

CHAPTER 2

Slavery in African History

Introduction

During times of famine, if a father wanted to sell a child in order to buy food, he would first scatter a little millet on the ground and tell the children to gather it up. He would then tell the slave merchant, with whom he had already negotiated a price, to choose the one he wanted. The victim would then be tied up and taken away. In this way, children were sold just like chickens. With the proceeds gained, food could be purchased to sustain the family.¹

Long ago the people up the river were very hungry, and I took some food in my canoe and went to visit them. For this food I bought two little boys, and then returned to my house. When the boys had grown fat and strong, I bought them a gun and gave them spears. Then we went up the river, and the gun frightened the people. They ran away, but we caught three and brought them down with us. I made them build a house for me, and soon I had a town all my own, and my name was feared. So when I went up the river the third time, I easily took more slaves and in this way I became very rich and great.²

¹ Quoted by Andrew Hubbel, "A View of the Slave Trade from the Margin: Souroudougou in the Late Nineteenth-Century Slave Trade of the Niger Bend" in *The Journal of African History* 42, 1 (2001), 40.

² Quoted by Robert Harms, *River of Wealth, River of Sorrow: The Central Zaire Basin in the Era of the Slave and Ivory Trade, 1500–1891* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), 36.

* * *

There are heads of clans, male and female, because everywhere each clan has its chief. Within the clan there are two groups, one of free persons, the other of those who have become slaves or ‘children of the village.’ Those who were there first are the free, those who have been purchased are the slaves. When the free men marry they do not marry each other but marry slaves; however, their children are called slaves, whereas the children of free women are called free. The children of male members of the clan do not inherit membership in it, only the children of free women, who are then also free.³

* * *

The slaves cut straw to make huts; a single marabout superintends the slaves of the whole family, or several of his friends; and he assembles them all, sometimes to the number of forty or fifty under the same hut. Every marabout sends as many slaves as he can spare ... the slaves fill their leather bags with water every morning, and furnished with a great forked stick, they traverse the fields in search of gum; as the gum bearing trees are all thorny, this stick is used to knock off from high branches the lumps of gum which could be reached by hand. As they pick it up they put it in their leather bags; and thus they spend the day, without anything but a little water to refresh them ... the superintending marabout receives a portion of the gum; the slaves work for five days for their master, and the sixth for the superintendent, who thus comes in for the greater part of the produce.⁴

* * *

If developing the definitions of slavery and freedom explored in the previous chapter is vital to understanding the history of slavery, so too is placing those definitions within the dynamics of African history. Slavery often coalesced during moments of change, contradiction, and tension. For numerous Africans, slavery became *the* central method to mobilize labor, acquire status, govern states, and/or ensure household-level reproduction. Slavery was a common response to the need for people to work longer, harder, or in innovative ways as

³ Quoted by Wyatt MacGaffey, “Indigenous Slavery and the Atlantic Trade: Kongo Texts” in Jay Spaulding and Stephanie Beswick (eds.), *African Systems of Slavery* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2010), 184.

⁴ Quoted by Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 216–217.

Africans developed new social structures, permanent settled communities, militarized states, or new kinds of economies. Over the *longue durée*, slavery became more important and widespread. But what is the best way to understand and interpret this change? Moses Finley – followed by many other scholars – tried to understand slavery by labeling some societies as “societies with slaves” and others as “slave societies.” For these scholars, “slave societies” were exceedingly rare and *only* existed when a large number of slaves became central to economic production.⁵ Although the distinction between a slave society and a society with slaves is a useful one, I have chosen to broaden my use of those terms. In parts of Africa slavery became a central economic institution. But it is impossible to measure the centrality of slavery by a purely economic rationale. Slavery in Africa often facilitated *reproduction* without being tied directly to *production*. That is, slaves were regularly acquired for noneconomic reasons, most often for their reproductive capacity. Societies that relied on slaves extensively in non-economic roles could indeed be “slave societies,” although the nature of slavery in those societies often differed. In addition, I aim not just to distinguish between “societies with slaves” and “slave societies,” but instead to focus on questions of slavery and historical processes in Africa: how, when, and why did some societies in Africa use slavery to reproduce their governments, institutions, households, economies, and kin groups? How did slavery change as a result? What were the goals of African slaving strategies and why were they employed in particular times and places? The rest of this chapter seeks to answer these questions using a chronological framework.

African Slaving Strategies: An Overview

There was not a singular “African slavery,” because African slaving strategies produced a variety of outcomes. We have already observed just how important the general concepts of insider and outsider were to slavery in Africa. African *insiders* aimed to acquire *outsiders* as slaves to better compete with other *insiders* for power, status, or wealth. According to Miller: “The historical issue between the enslavers and the enslaved was appropriating outsiders’ energies in

⁵ Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* and see Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 7–9.

support of insiders' strategies."⁶ The goals and strategies of insiders varied. Early on, most Africans lived within collectivities tied together through kinship. These societies were generally small in scale, had few formal political institutions, and were weakly tied to markets. When it existed, low-density slavery was most common. Over the course of centuries, commercial and political revolutions transformed parts of Africa. Insiders sought slaves for new reasons and used them in new ways, which sometimes led to the emergence and consolidation of high-density slavery. The enlargement of scale – sometimes made possible by slavery – produced new forms of hierarchy, social stratification, coercive state-building, and production for markets. Africans responded by increasing the scale of slaveholding and broadening slave use. New slaveries did not simply displace older forms of enslavement; indeed, they were often (but not always!) an adaptation of older forms of dependence.

