CHAPTER 1

Defining Slavery, Defining Freedom

Introduction

In 1819, Barka became dan rimi, a powerful, titled, and official position specifically for slaves in the government of Kano (a major city in the nineteenth-century Sokoto Caliphate – now northern Nigeria). In his capacity as dan rimi and over the course of roughly thirty years, Barka advised two emirs – Ibrahim Dabo and Usman – on matters of war, state, and politics. Barka had numerous wives and children all of whom occupied a special section of the palace; wore expensive and ornate robes of state; owned many horses; commanded soldiers; supervised tax collection; and became an absolute force in affairs of state. After his death, a number of Barka’s children became dan rimi and worked alongside numerous emirs at the highest levels of authority and power. He is well remembered today by his descendants in Kano, Nigeria.¹

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Msatulwa Mwachitete grew up in Chitete, located in central East Africa, to the west of Lake Malawai, in the house of his father, who had twelve wives. Their home was attacked numerous times by Mkoma of the Inamwanga, who regularly carried off women and children into slavery after setting fire to surrounding villages. During one such

attack, Msatulwa was captured, along with his mother and brother. He was taken some distance from his home and given as a slave to Mitano. Msatulwa was forced to grind corn, cut firewood, cook, hoe fields, and fetch water, but was eventually given to another person, who treated him better. In the end, Msatulwa found his way home after running away.²

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In South Africa, Floris, the slave of Francois Jacobus Roos, gave testimony in front of the assistant protector of slaves in Stellenbosch regarding what he termed an illegal beating given to him by his master. Floris explained that he had been very sick for a number of days, and that he had been sent to his master’s father-in-law’s farm for a light day’s work. He returned home after dark and sat beside the hearth. Another slave entered the room and told Floris that their master was calling for him. Floris then entered the master’s house, saluted him, and was asked by his master whether he remembered that his job was to wash his master’s feet. Floris said yes, but that he only just learned that he was being asked to do so. Floris then stated that his master beat him over and over again with a stick until it broke. After the beating, he washed his master’s feet, and then was beaten again, with a second stick. Roos explained his actions to the assistant protector of slaves by stating that Floris was insolent, had failed to offer the appropriate deference to him, and had not used the appropriate terms of sir or master.³

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Chisi was born in roughly 1870 in Nanwanga, now Tanzania. As a child she embarked on a journey with her brother to see her older sister. While she was staying with her sister, she was captured in a raid carried out by the Bemba. All the men of the village were killed and had their heads cut off to be later displayed to the Bemba chief. Chisi was seized along with her sister. Her sister was enslaved and eventually made into a wife by the man who captured both girls. Chisi became a slave of the chief. She stayed as a slave for three years. At the age

of eleven she was sold to four merchants from the coast. In time she escaped and lived with a family headed by Ndeye, who eventually married her. She was mistreated by Ndeye’s other wives to such an extent that she did not follow the family when they sought protection with a nearby chief, but in so doing she also had to abandon her children, whom she later managed to recover.4

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Rosine Opo was born in 1832 in Akropong (now located in Ghana) and was the daughter of a slave woman and Kwaw Kutanku. In 1844, Rosine was handed over to Kawku Sae as a wife. Kawku Sae did not purchase her, but instead provided a smaller amount of “head money” to her father. Although Kawku had sexual access to Rosine, she was still a slave that belonged to her father’s family because she had not been fully purchased. Rosine grew to hate her domestic situation, and she made trouble for her husband, who ultimately sent her away. In the meantime, Rosine had fallen in love with Charles Irinkeye, a pawn (a free loaned person) of Kwaku Sae’s. Charles paid Rosine twelve pounds in order to make her his official wife, but Rosine never paid her first husband Kwaku Sae to end the marriage (by making up the cost of what he initially paid in head money), nor did she or Charles pay her father the head price. Thus, Rosine remained a slave of Kwaw Kutanku, who still had rights over her and her children. Because she and Charles failed to pay her first husband back the head price, Kwaku Sae and his family also had claims over Rosine’s children. She eventually turned to Christian missionaries, who she hoped could offer her a way out of these conflicting claims on her person. Eventually, Rosine was snatched from her second husband by her paternal family and given to another headman as a wife. Her six children were divided among family members.5

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Barka, Msatulwa, Floris, Chisi, and Rosine were all slaves in Africa. Yet, each experienced slavery differently. For Barka, slavery provided a route to power and brought him closer to assimilating into the free elite. Over the course of his career as a slave official he grew both

4 Wright, Strategies of Slaves and Women, 81–91.
rich and influential. Msatulwa’s experience of slavery was defined by powerlessness and violence. He was enslaved through war and was subjected to brutal treatment in the context of an increasingly disordered political situation in nineteenth-century Eastern Africa. Floris experienced humiliation and subordination within slavery. He was not only forced to wash his master’s feet, but also severely punished for not acting respectfully, although his master had to defend his actions in front of the protector of slaves. Chisi experienced slavery as a woman and found herself attached to powerful households through marriage in ways that offered opportunities, yet she still suffered from all the uncertainties that came with her status as both a woman and a slave. Finally, Rosine negotiated complex and overlapping networks of dependency as a slave, client, wife, and mother. Her status as wife, daughter, and slave often overlapped. She experienced claims on her person, labor, wealth, and children as a result, yet she did her best to improve and stabilize her social and economic position by using those multiple identities to her advantage.

