 1853 to 1859, assured a number of large slave owners: “the British Government had no disposition to interfere with the state of domestic slavery existing in Africa.” Many slaves thought otherwise. They saw in
British occupation a signal for escape, and soon the arrival of fugitive slaves reached crisis proportions. Maclean had earlier reported that runaway slaves were a problem on the Gold Coast, but the Lagos situation was far more critical. Maclean had been able to check the flight of slaves. It was not possible to do so at Lagos after 1859. The actions of slaves, as at Old Calabar, altered British policy, unintentionally but decisively.

Despite some attempts to convince Yoruba masters that the British would respect their ownership of slaves, asylum was granted in almost every case. There were so many slaves by the early 1860s that William McCoskry, the acting governor, provided special accommodation:

In consequence of the numerous slaves seeking protection here I have found it necessary to appoint a man to take charge of and to find work for them.... In order to make the establishment for liberated slaves self-supporting, I devote a small portion of their earnings to defray the expenses and I consider they suffer no injustice in thus providing for their own protection and in supporting an asylum which will be always open for those of their friends who can effect their escape.

The British soon found work for some of these escaped slaves. They were enlisted into the colonial army, the Hausa Armed Police Force, and became agents in the conquest of a British Empire in Africa.

The recruitment of fugitives as soldiers and police proved to be extremely successful, particularly because ex-slaves were highly motivated and had no loyalties to their master’s country. The British, later followed by the French and Germans, pursued these recruitment policies for the rest of the century. The British even sent delegations to Salaga after 1874 to buy slaves for the army; the official reason was that slaves were being granted their freedom. Nonetheless, the Salaga merchants were more accurate in their perception of the British recruitment officer: He wanted slaves and was willing to pay the market price. Late in the century, the Belgians wanted to form military units for use in the Congo from among the Hausa and other northern fugitives at Lagos and on the Gold Coast, but the British opposed this move because it might inhibit their own recruitment of police and soldiers. In one sense, European attitudes toward military recruitment fit into an African model in which slaves had long been used in armies. There was a significant difference, however. Soldiers of fugitive origins were exposed to a new ideology, based on the abolition of slavery, and when they marched through the countryside during campaigns, other slaves were informed of new ideas and encouraged to escape. Whereas the colonial officials and officers themselves did not openly undermine African societies, their soldiers often did, particularly in the various British campaigns in Yoruba country during the last two decades of the nineteenth century.

The official desire for nonintervention did not change, but the political situation certainly did, especially in the 1870s. The 1874 emancipation decree and the defeat of proslavery Asante encouraged thousands of slaves to escape,
although officials on the coast attempted to conceal the movement through reference to a “benign” domestic slavery. In late 1873, James Marshall, chief magistrate and judicial assessor for the Gold Coast Colony, could state:

I have not known any instance of domestic slaves leaving their owners for our castles, forts or settlements on this long line of the coast during the last two years; They are part and parcel of their families, to which they are so much attached as their children are, consequently there is no damage to be apprehended at this point.\(^\text{20}\)

Despite this effort to downplay the crisis, the temporary collapse of Asante gave slaves their chance, and many took it. The actions of British troops, who encouraged desertion among slaves, and the gradual erosion of extradition arrangements had their effect too, as did the continued preaching of the Basel and other missionaries. In 1874, it was no longer possible to ignore the flight of slaves, although attempts were still made to minimize its significance. Hence another official reported that “a series of migrations is going on to and from different parts of the country but whatever exodus takes place from a district is, in general, almost equally balanced by the influx of persons who return to it from other districts where they in like manner have been in servitude.”\(^\text{21}\) Basel missionaries reported people on the move too, and their missions became sanctuaries for escaped slaves and pawns.

Whole villages of slaves deserted, especially in Abuakwa, which may have lost as many as 10,000 slaves and pawns in the late 1870s. The Basel missions provided sanctuary; their congregations – consisting almost entirely of fugitives – swelled to several thousand in the 1880s. Krobo and Akwapim also experienced losses, although on a smaller scale, whereas Ada – the salt-producing area near the mouth of the Volta and a major center of the palm-oil trade – suffered severely. Almost every master lost a slave; some lost ten or more. By 1893, fugitives had founded at least a dozen villages in the interior of Accra. Although information is most complete on the eastern Gold Coast area, slaves also fled from Fante areas farther west, and slaves from the interior who served as porters to the coast also escaped in increasing numbers.\(^\text{22}\)

The missions increasingly served as a catalyst for the turbulence among slaves, especially during the 1870s and later. The missionaries, particularly the Church Missionary Society, had always been troubled over the issue of slavery in African society. They were firmly opposed to the slave trade and enslavement; indeed, the missions were intimately associated with the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Their activities in Africa were in fact a direct outgrowth of the abolition movement, but their observations and policies contributed to the justification of actions that were lenient toward domestic slavery. On the one hand, they pledged to fight slavery as part of the general reform of African society associated with the spread of Christianity; on the other, they generally concluded that conversion to Christianity should precede the abolition of slavery. Slaveholders, for example, were allowed to become Christians. Slavery was to be tolerated temporarily, so that the Christian church could be
transformations in slavery

established. Only when Christians were a majority of the population would it be safe to abolish slavery.33