These different experiences demonstrate just how difficult it is to discuss slavery across a continent as large and complex as Africa. Yet, it is possible. Slavery in Africa was diverse: slaves occupied a wide range of roles and positions in African states and societies. The statuses and treatment of slaves varied dramatically as well. Some found that slavery offered them an opportunity to achieve prominence and power. For others, slavery became the means through which they – although most usually their children – developed ties of belonging as members of kin or other corporate social groups. For yet others, slavery was defined by being bought and sold and then forced to work at tasks ranging from household labor to difficult work on African versions of plantations. Slavery in Africa was not simply a benign path toward greater inclusion, nor was it always defined by violence and hard agricultural labor. Yet, in all cases, slavery in Africa was powerfully conditioned by the ways in which African individuals and corporate groups valued people. It is now axiomatic that in Africa, possession of – or control over – people meant power. Power over people provided access to labor, to the reproductive capacity of female slaves, and to political agents or functionaries who then bolstered the power of elites and other big men. Thus, to understand slavery in Africa, and to appreciate why slaves were often regarded as the ultimate form of wealth in people, we must understand the nature of African ideas about human capital, about value, and more broadly, about belonging.
What Is Slavery?

Slavery and freedom are slippery concepts. For most, slavery conjures images of men on cotton plantations working under the sun and subject to the constant threat of the whip. The key to understanding slavery in Africa is to understand that slavery cannot be defined by the ways slaves were treated or by the jobs they performed. Although plantation slavery existed across parts of the world as varied as Brazil, the American South, West Africa, and ancient Rome, it by no means existed everywhere, nor was it the most common form of slavery. Many slaves labored in non-plantation skilled and unskilled occupations. In Africa, male and female slaves performed a wide variety of jobs – from skilled labor to domestic work to farming to soldiering to tax collection. Additionally, men were not the most commonly used slaves; in many places, including large parts of the African continent, women were more numerous and were the most valuable slaves. Finally, violence is certainly a common theme in all places slavery existed, but violence was not always necessary for slavers and was often the least effective means for getting slaves to do what was needed. Once we remove type of work and type of treatment as the defining features of slavery, what is left? Perhaps the best way to understand slavery is to think of it as being composed of a bundle of traits. The various traits in the bundle that made up slavery varied over time and place. Slavery was not static or changeless. Historical forces altered the nature of slavery. Slavery was a dynamic product of history and of the often accidental choices made by people in history. Sometimes slavery could be largely economic, at other times mainly political, and in yet other circumstances largely social. Most kinds of slavery in Africa would have contained elements from all three categories, stressing one or another depending on historical circumstances.

Clearly, however, we must better develop the key features of the bundle of characteristics that define slavery. Definitions of slavery usually focus on at least one of the following three traits: slaves as kinless outsiders, slaves as property, and/or slaves as violently dominated

or powerless. In Africa, slavery was composed of a varying degree of all three characteristics, which often overlapped. In virtually all times and places, slaves were outsiders. In other words, they did not belong in any way to the dominant slaveholding society except in relation to their status as slaves. This often meant that slaves had no ties to kinship systems. They were, in effect, anti-kin: outsiders who did not belong and had no families or social ties except those moderated through their master. As Orlando Patterson noted, “Not only was the slave denied all claims on, and obligations to, his parents and living blood relations but, by extension, all such claims and obligations on his more remote ancestors and on his descendants.”

Scholars have debated the extent to which slaves remained permanent outsiders and the extent to which slaves were gradually absorbed into kinship systems. Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff, for example, argue that the marginality of slaves was gradually reduced as they were incorporated into broader kinship systems, whereas Claude Meillassoux sees slaves as permanently and completely kinless – fundamentally different from all other dependents.

In all cases of slavery in Africa, slave status was hereditary. Even when slaves were frequently manumitted or incorporated, the hereditary element of slavery existed initially, and could only be removed by granting the slave a status closer to that of an insider. In many cases – usually in societies with well-developed market systems – slaves were also salable. Turning human beings into property made them exploitable as outsiders and helped maintain their dependent status. Thus, masters gained and maintained control over slaves by virtue of their ability to both buy and sell them, which also ensured that slaves remained outside kinship systems. Obviously, the importance of the chattel/property component depended on the nature of the society in which slaves were used. Finally, violence was a characteristic of slavery in Africa. Slaves were often – albeit not always – produced through violence, usually war or kidnapping. Acts (or threats) of violence reinforced slave status and emphasized the powerlessness of the slave. Slaves were not always subject to violence, but the potential

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for violence and the powerlessness of slaves were unique to slavery. This is especially true because slaves tended not to reproduce themselves. Some died and others were manumitted or incorporated. This meant slave populations needed to be continually replaced by new slaves through war or other – most often violent – means.

Although scholars of African slavery generally agree that these characteristics are related to slave status, they also often disagree on which ones to emphasize. Most especially, scholars have debated the extent to which slavery was part of a continuum of dependent statuses that involved claims of rights over persons. The idea is that African societies were organized in ways that sought to make claims on people as kin, as children, as wives, and as slaves. The key question is: can slaves be placed along a continuum of statuses that included kin (those who belonged) by conceptualizing slavery as one institution among many that offered control over rights in persons? Slavery would then be at the most extreme end of dependency, whereas marriage and parentage would be at the least extreme. Slavery was, the argument goes, not the opposite of freedom or kinship but similar to other institutions that emphasized dependency and that served to incorporate Africans into broader corporate groups.11 Other scholars have pushed back to argue that the incorporative view of African slavery erases the exploitation and struggle central to the institution; indeed, for these scholars, the dependency of slaves was something both unique and special.12 Slaves were persons who occupied a substantively different status than did those who belonged. In the words of Meillassoux, slavery was the antithesis of kinship. Because slaves were not part of a continuum that included non-slave dependents, incorporation was much more fraught, contested, and problematic. Overall, this debate is about the extent to which we can accept binary definitions of slavery and freedom or of slave/non-slave status in Africa. The usual thinking is that an absolute opposition between slavery and freedom is problematic because it involves the imposition of modern notions about labor, freedom, and individuality on a unique African historical context. While it is indeed imperative to contextualize slavery and freedom within African ideas and histories, this book argues that Africans in most times and places did indeed see slavery and freedom as oppositional. However, African ideas about slavery and freedom were intimately connected to

11 This view is most commonly associated with the work of Miers and Kopytoff.
12 Lovejoy and Meillassoux are the main proponents of this position.
conceptions about belonging and not belonging. Africans drew profound distinctions between those who morally, politically, and socially belonged and those who did not, which were in turn mapped onto broader social distinctions between slaves and non-slaves.

On Freedom and Belonging: Insiders, Outsiders, and Slavery

Freedom is usually understood as the opposite of slavery. In most cases, freedom is described in the context of individual or personal freedom (to do what one pleases) and civic freedom (to be able to influence and participate in how one is governed). Thus, freedom conventionally refers to the absence of obligations, dependence, or other ties that restrict or narrow an individual’s right and ability to make decisions and act autonomously. In many African contexts, freedom might better be defined as the ability or right to belong. In most African social systems, belonging mattered. Africans could belong to numerous institutions or corporate groups – some were religious (Islamic brotherhoods), others occupational (a herder or blacksmith), and still others political (a state, city, or neighborhood). But in general, to belong meant that one was enmeshed – as an insider – within reciprocal systems of mutual obligation and patronage organized around kinship and descent. It meant that one was socially, morally, and politically a member of the community, which offered broader opportunities to belong to a variety of institutions within that society, and which in turn meant one could make claims on the individual members of those groups. Thus, those who belonged to households, lineages, and/or states had both obligations and privileges governed by a wide variety of social norms that were broadly acknowledged.

Not everyone who belonged was equal. Many African corporate structures were exploitative. Those closest to the center of power or the highest of statuses, sometimes defined by age, gender, birth, or wealth, gained the most protections and privileges. Others were

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13 Patterson’s *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture* is a good introduction to these concepts. See Patterson, *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

profundely dependent on those more powerful and more senior. But the exploitation of dependents was often limited by virtue of the fact that they were insiders. Social subordination was not the equivalent of slavery. Belonging offered protection and potential for higher status. Even the least powerful members of a group gained by virtue of their positions as insiders. The benefits of belonging might not have been as substantial for a low-status person as they were for a higher-status individual, but the ability to claim status as an insider was nonetheless valuable, for it was through belonging that one could claim socially sanctioned rights to marry, practice religion, farm, build homes, inherit, have socially recognized children, claim the labor of those children, and many other privileges. These rights were not simply defined by dependence; they offered those who could rightfully claim them autonomy — in the sense that one could exercise rights that provided opportunities, choices, and control, dependent of course on one’s social position. Slaves could acquire some of the privileges enjoyed by those who belonged, but these privileges were not normally grounded in their membership within the broader community of the free; instead, they were granted at the prerogative of the master. Even when slaves secured privileges that were more broadly grounded, they were still a product of their specific status as slaves and could be revoked.

Thus, slavery in Africa was based on the distinction between people defined as insiders — those who belonged to and in local and regional social, religious, and political systems — and slaves, who were outsiders. However, slaves in Africa were not just outsiders; they were also understood as kinless. They lacked the social ties to ancestors and progeny that made one an insider and provided webs of patrons and clients on which people could draw for social meaning and for political and economic support. This in turn made slaves especially useful — as workers, political agents, soldiers, or dependents — because their special vulnerability meant that their owners could use them as they saw fit. Slaves could act as high-ranking generals or as lowly farm laborers because they were genealogically isolated and had no or weak claims to social or political capital and support. Contrastingly, the free could access a wide variety of relationships and experience a variety of claims upon their persons. This provided the free with choices and protections, along with the possibility of balancing claims and obligations across different social networks and individuals, often composed of kin. Slaves had only one avenue through which they could access the world of the free: the master. In Buganda, for example,
the opposite of slave was known as a *musenza* or “client/freeman.” The latter could change patrons of their own accord, whereas slaves could not. They were dependent on their masters and could be used in whatever way their masters wanted. Nothing better embodies the position of slaves in this regard than the Swahili proverb: “Slaves have no words of their own.”

Africans usually wanted to acquire slaves who had been transported far from their homes rather than slaves acquired closer to home. Mungo Park, who traveled throughout the Senegambian region in the 1790s, noted: “The value of a slave in the eye of an African purchaser increases in proportion to his distance from his native Kingdom.” Why? Slaves acquired in this way were initially regarded as absolute outsiders. These slaves had no rights or social identity except as mediated through their master. This made them valuable and especially useful because they were fully exploitable objects. Likewise, in the Nkanu region of Igboland (now southeastern Nigeria), even though slaves were theoretically conceptualized as inferior kin and thereby brought within the domain of kinship relations, in practice these slaves suffered profound disabilities that could only be imposed on kinless outsiders of slave status. They could, for example, be sold or sacrificed, whereas kin could not be subject to such violence. In addition, while Igbo masters granted some of their slaves the right to form families, they were not created or protected in the same way as free families. In contrast to marriages between free persons, the slave husband did not pay bridewealth (a payment in goods or service) to his future father-in-law. Instead, the master of the slave literally purchased a slave wife for his slave. This meant that, in practice, the master effectively owned the children produced within such a marriage because the master owned the husband and the wife, their labor power, their bodies, and whatever their bodies produced. The master could therefore do what he wished with the children produced by these unions, which included sacrificing them at funerals, selling them, or taking

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them from their families to be used in his own household as domestic labor. It was impossible for the children of free unions to be treated in this manner because they belonged and they possessed rights as well as obligations as a result of their status.