Besides the CMS, other missionaries in West Africa included the Southern Baptists, strong in the Yoruba region, the Methodists, centered at Badagry and on the Gold Coast, two Catholic missions, the Holy Ghost Fathers and the Société des Missions Africaines, and the Basel Mission on the Gold Coast. Each experienced trauma over the slavery issue, with some missionaries offering sanctuary to slaves and openly condemning the institution. In general, however, these more radical views were contained after an initial burst of enthusiasm that resulted in local danger to the missions. By the 1850s and 1860s, a more moderate policy was adopted, although by then the missions were seen as opponents of slavery anyway. Sometimes slaves fled to the mission stations whether or not they were encouraged to do so. The limiting factor on the number of fugitives was the relatively restricted area of Christian activity, confined principally to a few coastal points, towns along the Niger River, and some Yoruba cities where Christians remained a tiny minority until late in the century. Then one of two patterns emerged. In the Biafran area, abolition and Christianity became intricately linked. Beginning in the 1850s at Old Calabar and spreading to the Niger delta and up the Niger River in the 1870s, reforms and rebellions were associated with fugitive slaves, slave-converts to Christianity, and mission interference in local affairs. Elsewhere, most missions and the growing number of African Christians reached an accommodation over the issue of slavery, and the radical movement became associated with the CMS alone. The growing crisis involving escaped slaves in the Yoruba area was partly associated with these missions and partly with British army recruitment.44 Almost certainly, however, the preaching of all Christian ministers contributed to the dissemination of ideas that seriously questioned the established order, and in that sense they fed the flames of discontent.

The movement for a changed status that began in the 1850s at Old Calabar soon spread to other centers in the Niger delta. It first took the form of resistance to abuse, as it had when the Calabar slaves struggled against the right of their masters to sacrifice slaves at funerals. At Bonny, the ascension of King George Pepple I in 1867 led to an internal movement for emancipation. The King was Christian, educated in England, and sympathized with the discontent of slaves over their status. Ironically, his struggle for emancipation and his association with the Christian faction, which was composed almost entirely of slaves, pitted him against a former slave, Jaja, who had become the wealthiest merchant at Bonny and head of the Annie Pepple establishment. Jaja staged an abortive coup d’état against the king and subsequently removed his followers to Opobo, where he successfully challenged the commercial position of his rivals at Bonny. The case is instructive for several reasons. First of all, it demonstrates the extreme social mobility of some slaves in the delta; Jaja rose from the ranks of newly purchased young Igbo slaves to the heights of commercial success and political power.45 It also shows that many slaves supported
the Christian missions in their fight against slavery, thereby revealing extreme dissatisfaction among the servile population, again because of immolation at funerals and economic exploitation.

The struggle between converted slaves and traditional authorities took many forms in the Niger delta. At Bonny in the 1870s, Christian converts were chained and tortured, their heads smashed with clubs. Despite this, more than 1,000 slaves had become Christian by 1882. At Brass, an African missionary led his slave converts in a coup d’état in 1879, which ended in the destruction of the local shrine. The pattern is clear. Whereas slaves had formerly been subject to the will of their masters, who could kill them, sell them, or donate them for sacrifice at shrines, now it was difficult for masters to punish slaves if they were Christian. Social mobility for slaves continued in the Niger delta, but it was because of their own actions, through the threat of force, that they achieved this.

Because of the abolition movement along the West African coast, slavery was under serious strain by the 1890s, even though this was not the intention of British policy. The initiative came internally. The worldwide economic depressions of the 1880s and 1890s adversely affected the export of palm oil and kernels, so that large producers, using slave labor, were forced to push their slaves harder. Some slaves probably fled as a result. The presence of missionaries who became bolder in their acceptance of runaways, as the Basel Mission on the Gold Coast did, was also a factor. Colonial military action continued to be directed against the largest slave owners; expeditions such as the march on Aro Chukwu in 1901 accelerated the collapse of slavery. As slave labor became scarce, farmers and merchants had to use the labor of pawns on an ever-increasing scale. Hence the rise of small producers was matched by the expansion of pawnship, as people were forced into debt in these difficult times. The imposition of colonial rule, therefore, involved a complex readjustment that was closely associated with the decline in slavery. As the final emancipation of slaves in Sierra Leone in 1926 demonstrated, slavery did not end with colonial rule, and its legacy influenced economic and social developments for several more decades. Nonetheless, by 1900, the institution was profoundly altered, the initial stages of its collapse caused as much by the actions of slaves themselves as by any other factor.

**Christian Missions in Central and East Africa**

The abolition impulse came much later to central and East Africa than to the West African coast, and when it came, the missionaries had proportionately greater influence until the 1890s. European intervention here was very restricted, primarily to Zanzibar, South Africa, and a few scattered places elsewhere. Furthermore, European imperial attitudes were more mixed. The British pursued policies similar to those in West Africa, but the Portuguese and Belgians were far less susceptible to abolitionist sentiments. The Portuguese
promoted the use of slaves in their domains until the early twentieth century, although under different names and with some restrictions. The Belgians were so interested in the extraction of profit from the Congo basin through the use of force and brutality that the slavery issue only served as an embarrassment and then as a convenient scapegoat. Finally, the distinction between productive slavery and lineage slavery influenced the course of abolition. Where slavery was a major feature of production, abolitionist pressure, despite the fact that it came late, led to a transition from slavery to other forms of servility and oppression; in general, freedom was not an option. Where lineage slavery was predominant, the imposition of colonialism reduced the institution to a marginal role, more by the requirements of the colonial economy than by the conscious efforts to erase slavery from the social order.