Likewise, in the grassfields of what is now Cameroon, a series of increasingly violent and coercive states emerged over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Political elites accumulated power through their control over people – the labor power of young men and women – via organizations of extended lineages over which they presided. Elder men extracted labor from young men, who in turn looked toward the time when they might take a wife with the help and support of an elder man and assume an elite position. Over time, the demands on younger generations grew; at the same time, it became harder to acquire a wife and achieve any kind of upward mobility. Many young men voted with their feet and left their lineages to begin life in another region under another set of elites, who might adopt them as junior kin and offer them some upward mobility in return for their loyalty and labor. This floating population represented a political threat to those in power. They were viewed as a source of rebellion, and their mobility actually undermined the elite’s control over people. Upward mobility was restricted everywhere by limited resources, which in turn caused elite-commoner conflict and further migration that perpetuated the basic social and economic contradiction between accumulation and the demands and expectations of kinship. The ideology of kinship meant that “fathers” were supposed to offer patronage to their “sons,” but they were no longer able to do so in addition to accumulating people and resources themselves. Gradually, the most vulnerable among the most disaffected of the mobile population became subject to enslavement. Thus, vulnerable, adopted junior kin who had moved from their original homes in search of upward mobility were made into slaves and sold by traders to other polities in need of labor. Why? These people were now slaves, who could not make claims of belonging and thus could be used by political elites as the ultimate resource: humans who could make no claims based on an ideology of lineage, kinship, or belonging.

19 See Nicolas Argenti, The Intestines of the State: Youth, Violence and Belated Histories in the Cameroon Grassfields (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 45–56. This
In general we are on strong ground to argue that slaves in Africa were usually produced through violence, were often the objects of a property-like relationship, and initially had the status of kinless outsiders within their host societies. While variations in slavery were common, and it was possible to transcend slave status in some times and places, as an institution, slavery in Africa provided the most efficient and complete means for some human beings to exploit other human beings. Kings valued slaves for different reasons than, for example, merchants, but slaves were valuable to both because they were outsiders and thus were open to more profound exploitation than those who belonged – or the free. As Claire Robertson and Martin Klein argued, slaves were “involuntarily servile,” occupied marginal positions with their society, and were “subject to the control of another.”\(^{20}\) This status was hereditary unless the slave was manumitted. To reiterate: slavery in Africa – as in the rest of the world – was fundamentally about economic, sexual, social, or political exploitation.

**On Honor and the Master-Slave Relationship**

If slaves were usually viewed as persons who did not belong, that status was often represented by their lack of honor. This is not to suggest that slaves could not honor each other, but rather that a central component of a slave’s initial status was that he or she was deprived of honor in the eyes of dominant society. Obviously, honor is a historical category – the content of which changed – but the important point is that slaves were initially excluded from whatever it meant to \textit{be honorable} and were thereby excluded from a “right to respect.”\(^{21}\) Slaves were, in short, dishonored as well as kinless outsiders, as Edward Steinhart notes: “The status of slaves as distinct from other forms of dependent labour in pre-colonial society was process also led to a broader long-distance trade (both into the Atlantic trade and northward into the Islamic Savanna) in slaves, which gave elites access to prestige goods via the exchange.


\(^{21}\) See John Iliffe, \textit{ Honour in African History} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 4. Iliffe points out that “[H]onour exists both subjectively and objectively. It exists subjectively in the sense that individuals believe they are entitled to respect. But it exists objectively only if others treat them with respect and if individuals can if necessary enforce respect.”
far more a matter of the alienation of honour rather than the alienation of labour.” It was this “alienation of honor” along with their initial kinlessness that made the alienation of a slave’s labor – and personhood – possible. The forms this dishonor took in practice varied. Some slaves were made to go naked, given pejorative names or nicknames, not buried after death, branded, ritually humiliated, or compared to animals.

To label slaves dishonored outsiders is only one-half of the story, however. Honor was a contested category. Slaves sought honor within their own communities and in relation to dominant society. Slaves often struggled to build religious connections, political alliances, patron-client ties, and other kinds of relationships that brought privilege and membership within the slaveholding society rather than struggling to gain an abstract and individualized freedom. In some times and places, slaves either succeeded in forcing this recognition, or masters found it in their best interests to recognize the honor of individual slaves (as distinct from slaves as a broad status category). This is what makes charting the socio-legal boundaries of slavery so complex: the statuses and relationship between insiders and outsiders changed over time, as did the relationship between masters and slaves. During times of great upheaval, the free often found themselves subject to more profound kinds of exploitation, which in some cases led insiders to being used in ways that looked like slavery (or, most often, social and political turmoil led to the enslavement of those formerly deemed insiders). This could create a blurry distinction between slaves and other kinds of dependents. In other cases, struggles emerged between masters and slaves over the practice of slavery itself. The nature of slavery was partially determined by the push and pull – and the social and psychological relationship – between master and slave. The slave sought acknowledgment, status, and position, which masters offered out of affection, necessity, or self-interest, which was in turn sometimes recognized by the dominant society. In other cases, slaves fought to preserve their customary rights and to reduce new obligations, while their masters looked to reduce their slave’s customary rights and to expand their control over their slaves. This is what Cooper has called the “continual testing” of the terms of

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servitude by all the parties involved, which could dramatically impact how slavery worked.23

Slavery and Other Forms of Dependence in Africa

This leads to a key question of how to sort through the relationship and differences between slavery and other forms of dependency in Africa. It is the argument of this book that slavery was fundamentally different from other institutions – such as marriage – that granted rights over people. By comparing slavery to institutions that seem much closer to slavery, such as debt bondage or pawnship, we can learn a lot about the nature of slavery.

In some parts of Africa, if a person desired a loan or access to goods, the creditor providing those goods might ask for and receive a human being – known as a pawn – from the debtor’s family or kin group as security for the debt. The creditor retained the pawn and access to his or her labor until the debt was paid off or satisfied. Thus, pawnship was used to both secure debts and to gain access to people. As far as we know, a majority of pawns were female. Both slavery and pawnship indicate the high value Africans placed on the control over people as dependents. In some places, pawnship was a marginal institution until the era of the transatlantic slave trade, when increasing commercialization prompted some Africans to use a precious resource – people – to gain access to another, European credit.24

Most production in Africa occurred at the household level through the mobilization of client and family labor. Free labor (meaning the labor of free persons) was, therefore, by definition household labor, which tended to be restricted to local, domestic economies. Free labor existed, but the problem was that free laborers were often harder to exploit and were simply not as dependable as slaves. This is why people were so valuable. Without extensive access to reliable wage laborers, Africans acquired more labor by expanding their households through birth or attachment. Pawns offered access to people – the ultimate resource – while also serving as a means to secure credit where

23 See Frederick Cooper, Plantation Slavery on the East Coast of Africa (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1997), 155.
other forms of credit did not exist. Persons who acquired pawns could thereby mobilize the dependent labor of people who were “more” than slaves but “less” than free.

Pawns were not, however, being sold into slavery. Instead, they remained morally and socially connected to their kin and descent group. They were not supposed to be treated as slaves. Children of a female pawn, for example, did not belong to the owner of the pawn but to the woman’s original kin group. Pawning was very different from the practice of seizing people who had failed to pay their debts. Those persons were effectively being enslaved. Although raids, war, and kidnapping were the most common mechanisms to supply slaves in Africa, a portion of slaves originated as debtors. Once enslaved for their debt, they were subject to all the disabilities associated with slave status – including the possibility of being transferred to other owners through sale. Pawns, on the other hand, were not supposed to be bought and sold and were not hereditarily bound to their master. In a sense, they could only be pawned because they were kin, and they were, therefore, protected by that status. In times of stress and change, pawns could be and were converted into slaves, but this was generally regarded as a violation of the terms of pawnship. Indeed, pawns could not be used as slaves until the terms of pawnship were violated, thereby making them into slaves. Thus, pawns had protections that derived from their status as free persons who had kin and belonged, as well as disabilities as persons who were – in effect – being loaned out as lesser dependents. Pawnship was deeply embedded in unequal power relations, but the limitations placed on their exploitation helps explain why slaves were so useful and valuable (in that they had no such protections). To better understand the value placed on people as slaves, we will now turn to a closer examination of household production, African reproductive economies, and the concept of “wealth in people.”

**Human Capital, Wealth in People, and African Reproductive Economies**

In virtually every part of Africa, household-based production was important. In the words of Meillassoux, self-sufficient domestic economies in Africa developed “knowledge of agriculture and craft techniques to run a farm system productively” and used “human labor
as the prime energy source.”

Households composed of extended families and clients were the primary producers, but these households were often incorporated into broader lineages. Lineages were composed of a group of people related by affinity and blood who thought of themselves as historical, political, economic, and social units, and through whom kinship, descent, and inheritance would be shared in a variety of ways. They were often run by elder men, who were sometimes drawn from specific households or in other cases were the most successful individuals within the lineage. In some places, lineages remained the largest political, social, and economic units. In others, lineages were incorporated into broader hierarchical state systems that sought to impose monarchical control over people – often made up of lineages and households – through (for example) coercion or taxation in order to appropriate for the state at least some of what was produced by the domestic economy.

These African political economies often valued wealth in the form of people rather than wealth in nonhuman forms of capital. People and material goods were in a sense not separate categories of capital, but were intimately linked together. Nonhuman forms of capital – such as commodities or luxury goods – were used to acquire people rather than being sought after for their own inherent value. Why did Africans tend to focus on the social value or economic benefits of the control over people? Attracting and keeping followers was a central problem for most political elites in Africa. In situations where land was readily available for use, or when other political, descent, or religious groupings might be competing for allegiance, the ability to attract and retain a wealth in people was a necessity. Africans gained access to material goods by acquiring rights to or control over the producers who actually made the goods rather than just through exchange or trade. They emphasized the importance of “people as the sources of productivity.”

Thus, control over people was a means to accumulate wealth, power, and social status. But it was even more complex than that. In places where households dominated production, Africans sought not to produce material objects for sale, but aimed to secure the physical

and social reproduction of their communities via control over people in order to gain access to their ability to produce (farm, fish, tend cattle) and physically reproduce (children whose labor power could then be secured). Political elites secured their interests in both the productive and reproductive capacity of people for the future by attaching them and their progeny in dependent and hierarchical relationships. Joseph C. Miller has described this process as “aggregating human dependents.” In many parts of Africa, populations suffered from high mortality rates, and were subject to crop failures and fluctuations among other uncertainties, so the key was to acquire not just control over dependents directly, but to place claims on the future labor of as many people as possible by making claims on their descendants – which in effect created an African reproductive economy. This attachment was accomplished in a variety of ways, sometimes by attracting followers, or through the ideology of kinship and descent (where junior members owe something to senior members and who eventually reproduce themselves and thus continue the senior-junior cycle), pawnship, marriage, or – and most important for our purposes – slavery.

Slavery was one of the best ways to claim the actual labor of people as well as to secure control over their future labor. Unlike clients or kin, slaves depended singularly on their master. Slaves were divorced from both the product of their labor and from the product of their fertility. The Bobangi described the relationship between slaves and their masters perfectly: “If I buy a slave, am his father, I am his mother.” In other words, a slave and his or her progeny had no bonds of kinship or set of relationships beyond the control and power of the master. Thus, the raw capacity of the master to control the slave – the ultimate form of human capital – was not just different in degree from the free, but also in kind. They were kinless. They were outsiders. They were subject to control and violence in a way that was uniquely informed by their powerlessness. Because slave status was inheritable, the master could enforce his sole claim to effective ownership and power over the progeny of his slave dependents, theoretically, in perpetuity. This control over future human capital through slavery secured the survival

27 Miller, Way of Death, 43
of households, the domestic reproductive economy, and the wealth-generating capabilities of that economy.