The wrath of the abolitionists was directed at the Muslims, particularly Arabs and Swahili, who were held responsible for the slave trade. When missionaries began to write exposés on the horrors of a savage continent where the slave coffles and the destruction by the slavers were unchecked, there was little concern with “domestic” slavery. David Livingstone initiated this attack in the 1850s and was soon followed by others. The German Wissman, the American Stanley, the Scottish Cameron, among others, rivaled each other in advertising the potential of the region by contrasting glorious projections against a picture of depopulated regions, barbarous customs, and incalculable brutality. In 1874, V. L. Cameron could write from Lake Tanganyika that “the slave trade is spreading in the interior, and will continue to do so until it is either put down by a strong hand, or dies a natural death from the total destruction of the population. At present events are tending towards depopulation.”30 Cardinal Lavigerie came to the fore in this attack on the slave trade. Domestic slavery, except as it related to the use of slaves as porters by Arabs and Swahili, was scarcely mentioned in this onslaught. In West Africa, domestic slavery was tolerated; in central Africa, it was largely ignored.

As was the case in many parts of Africa, the Christian missions were the most active agents in the fight against indigenous slavery, although they too often concentrated on slave raiding and trade rather than the plight of domestic slaves. The CMS established a mission at Rabai, near Mombasa, in 1846, but the missionaries shied away from the slavery issue. The Rabai community remained very small until the 1870s, when slavery could no longer be ignored. The United Methodist Free Churches founded a mission at Ribe, 10 km from Rabai, in 1862, by which time the problem of fugitive slaves was already serious. The Ribe missionaries still tried to minimize their appeal to the slave community of the Mombasa area, however. The Holy Ghost Fathers, on Zanzibar, began buying slave children for conversion as early as 1860, and they pursued a similar policy at Bagamoyo, on the mainland opposite Zanzibar. Despite the conservative approach of the missionaries — Catholic and Protestant alike — the mission stations gained a reputation as refugee centers for slaves, and by the 1870s, the number of fugitive slaves seeking asylum increased. After 1875,
when the CMS established Frere Town opposite Mombasa as an industrial mission for liberated slaves, including repatriates from India, the mission communities grew rapidly.11

Slave escapes already plagued the Swahili plantation society of the coast before the Christian community became a factor. In the late 1860s, escaped slaves (watoro) formed a recognizable portion of the population of Witu, near Lamu, where the exiled Nabahani family of Pate had established itself. In its struggle against Zanzibar, the Nabahani welcomed fugitive slaves, who left the plantations on the mainland opposite Lamu by the hundreds – the total number of escapes may have reached several thousand by the end of the century. These watoro plundered the plantation region of the coast, seizing slaves for sale to Somali merchants in the north (in exchange for guns and ammunition), although sometimes the Nabahani sultans tried to restrain the watoro to stabilize relations with Zanzibar. By the 1880s and 1890s, Witu had developed a plantation economy itself, and some escaped slaves had become slave owners. Witu offered sanctuary to fugitives not as a matter of principle but as a matter of politics. Nonetheless, both in the Lamu area and elsewhere, slaves could find sanctuary in places, like Witu and, to a lesser extent, Gasi, which were opposed to the hegemony of Zanzibar.12

In the Malindi area, fugitive slaves established an independent community in the early 1870s that became allied with the Christian missions by the end of the 1870s. Fugitives fled into the marshes 20 to 30 km inland from Malindi and, despite repeated expeditions against them, maintained communities at Jilore and later at Merikano and Makogeni. In 1875 and again in 1877, the Jilore and Makogeni fugitives sought CMS missionaries, and when Malindi expeditions in March 1878 and 1879 were particularly devastating, many fugitives fled south to the mission stations at Rabai and Ribe. By 1881, fugitive slaves formed a sizeable quarter in the settlement at Rabai.13

Another fugitive community associated with missionary activity was established at Fuladoyo, 50 km from Takaungu. Fuladoyo was initially a community of Christians who had been loosely attached to the CMS at Rabai. Under the leadership of David Koi, fugitive slaves were welcome as long as they converted to Christianity. The CMS kept its distance from this community, but over the next fifteen years, Fuladoyo became the largest settlement of escaped slaves south of the Tana River. The number of Christians living there surpassed the total Christian population of the mission stations at Frere Town, Rabai, and Ribe, despite the fact that the slave owners of Takaungu organized a devastating raid that destroyed the town in 1883. Koi was taken prisoner and executed, but the fugitives regrouped. Fuladoyo was rebuilt, and retaliatory raids were launched against the Takaungu plantations. By 1890, Fuladoyo and its satellite communities had an estimated population of 2,000.14