Slaves also had important social uses. In some less stratified, subsistence-oriented societies, the role of slaves in production – as well as the ability of masters to extract any surplus from slave labor – was limited. Masters and free people did essentially the same work as their slaves. Slaves were desired instead for their social purpose: as objects of prestige, as objects that could be exchanged for goods in times of shortage, as objects that could be used as a reward, as a follower, as a gift to an ally, or as members of a chief’s entourage. Even in complex, highly stratified societies, slaves could sometimes serve an essentially social purpose. In the Kingdoms of Dahomey and Benin, both located in West Africa, slaves were ritually sacrificed as a direct representation of the temporal and spiritual power of their kings, which often occurred at the funerals of important political leaders at ritualized ceremonies throughout the year (Figure 5). In most places, then, slaves were not simply valued for their role in production.

Until now we have referred to reoccurring processes focused mainly at the level of the household and lineage. The lineage ideal did not exist everywhere, nor was that ideal the same across time and space. In some places, other forms of capital – land, cattle, gold mines, or canoes – complicate our picture of people- and household-based production. In other cases, the subsistence-oriented household economies produced surpluses that drove regional and long-distance trade, which later developed into export-oriented economic sectors specializing in the production of goods via the wide-scale use of slave labor. In these societies, local, regional, and long-distance trade represented vital economic activities, and the production and exchange of commodities was a central goal. Coercive states also emerged in places, the leaders of which secured their own economic and political security through the use of slaves in politics, the military, and as producers of goods. As with lineages, political elites of these kinds of African states – ranging from Dahomey to Oyo to the Kingdom of Kongo, for example – looked to secure their social and physical reproduction by amassing and using slaves. Although the scale of this kind of slave use was very different from smaller-scale political units, slaves played a parallel role in large, state-oriented societies: their status as outsiders permitted their exploitation in a manner that was unique and that secured the productive and reproductive capacity of their owners and the political/economic/social systems of which they were a part. The benefits of controlling people – and the role of slaves in that process – was a common theme across the African continent, from small-scale lineage-based societies in the Congo Basin in 1500 to the large-scale, plantation-based economies of the Sokoto Caliphate in 1850. We will now take a closer look at the broader relationship between slavery and different economic and political structures in the African past.

**High- and Low-Density Slavery in Africa**

Slavery cannot be understood by simply exploring the relationship between master and slave within an ahistorical vacuum. The economic and political structures of the societies that held slaves mattered. Moreover, slavery, the nature of enslavement, and the shape of slaveholding societies changed over time, as did African ideas about freedom and belonging. One way to get at larger patterns of change is to focus on the ways slaves were held, the roles they performed, and
their location in economic, social, and political life. Scholarship on slavery in Africa has conventionally focused on the fundamental distinction between high- and low-density slavery. Some slaveholding societies in Africa were high-density slave systems. In these systems, slaves made up a significant proportion of the population, their use was economically rationalized, and they were usually important factors in production (often producing commodities for external sale or internal use). They tended to work in larger, slave-dominated units rather than within their master’s household. Social incorporation occurred more rarely and when it happened it took more time, was more precarious, and was usually a product of formal manumission process that literally made a slave into a free person. In short, slaves were valued as economic objects and were property. We can characterize huge parts of the Islamic Savanna in West Africa from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries, parts of the Swahili coast in the nineteenth century, Dahomey in the nineteenth century, Asante in the eighteenth through nineteenth century, the Cape Colony in South Africa between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and even the Kingdom of Kongo in central Africa as high-density slave systems. In low-density slave systems, slaves made up a smaller proportion of the population. Their role was not solely centered on production, but they often had important social or political uses, most often related to the desire of masters to expand their retinues, lineages, or households. Slaves worked in these lower-density situations, but they did so alongside their masters. They also slept within the same general household and ate out of the same pot as their masters. Social incorporation occurred more often and was often a product of gradual assimilation rather than a formal manumission process; furthermore, their incorporation was in normal circumstances less precarious, although a social stigma would often persist for a number of generations.

Over time, and sometimes related to the burgeoning transatlantic, trans-Saharan and Indian Ocean slave trades, numerous African states developed high-density slave systems that relied on the productive labor of a large slave population. However, slavery in Africa was seldom simply an economic question. Slavery could be a central

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institution in both low- and high-density slavery. The value of slaves cannot simply be measured by their role in production or productive processes. Slaves were vitally important for the reproduction of kinship and lineage units as well as for the political elites and institutions that composed the basic fabric of many African societies. Slavery could thus be an absolutely central institution in low-density slave societies, in that slaves ensured the social and political reproduction of the society without necessarily engaging in productive labor. The key is to determine the extent to which slavery was institutionalized. Societies that occasionally acquired slaves were very different from societies in which slavery was common and their capture/acquisition/use was institutionalized through wars, markets, or other means, such as debt.