The fugitive issue was a difficult problem for the CMS, whose communities at Frere Town and Rabai were allowed to exist at the tolerance of the Mombasa government. Official CMS policy could not condone the acceptance of fugitives
into the mission stations, which was one reason why Fuladoyo, as an independent community, was so successful. The difficulty of controlling overzealous members of the mission stations plagued the CMS throughout the late 1870s and 1880s. William Henry Jones, for example, who was the deacon at Rabai from 1878 through the 1880s, secretly welcomed fugitives, whose identity he hid from his superiors. Jones, an ex-slave of Yao origin, had been at Rabai since 1864. He had sheltered at least 524 escaped slaves by 1888, when his involvement was uncovered in a special inquiry. It was thought that a slave uprising was being organized at Frere Town in 1880; at last, a mob of Mombasa slave owners attacked the mission, and it was later admitted that there was a white flag at the mission that had “freedom” written on it in Swahili. Whether or not there was a real plot is uncertain, but certainly the slave owners of Mombasa thought so, and the CMS tried to restrain its members from any actions that would place the safety of the mission in jeopardy. The same inquiry into Jones’s conduct in accepting fugitives at Rabai revealed that the mission stations had harbored more than 1,400 escaped slaves by 1888. The CMS extricated itself from this situation by convincing the Imperial British East Africa Company to compensate the Mombasa government for these slaves, thereby effectively purchasing their freedom. In all, 1,421 certificates of freedom were issued to runaway slaves.

The introduction of Christian missions into central Africa was also closely associated with the fight against slavery, although the early mission of the Protestant Universities Mission established by its example that slavery was a difficult issue. Founded in the 1860s on the western shores of Lake Malawi, the mission offered sanctuary to fugitive slaves and was annihilated as a result. Not until 1876, and the arrival of the Church of Scotland mission, was there another attempt at founding a Christian community, and even then the European missionaries learned their lesson slowly. At first, the policies toward slavery were similar to those adopted by the earlier, abortive UMCA mission. Within a few years, Blantyre was surrounded by seven villages that were inhabited primarily by fugitive slaves, despite local opposition and occasional violence. By March 1878, "Blantyre has become an asylum for the slave." The policy was to sabotage local slavery, as can be seen in the comments of the Reverend Macklin on the arrival of six fugitives:

The mission in its civil and social aspects is making reasonable and satisfactory progress. As an asylum for the poor, persecuted slave, Blantyre is becoming known and prized. We have now six fellow-creatures rescued from the lash of the driver, and miseries worse than death. And this in turn, prepares them for giving a ready reception to the free offers of the greater emancipation, salvation by grace through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Within two years, however, the mission retreated fully from the issue of slavery. No longer was Blantyre to be a place of refuge. Fugitive slaves were subsequently returned to their masters, even when this resulted in the death
of fugitives. Expediency was again the rule, for the head of the mission, the Reverend Duff MacDonald, was after a different breed of convert and feared the consequences of an antislavery crusade:

As I mingled more with our neighbours, I saw that our reception of runaway slaves had alienated many excellent men who might have been our best friends, and who were better able to rule slaves than we. If the colonial work disappeared the purely Missionary work would be more successful, and the colonial work might gradually be suffered to disappear if slave refugees were denied an asylum.... The reception of slaves no doubt had certain advantages. Already nearly 400 had sought an asylum in order to escape death. The Mission had thus saved a great many lives, but at a terrible risk. Its course of action had made enemies of all the slave-owners in the district, and even tended to increase the slave-trade, for when a master saw that his slaves might run to the English, he resolved to sell them off as soon as possible. Again, the reception of persons who had fled to escape death or any of the other hard consequences of slavery, soon led anyone that fancied he had a grievance, to desert his master and seek refuge at the Mission, while the kindly treatment he experienced made him desirous of having his friends or relatives with him to share his advantages. Thus the settlement was in danger of becoming a larger state, composed of all the discontented people of the country.40

MacDonald's distinction between “colonial work” and “Missionary work,” the secular and the spiritual, enabled him to ignore the plight of slaves, something that many other missionaries had difficulty doing. Despite the restraint of men like MacDonald, the missions became associated with freedom. As MacDonald realized, the possibilities for revolutionary change were present if slaves were allowed to flee en masse and could be brought together as a political force. The risks were too high for the Scottish Church of Blantyre. Direct action would have required military support, either from a colonial government or from an independent force armed and trained by the missionaries themselves. The naive ministers, like Macklin, did not perceive this. The astute men, like MacDonald, did but refused to adopt such a course of action.

The White Fathers, under the inspiration of Cardinal Lavigerie, did attempt a more vigorous approach, partly through the purchase of slaves and partly by providing sanctuary for fugitives. In 1879, a mission was established on Lake Tanganyika at Rumonge, 100 km north of the lake port at Ujiji, and another was founded at Masanze, across the lake, in 1880. Because Ujiji was the center of Nyamwezi, Swahili, and Arab trade into the interior, and there were many slave plantations around the town, the slavery policy inevitably embroiled the White Fathers in local politics, and in 1881, the station was destroyed. Unlike the Scottish Church, however, the White Fathers moved ahead, establishing a new post at Kibanga on the west side of the lake in 1883, and within five years, the mission had grown to 2,000, including 300 slave children in its orphanage and 200 adults who had been bought as slaves. Many of the other converts were fugitives. Kibanga was on its way to becoming a small Christian kingdom in the heart of central Africa.41
The Christian missions provided the catalyst through their purchase of slaves and offers of sanctuary, but the record shows clearly that the slaves themselves were primarily responsible for taking the initiative that began to undermine slavery. Despite mission efforts to discourage escapes, slave fugitives became increasingly common in the 1890s and the first decade of the twentieth century. Many slaves escaped to the missions or into the interior during the revolts on the Kenyan coast in the 1890s. Maji-maji uprisings against the Germans in the first decade of the twentieth century offered similar opportunities for slaves there.42

Because slavery had not been transformed into a productive system in most of the interior, the colonial regimes were not especially concerned with the plight of slaves. All five European governments – French, Belgian, Portuguese, British, and German – instituted taxation and labor policies designed to force Africans to work for European firms or to provide raw materials for export. These policies had little to do with lineage slavery, which was seen neither as an impediment nor as an asset in the mobilization of the African population. The Belgians instituted an especially harsh system of exploitation. In the 1890s, the Congo Free State granted concessions to giant companies whose profits were based on the extraction of raw materials with the use of forced labor. No distinctions were made between slaves and free; the existing social order was largely ignored, and even when the Belgian colonial regime assumed control of the Congo basin in 1908, the emphasis was on the extraction of agricultural products and other goods through the power of the state and large, foreign companies.43 Slavery continued as a marginal institution. Cannibalism and funeral sacrifices were outlawed, so that slavery soon lost some functions it had provided in the old social order. When the African population as a whole was being reduced to a migrant labor force for the mines and an exploited peasantry forced to cultivate select crops for the state and private companies, these older social distinctions had little relevance.

The British, too, largely ignored slavery once the slave supply mechanism that fed the plantations of the east coast was disassembled. Instead, racial segregation became the basis of an altered means of separating the working population from its employers. Again, as in the Congo, a migrant labor force was needed, and racism provided a strong justification for mobilizing Africans into a malleable working class. Again, the slavery of old had little place in this new industrial system, and even the Boer system of apprenticeship gave way to migrant labor. Only where slavery had been essential to production, as on Zanzibar and Pemba, was there a particularly difficult transition, but the island setting prevented escape. Various measures were enacted so that the ex-slaves would continue to work on the plantations. These included vagrancy laws, manipulation of credit, control over land, and other resources that bear comparison with the West Indies after emancipation there.44 The Portuguese enacted laws that perpetuated forms of labor that were similar to slavery under different names.45 In all these cases, slavery became lost in the colonial
dictatorship. On a much reduced scale, lineage slavery continued to function on the margins of society, but its social and political importance ended with the establishment of colonial rule.

The Imperialist Justification of Islamic Slavery

In contrast to the other parts of Africa, in the northern savanna, missionaries had scarcely any impact at all on the abolition of slavery, at least not until the twentieth century. The campaign in these Islamic lands was confined almost exclusively to official government actions, the French in the western Sudan and the British in northern Nigeria and the Nile valley. Ethiopia was different still, for in maintaining its independence from European control until the 1930s, it also retained slavery as a major feature of society even when international pressures for abolition began to mount in the 1920s. Consequently, the concern here is with the Islamic lands only and the evolution of French and British policies. In general the French and British attempted to reach an accommodation with Islamic leaders, and for this reason Christian missionaries were excluded from many areas and confined to border regions away from the centers of power whenever possible. Otherwise, missions proved to be a vexing problem, as the French found out in Mali, Guinea, and Senegal. In reaching a settlement with African rulers, both colonial states found it necessary to dispose of militant Muslim leaders; for the French, this list included Ahmadu of Segu Tukulor, defeated in 1893, Samori, whose forces in southern Mali and adjacent areas were eliminated in 1898, and Rabeh, who controlled parts of southern Chad and Borno, also crushed in 1898. For the British, only the Mahdiyya, under the leadership of Caliph ‘Abdallah, were a comparable enemy, and he was defeated in 1898. The British replaced the leadership of the Sokoto Caliphate, but it was not necessary to dismantle the state, as was the case elsewhere. All these actions came late, and by this time the general policy toward slavery had already been established.

The early attack on slavery in the western Sudan was directed mainly at the trade in slaves, not their indigenous use, even though the French introduced the *engagés à temps* system in 1817 and emancipated some slaves in 1848. The *engagé* system, requiring the indenture of slaves for periods ranging from ten to fourteen years, was a subterfuge that allowed the Senegalese government to acquire slaves for its own use, including military conscription. The 1848 decree covered emancipated slaves throughout the French empire, but the French sphere in Senegambia was narrowly defined to include only the four communes. The colonial regime took strong measures to prevent Saint Louis and Gorée from becoming sanctuaries for fugitives. Escaped slaves were expelled as vagrants and returned to their masters. A modified form of slavery even continued in the towns themselves under the myth that slave children were “adopted” into local families. Not until the 1870s did the abolitionist forces have a serious influence on French policy toward slavery.
In 1876, the French temporarily annexed Walo and Dimar, after defeating the anticolonial forces of Bubakar. Annexation automatically extended emancipation laws into the new provinces, and as a result, an estimated 3,000 people – large slave owners and their slaves – moved east. Although the French regime quickly reversed its annexation decree to placate slave owners and encourage the return of the exiles, the gradual move toward the end of slavery once more was apparent. By 1883, fugitive slaves were free upon reaching the communes, although escaped slaves were still discouraged from living in the towns. In 1892, a conference was held with political leaders from the region in which the French recognized that domestic slaves were servants and not slaves. The newly classified “servants” had the right to buy their freedom and to receive a certificate of liberty from the French. The leaders of Kayor, Sine, Saalum, and Dimar accepted these terms; in 1894, the Futa Toro government nominally agreed too. The effects, however, were minimal, as was expected. In Futa Toro, for example, only a few hundred certificates were issued each year between 1895 and 1903, and most of these were to women who had probably borne children by their masters and could expect to be freed anyway.48 In the far interior, there was no active intervention against slavery – not even in these superficial ways – until it became expedient to encourage the slaves of belligerent states to flee to the French as a means of undermining the power of opponents.