Open and Closed Slave Systems

There was a relationship between high- and low-density slavery and the social mobility of slaves. Some African slave systems were open. They allowed significant status mobility and opportunities for social incorporation. Others were closed systems that offered little opportunity for movement out of slavery. The more slaves were used in purely economic roles, and the higher the density of slavery, the more likely it was that a closed slave system would predominate. These societies tended to be commercialized and market oriented, and most often viewed slaves as property. Low-density slavery tended to be more open. This was because low-density slavery offered more opportunities for slaves to move toward the center of power and belonging. Slaves in these systems often performed a wide range of occupations that were not simply focused on production. This provided a path to belonging that laboring in the field, isolated from the master’s house, simply could not bring. The social and political use of slaves in households often led to gradual incorporation. As slaves adopted local ways, they came to be viewed as something other than complete outsiders. Often women had the best opportunities to make this transition in their capacity as slave wives and as the producers of children who could then be claimed and incorporated. These societies also tended to be less commercialized and connected to markets. The property component of slave status was, as a result, less important. However, low-density slavery was not necessarily less exploitative or benign.
The kinship idiom into which slaves might be incorporated was often a thin veil for profound exploitation, as a Lele man from Kasai in Central Africa stated:

A slave is a man who will do as he is told. If you send him to draw palm wine in the rain, he goes. You call him brother, age-mate, put your arm around his neck, give him palm wine and meat, so that he is happy. He thinks you love him. Then, when your mother’s brother dies, you kill him.32

Open and closed slavery are ideal types. They represent two extremes along a much broader continuum. In most cases, the African societies that used slaves were neither completely open nor completely closed, but fell somewhere along the continuum between the two. It was also possible for slaves who worked in one particular sector to operate within a closed system, while those who worked in other sectors in the same society could operate within an open system. But in general the position of slaves as absolute outsiders in high- and low-density slavery was often reduced by offering slaves opportunities to develop ties to the dominant society that moved them closer toward belonging. Slavery in Africa was similar to slavery throughout the globe. Along with the necessity of making people into outsiders, it was often useful for masters to recognize the humanity of slaves and their desire to belong and establish a social identity. To do so enhanced the master’s own ability to exploit their slaves by offering slaves a reason to cooperate that did not involve simple violence and naked force. In Africa, one of the key dynamics of this process involved the different statuses of first generation, captured slaves, and those born into slavery in subsequent generations. In Senegambia, the jaam sayoor or slaves exposed for sale who survived years of slavery and who were both lucky and trusted by their masters, might be given the chance to form a family and produce offspring. The children of these slave unions – jaam juddu (“born slaves”) – still worked as slaves, but were given protections and privileges (their own plots of land, wives, release from slavery after marriage) that were a product of their status being closer to “insiders” than captured outsiders.33 This pattern of providing second- or third-generation slaves with advantages and privileges that resulted from their birth within the societies that held their parents in bondage

was common throughout Africa, even in high-density slavery. In the Western Sudan, now mainly modern Senegal and Mali, these slaves were often known as “slaves born in the house” of their master. They spoke the languages of the slaveholding societies and were believed to be closer to the status of insider. Yet they were still subject to the power of their master. Although in theory they were not supposed to be sold, in practice they could be sold or abused until they had been formally manumitted and thereby incorporated. In lower-density slavery, where slaves generally were held by kinship/lineage/households and where they were either less directly involved in production or worked alongside the master’s family, a distinction was also made between first-generation captured slaves and those born in the house of the master. In low-density slavery, however, social mobility via incorporation for first-generation slaves was far more common than in higher-density slavery.

Open systems of slavery were not simply products of uniquely incorporative African social systems, but were rather a product of the fundamental struggle between master and slave. Slaves struggled to have their humanity and social identity acknowledged. To do so, slaves sought to belong, and thus claim as many of an insider’s privileges as possible. In some times and places these actions were resisted or denied by masters; in others masters were more willing to accept these kinds of claims. For example, Elizabeth McMahon has shown that on the Swahili coast slaves and masters struggled over inheritance and property rights. McMahon demonstrates that slaves and ex-slaves experienced real disabilities related to their specific statuses, which affirm that slave status was not something transitory or easily shed upon manumission. If a master manumitted a slave, that same slave would continue to be bound to his former master as a client, which was viewed as being similar to a blood relationship. Yet, that social tie – and claims of a blood relationship – did not allow a former slave to claim any property of his master should the former master die. At the same time, the continuing relationship permitted the former master and his heirs to claim the estates of their former slaves, in some cases depriving the former slaves’ heirs of all their inheritance.34 While

this occurred in the context of colonial rule, and the justification for these claims on the land of former slaves was that slaves had been freed by the colonial state, and thus were in the eyes of Islamic law still slaves, it is clear that distinctions between slaves and those who belonged were immensely important. The need to provide an avenue to incorporate the outsider/slave and the struggle over how close they could come to full belonging were common wherever slaves were used. The contradiction between the status of slaves as outsiders and the fact that over time slaves or their progeny came to look, speak, act, and worship in same manner as insiders became in many places difficult to sustain.

Women, Gender, and Slavery

The majority of slaves in Africa were women. Female slaves contributed to and secured African reproductive economies both as producers and reproducers. Female slaves offered important advantages to African slave owners. As with male slaves, female slaves worked. They hoed fields, prepared food, and hauled firewood, among the many countless labor-intensive tasks some Africans performed on a daily basis. Women were acquired and highly valued for these roles. The owners or users of female slaves might be free women, whose own labor burden could be reduced through the use of female slaves in their household. Yet female slaves also reproduced. They could potentially have children. These children in turn added people to the master’s household or lineage. Thus, female slaves were also valued for their role in biological reproduction. If Africans tended to value people, and if many Africans desired control over people as a means to gain access to wealth, productive potential, and status, female slaves could guarantee that masters would have access to a new, initially subservient generation of people via the children of slaves. Female slaves also offered male owners the possibility of sexual access. Females were valued for both their physical and biological roles, but these women could be forced into sexually subservient relationship with their masters. In the Sokoto Caliphate in 1850, the price of female slaves varied depending on the shape and size of the slave’s breasts. While “young girls” were valued at 30,000–40,000 cowries and women whose breasts had sagged were worth 20,000 cowries, girls whose breasts had formed were worth 40,000 to 100,000 cowries and women with full breasts
could command 80,000 cowries. Finally, women were often socialized to be more submissive than males. This may have aided in their gradual incorporation into systems of belonging in the same way that their role as reproducers – often of the masters’ children – might encourage gradual incorporation in a manner much different than was possible for male slaves. It is vital to note that this incorporation was not simple, without limits, or uncontested, but only that the special roles available to women rather than men might make some kinds of incorporation more likely – or possible – in certain situations. Indeed, female slaves might find themselves brought within the structures of belonging, only to find themselves in extremely subservient roles as a result of the social status of their owner (i.e., a chief vs. a low-status farmer) or because of the preexisting gendered and sexual division of labor that relied on the physical labor of women more than that of men. Moreover, the children of female slaves often bore a stigma that emanated from their slave origins, which could limit incorporation or extend it over a series of generations.