The other nominal commitment to abolition was the establishment of villages de liberté along the lines of military advance. These villages became the homes of those slaves who escaped from enemy territory, but their name was even more deceptive than Freetown in Sierra Leone. Villages were located along supply lines to produce crops, and locally their inhabitants were often seen as slaves of the French government, not freed slaves. The villages de liberté resembled the plantations from which many of the fugitives had fled, and fugitives frequently used them as a temporary place of refuge before deserting to somewhere else. Slave owners could even claim their slaves from these settlements within a month of their escape. Given that masters from belligerent states were unlikely to do so, this policy effectively guaranteed that the slaves of masters in friendly territory would not escape. Furthermore, the heavy labor obligations in the villages acted as a deterrent against more massive desertions.49

As was the case in the use of slaves in the British colonial armies, the French also relied on slaves for its Senegalese tirailleurs as well as for its auxiliaries. Because the French never had more than 4,000 troops in West Africa, the conquest of the western Sudan depended on African recruits, so that – as elsewhere – a force including many ex-slaves conquered Africa for the colonialists.50 In a sense, the French created a slave force reminiscent of the old tyeddo slave warriors who were overthrown by the Muslim reformers of the nineteenth century. Even as the French commitment to abolition became firmer – despite the individual actions of administrators – the French slave army continued to recruit slaves, almost as if the military was tied to some archaic tradition that
French officials conveniently did not understand. This atavism was carried to extremes. As late as 1891, the commandant at Kita could report to his superior that some of the slaves – especially women – seized during military campaigns were being parcelled out to the soldiers, in partial compensation for salary: “I am going to distribute the slaves in order to have fewer mouths to feed. Of course, I will keep a certain number for your men, who will be available to them after your campaign: you can tell them that for me in order to stimulate them a little.”¹ Like the engagés à temps and the villages de liberté, slavery was adapted to colonial ambitions when possible; only the propaganda changed to disguise colonial exploitation in the language of abolition. As late as 1895, the French administrator Penel tried to convince proabolitionist governor Grodet:

no man of good sense having experience of the land will counsel immediate abolition of slavery. That would provoke a general uprising, to which also slaves would participate and which would ruin the colony…. Commerce, which is progressing, would be paralyzed. Thus we are under an obligation to accommodate ourselves for the time being to the institution of slavery. Previously, and at every occasion, we have formally promised the natives that we will not directly suppress slavery…. In all our dealings with the Blacks, it is necessary to be loyal, consistent, or lose moral credibility in their eyes.⁵²

The issue was a convenient ruse to gain public support in Europe for imperialist ambitions. It was usually difficult for government officials to resist some kind of public statement that supported the humanitarian cry to end the slave trade and slavery. At times it proved useful for one European country to condemn another because too little was being done to end the evil institution. Penel’s remarks, nonetheless, reveal another twist. For him, supporting slavery became an indication of loyalty and consistency, despite more than half a century of verbal commitment to abolition. The real battle over abolition may have waxed and waned during the period, but the trend was clear, as Penel himself realized. Slavery had to end; the colonial occupation would inevitably eliminate enslavement as a means of adding to the slave population. The slave trade, too, would subside and eventually stop. Surely, Penel could not really believe that the French position raised questions of morality, as he stated. Supporting slavery was expedient, but it had nothing to do with maintaining moral credibility.

The British concentrated their efforts on ending the trans-Saharan and Red Sea slave trade, and their intervention in the Nile valley, under the auspices of Ottoman and Egyptian authority, was an extension of this campaign. British policy was no more directed against indigenous slavery than elsewhere in the savanna. European administrators pursued the attack on the slave trade most zealously in the late 1870s and early 1880s. England wanted to clean up the image of the Egyptian government, which had become increasingly visible to the European public with the opening of the strategically vital Suez Canal. These efforts collapsed in 1884 with the emergence of the Mahdist state. The British were able to contain the export trade in slaves, except along the Wadai-Kufra
route across the Sahara, but they had no effect on indigenous slavery, raiding, or trade until the occupation of the Sudan in 1896. Because the Mahdist state was strongly committed to slavery, the colonial regime refused to emancipate slaves and thereby rekindle the flames of discontent over the issue that had been a major factor in the Mahdist success. Instead, the continuation of slavery was accepted on the basis of British-interpreted Islamic law.\textsuperscript{53}

Kitchener, the British governor of Sudan after the conquest, issued the following instructions to his provincial officers in 1899:

\begin{quote}
Slavery is not recognized in the Soudan, but as long as service is willingly rendered by servants to masters it is unnecessary to interfere in the conditions existing between them…. I leave it to your discretion to adopt the best methods of gradually eradicating the habit of depending upon the slave labor which has so long been part of the religious creed and customs of this country, and which it is impossible to remove at once without doing great violence to the feelings and injuring the prosperity of the inhabitants. Without proclaiming any intention of abruptly doing away with all slave-holding, much can be done in the way of discouraging it and teaching the people to get on without it.\textsuperscript{54}
\end{quote}

The British regime went farther. Its officials became experts in Islamic law, and they interpreted the provisions on slavery in a manner that would justify its continuation, with modifications. Slave officials were eased out of office, but concubinage was left intact. Slave labor remained an essential component of the economy until the pilgrimage traffic from West Africa brought a migrant labor force to replace slavery. There was nothing radical in the policy toward slavery, only in the criminalization of the slave trade and the termination of large-scale enslavement. These changes invariably affected the ability to replenish the supply of slaves. Islamic ideals – the conversion of slaves, their emancipation, and eventual incorporation into society as clients – were officially promoted. The British eliminated some elements of the slave system and encouraged its patrimonial dimensions. Ironically, slavery became more “Islamic” under the British regime than previously.

This policy of using Islamic law and customary treatment of slaves to contain a potentially explosive situation was well established when the British marched on the central provinces of the Sokoto Caliphate in the first three years of the twentieth century. Slavery was manipulated for imperial purposes. Joseph Chamberlain, British Colonial Secretary from 1895 to 1903, thought that “sooner or later we shall have to fight some of the slave dealing tribes and we cannot have a better casus belli…. Public opinion here requires that we shall justify imperial control of these savage countries by some serious effort to put down slave dealing.”\textsuperscript{55}

By the time the British conquered the central provinces of the Sokoto Caliphate in 1903, a slavery policy already existed. Its architect, Sir Frederick (later Lord) Lugard, combined elements of British experience in the Lake Malawi region, the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, and coastal West Africa. Lugard
brought to the Sokoto Caliphate a sense of political realism that excluded the immediate abolition of slavery but rather sanctioned the abolition of the legal status of slavery—a subtle distinction drawn from British experience in India, which did not actually emancipate slaves. In his instructions to his subordinates in 1906, Lugard explained his position in the following terms:

[T]o prematurely abolish the almost universal form of labor contract, before a better system had been developed to take its place, would not only be an act of administrative folly, but would be an injustice to the masters, since Domestic Slavery is an institution sanctioned by the law of Islam, and property in slaves was as real as any other form of property among the Mohammedan population at the time that the British assumed the Government, a nullification of which would amount to nothing less that wholesale confiscation.¹⁶

Faced with a population that contained several million slaves, Lugard successfully established British colonialism without disrupting the social order. As in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, he interpreted Islamic law in new ways to modify the institution of slavery and to permit a transition to wage labor and tenant farming peacefully. These modifications included a reliance on acts of emancipation that would offer an incentive for slaves to accept the new order willingly.

The institution of murgu was the cornerstone of this reform. In the nineteenth century, masters could let slaves work on their own account under murgu arrangements, in return for a fixed payment, usually weekly or monthly. Sometimes slaves earned enough capital to purchase their freedom, if the owner agreed to set a price and the price was reasonable. The act was considered pious because an owner who set a relatively low price was effectively assuming a financial loss in allowing the slave his freedom. The British changed this. Now a master had to agree to set a fair price on any slave who requested the arrangement of murgu. Failure to do so was a matter for the courts. This was not the only reform. As in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, slave officials were gradually displaced, and the prison for recalcitrant slaves was closed. Finally, the British decreed that all persons born after April 1, 1901 were technically free, so that the slave population was well on its way to extinction by the time all slaves were emancipated in 1936.¹⁷

A crucial dimension of both British and French policies involved the treatment of escaped slaves. At the same time that slaves who stayed with their master were given greater rights and the lure of eventual emancipation, if not for themselves then for their children, the lot of escaped slaves was made as difficult as possible. The freed-slave villages of the French along railway lines and supply routes hardly encouraged escapes in the western Sudan, although slaves sometimes used the villages as temporary refuges before fleeing further. The British enacted vagrancy laws in which the government prevented new settlers from obtaining land in a village unless they had sufficient capital to provision themselves for a year. This was designed to impede the movement of
fugitive slaves. The British also destroyed some fugitive-slave villages in areas where slaves had retreated into defensible hill locations. The military solution took several decades, and not until the 1930s were all the hill retreats in Nigeria “pacified.” Nonetheless, all these measures, including the efforts of the colonial regimes to disguise the slavery issue, failed to prevent the massive flight of slaves in the 1890s and the first decade of the twentieth century. Throughout the savanna, slaves ran away, particularly slaves who had been on plantations. The most dramatic struggle occurred in French areas, from Banamba, Kankan, Tuba, Gumbu, and other centers of plantation agriculture. Escape had long been a factor in resistance to slavery, as we have seen with respect to the problems encountered by the French and English in curtailing the influx of fugitives into occupied territory. The French had encouraged slave desertions among their enemies because it was expedient. The British promoted similar actions in the Nile valley after the expulsion of the Turco-Egyptian regime in 1884. The events of the 1890s and after were of a different order. The scale of desertion was so great that it shook the foundations of the Muslim states as much or more than the colonial conquest itself. The French had wanted to weaken the economies of Segu Tukulor, Samori, Rabeh, and other enemies; however, they did not want a social revolution. Nor did the British, as Lugard’s expressed fears reveal: “If … slaves were to be encouraged to assert their freedom unnecesarily in large numbers, or if those so asserting it, by leaving their masters without some good cause, were indiscriminately upheld in their action by Political Officers, a state of anarchy and chaos would result, and the whole social system of the Mohammedan States would be dislocated.”