Meillassoux has argued that female slaves were used mainly for production and were essentially economic objects tied to productive tasks. While women performed a great deal of agricultural labor, they were not simply used in this capacity. They were also concubines, domestics, prostitutes, soldiers, traders, tax collectors, bakers, and brewers (among many others). Furthermore, Meillassoux argued that slaves did not reproduce themselves biologically, given the harshness of slavery and its focus on production. While one must agree that the overall growth rate of most slave populations could not have been sustained by the biological reproduction of female slaves alone – hence the continued need to acquire new slaves – this does not mean that female slaves were not valued for their reproductive potential. Nor does it mean that masters did not gain from this reproduction or that slaves did not develop slave unions that resulted in the birth children. In low-density slavery, women would have been valued primarily for their roles in the household, and as potential reproducers who in turn could add dependents and therefore increase the political influence of her master. In this context they also could have been used as gifts to

cement political and social alliances with others. In high-density slavery, women would no doubt have been valued as much for their productive as their reproductive potential, although this too would very much depend on the physical and intellectual attributes of the female slave and the overall aims of her master.

Conclusion: The Dynamics of Slavery in Africa

The life stories of Barka, Msatulwa, Floris, Chisi, and Rosine presented at the beginning of this chapter exemplified the wide range of statuses, occupations, and life experiences of slaves in Africa. Some slaves were bought and sold numerous times and lived out their lives farming for their masters in the company of other slaves; others became powerful politicians and officials and married multiple wives who produced numerous children; still others were acquired as concubines and eventually married free men and made the transition from outsider to insider. Despite the differences in treatment, occupation, and status, slaves in Africa initially shared much in common: they were usually produced through violence, were regarded as kinless outsiders, were often treated as property, and were believed to lack honor. Slaves were the ultimate form of human capital in Africa because they were a special kind of dependent: they were moral and social outsiders and therefore uniquely vulnerable and exploitable.

Defining the characteristics of the bundle of traits that made up slavery in Africa tells us little about the actual dynamics of slavery, however. Given the nature of African economies and societies, control over people often translated into power. Africans valued people for their labor power, sexuality, and reproductive potential. From the perspective of the powerful, with use rights over land often available, followers/supporters/dependents were difficult to attract and keep. Elites (whether small-scale household heads or kings) had to walk a fine line between extracting enough wealth or labor from their dependents to ensure their own reproduction and extracting so much that they drove those dependents away or encouraged them to rebel. Slavery emerged as perhaps the most useful means of attaching dependents to households, lineages, and states. Slaves could not make the same claims or expect the same protections as could those who belonged. Attachment through slavery resolved some of the central contradictions faced by African polities, corporate groups, political
elites, and big men; namely, it provided a means to better attach and better exploit dependents and followers. Slavery reduced the risk that dependents would flee, successfully rebel, or challenge authority. This is not to argue that slaves were well-behaved blank slates. Rather, slaves resisted by claiming rights within slavery, by attempting to develop ties of belonging to the dominant society, or by exploiting their slave status to rebel or undermine their masters.

If the use of slaves was the product of strategies designed to acquire people, we still need to understand how slavery operated and was transformed in different political, economic, and social contexts. Slavery was transformed at the level of both the individual (by the variable relationship between master and slave) and the collective (by the nature of states/economies/religion). Individual slaves and masters struggled over the definitions of slavery. Sometimes masters won. Sometimes slaves won. Sometimes masters and slaves came to agreements that benefited them both. The negotiations between slave and master could dramatically alter the practice of slavery as the terms of bondage were negotiated and changed; hence, slaves gained power, families, land, wives, husbands, free status, or horses (among many other things). Slaves might find their roles or status as slaves dramatically transformed within their own lifetimes. On a broader structural level, in some parts of the continent slavers in large hierarchical, market-oriented state systems came to use slaves in large numbers to enhance their ability to extract wealth from their dependents. We have called slavery that was large-scale, economically rationalized, intensively exploitative, and market-oriented high-density slavery. Whereas in situations where commodities, production, and trade were less central, slaves were used in smaller numbers, often in noneconomic roles, which we have termed low-density slavery. While both kinds of slavery valued people, slaves were treated differently, used differently, and incorporated differently. In the cases of both low- and high-density slavery, however, slavery could be an absolutely central institution on which the reproduction (or continuation) of the society depended.

Another way to understand slavery is to focus on the role or use of slaves. In some parts of Africa, political slavery emerged (the use of slave in government/military), in others productive slavery (use of slaves in production), and in others domestic slavery (the use of slaves within households). In some places slaves played all three roles. That slaves could be used in such different tasks demonstrates just
how flexible they were given their status. The different uses of slaves impacted in very profound ways the dynamics of slavery in Africa. The use of slaves as soldiers led to a different kind of institution than the use of slaves as domestic help in households, for example. Finally, in all cases where slavery was a centrally important institution, the dynamics of slavery led to the continual need to acquire new slaves. Over time slaves died, were freed, or incorporated. The children of slaves might gain protections and rights that reduced the power of masters to fully exploit them as they moved from complete outsider toward insider. The reproduction of slavery itself depended on the continual acquisition of slaves. Thus, the key to understanding slavery is to ask historical questions about the institution, which we will explore in the following chapter.