Beginning around 1895, slaves took the initiative in French West Africa at an accelerating rate. The advancing colonial armies provided the opportunity, as the Muslim governments were preoccupied or in disarray. A revolt shook Banamba in 1895, along with many escapes, but a few individual slaves were recaptured and severely punished, with the full support of the French, to check other insubordination. In 1896, more than 1,000 fugitive slaves were settled in a single village de liberté near Bakel until the majority could be sent back to their masters. Complaints from slaves concerning overwork, underfeeding, and other abuses began to reach French officials, who now realized how explosive the situation really was. Work stoppages, a steady trickle of escapes, and occasional violence against masters continued into the first three years of the twentieth century. French political and judicial reforms did not help the situation. New laws in 1903 and 1905 reduced the status of slavery to a matter that was no longer recognized in French courts. Despite French reluctance to deal with slave complaints, the slaves found that they could receive an audience, even if it was only indirectly through colonial reaction to potential insurrection. In 1905 and continuing into 1906, slavery collapsed in the French western Sudan. Some semblance of order was subsequently reestablished, but not before several hundred thousand slaves had fled. They ran away from virtually
everywhere, many heading south toward their home country in the lands that Samori and Babemba had devastated. The population of the Bougouni cercle, for example, increased from several thousand in the late nineteenth century to 95,592 in 1905 and to 162,343 in 1913.

The cercles of Sikasso, Koutiala, and Bougouni experienced a dramatic increase in population too (Table 11.1). Better census techniques and natural increase may have accounted for some of the difference, but it is likely that 250,000 people moved into these cercles as a result of the slave exodus. Even if allowance is made for natural increase in the order of 1–2 percent per year, the rise in population was still 35 percent. Many slaves fled elsewhere too, particularly to the peanut-producing regions, railway construction sites, and government recruiting centers for porters.

The scale of the exodus was so large that it represents one of the most significant slave revolts in history. There were many efforts to stop the flight before 1905, but once the exodus began, nothing could be done. The French simply let the slaves go, and for the first time the French restrained the masters. Once the dust had settled, the remnants of the slave system were reassembled, only now the more patriarchal dimensions of slavery were predominant. The French, like the British in the Nile valley and the Sokoto Caliphate, upheld Islamic law and custom in supporting slavery, with the expectation that slavery would gradually disappear now that the most disgruntled elements of the slave population had left.

The flight of slaves was also dramatic in northern Nigeria. The British had watched slaves escape from Nupe, Lafia, and Wase across the Niger and Benue rivers since the middle of the 1890s. When slaves started deserting the farms around Yola in 1902, local slave owners became so agitated that a mob attacked the British fort. Slave escapes also spread to Kano and Sokoto once they fell to the British in 1903; in the next couple of years, slaves left in large numbers. Some masters awoke in the morning to find their slaves gathered together, armed with bows and arrows, hoes, and knives, defiantly taunting their masters to stop them from leaving. Many returned to the areas between the emirates, where slave raiding had cleared the land. Other slaves waited to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cercle</th>
<th>1905</th>
<th>1913</th>
<th>Increase</th>
<th>%</th>
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<tr>
<td>Bougouni</td>
<td>95,592</td>
<td>162,343</td>
<td>66,751</td>
<td>69.8</td>
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<td>164,410</td>
<td>223,719</td>
<td>59,309</td>
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<td>Koutiala</td>
<td>223,403</td>
<td>353,815</td>
<td>130,412</td>
<td>58.4</td>
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<td>Koury</td>
<td>224,266</td>
<td>322,083</td>
<td>97,817</td>
<td>43.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>707,671</td>
<td>1,061,960</td>
<td>354,289</td>
<td>50.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

see what the British regime would do, however, and consequently the exodus was on a smaller scale than in the French areas further west. Nonetheless, the movement continued for many years. The rapid expansion of peanut exports from Kano in 1911 introduced a level of prosperity in the rural areas that helped limit the flight. Because the British were more supportive of the Caliphate aristocracy and were particularly favorable to the merchant class, the slave owners were more unified than was the case in the areas conquered by the French. This, too, helped check the exodus. Nonetheless, many masters lost their slaves.64

Once again slaves had taken the initiative, just as they had done along the West African coast and in parts of central and eastern Africa. The inability to replenish the slave supply through the acquisition of new captives and through trade was a serious blow to the slave system, but the action of the slaves themselves was equally decisive. Ex-slaves became migrant workers; they opened new lands that were now safe from slave raiding; and they moved to the towns of the colonial states.65 Many slaves did not escape, but the institution had been changed dramatically. Without the possibilities of more slaves, slavery became more firmly embedded in patriarchal structures, and hence slave conditions were better. By the 1930s, slavery largely ceased to exist or was well on the way to extinction almost everywhere. Slavery seemed to be on its way to dying the “natural death” that Lugard and other colonialists anticipated.