This process took a particular chronological shape, although regional variations were common. The foundations for the emergence of slavery were laid between 10000 BCE and 500 CE. The agricultural and iron revolutions led to new settled communities, which had new uses for people in politics and production. In this foundational period, new contradictions *and* opportunities emerged that eventually encouraged the expansion of slavery, although few societies in this period actually used slaves in substantial numbers. Between roughly 500 CE and 1600 CE, parts of Africa experienced major technological, economic, and political changes. Ambitious or clever Africans enhanced their own power by using slaves to exploit new opportunities. In this period, high-density slavery became key to state consolidation and integration, as well as to the continued production of goods that sustained state institutions. Between 1600 and 1800, European commerce and credit influenced slavery in Africa. In West and West Central Africa a major external force, the transatlantic slave trade, affected slavery, which led to a further commercialization and militarization of the African continent. Access to European commercial credit and the greater external demand for slaves drove the further expansion of high-density slavery. Slaves were used more widely in production and were increasingly viewed as property. In this period, new elites and states emerged (or old states expanded) with the expressed

⁶ Joseph C. Miller, *The Problem of Slavery as History: A Global Approach* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 31.

purpose of taking advantage of the growth of the slave trade and slavery. Although high-density slavery spread to new areas, slavery was not completely transformed. Low-density slavery continued to dominate many areas of the continent. In other places, no slaves were used at all. Finally, between 1800–1900, internal and external forces coalesced to make slavery central to many African economies and societies, tied mainly to the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, Islamic revolutions in West Africa, and the Omani economy of the East African coast and Indian Ocean. In this period, slaves worked throughout Africa to produce goods for expansive commercial networks within and beyond the continent. After 1900, slavery gradually died out in most of Africa. The end of slavery came about as a result of major changes brought by colonialism. Slaves and former slaves moved into wage labor. A series of political changes brought an end to slave raiding and gradually reduced the power of masters over their slaves through law.

Cattle, Crops, and Iron: Laying the Foundations for Slavery in Early Africa, 10000 BCE–500 CE

Human beings create societies. Between 10000 BCE and 500 CE, Africans built new political, social, and economic structures. They created new political institutions, made decisions about food production, and organized labor in new ways. Sometimes, these decisions either led to the use of slaves or laid the foundation for their future use. Although there is much we do not know about early Africa, there is much we do know as a result of recent research. This research is not without its problems. The linguistic and archeological evidence often do not agree. Linguists have reconstructed root words from ancestral languages that suggest a very early origin for agriculture and iron-working that is not reflected in the archeological record.⁷ Moreover, the archeological record alone is usually not enough to tell us whether slavery existed. Nonetheless, historians have used linguistics and archeology to reconstruct a series of broad processes that led to the emergence and spread of African populations as well as new subsistence strategies, technological innovations, and social or political structures.

⁷ For an excellent introduction to the use of linguistics and history, see Karin Klieman, *'The Pygmies Were Our Compass': Bantu and Batwa in the History of West Central Africa, early times to c. 1900* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003).

Often these changes were propelled by human adaptations to historical variations in African climate. Between 16000 and 9000 BCE, four ancestral language families began to coalesce in specific parts of the continent. Over time the climate of the regions these people occupied changed. The period between 16000 and roughly 12000 BCE was quite dry. Hunting and foraging were the dominant modes of subsistence. Wild grass collection and fishing were practiced in areas that were well watered (especially the Nile Valley region). Between approximately 12000/9000–6500 BCE and 5500–3500 BCE, the climate entered a much wetter period (with an intervening dry period between 6500 and 5500 BCE). Parts of what is now the Sahara Desert became well watered. New grasslands came to dominate formerly dry regions, and lakes emerged or expanded along the southern edge of the Sahara:

By 8000 B.C., the Sahara had been transformed into a mosaic of shallow lakes and marshes linked by permanent streams... Mediterranean vegetation, which at present is confined to coastal North Africa, grew in the Saharan highland regions of Hoggar and Tibesti. Elephant, giraffe, rhinoceros, and crocodile were widespread. Lake Chad, fed by streams emanating from the Saharan highlands, rose more than 40 m to cover an area many times its present size; this larger lake is known as Megachad. To the south of the present Sahara, the dunes that had formed in the preceding dry phase were deeply weathered and covered with woodland. The forest at that time may have extended as far north as 13N latitude.⁸

Early Africans gradually adapted their subsistence strategies to this wetter environment. Africans first responded by repopulating the Sahara. Although many of these early Saharans remained highly mobile and practiced hunting, by c. 8000–7000 BCE, an increasing number specialized in fishing or pastoralism. Permanent communities eventually developed, some of which experimented with collecting wild grasses for food. Mobility nonetheless remained an important subsistence strategy, especially for herders. These innovations did not – at least initially – displace older forms of subsistence. By at least 7000 BCE, wild grass collection had spread widely throughout the green

⁸ Susan Keech McIntosh and Roderick J. McIntosh, “West African Prehistory: Archeological Studies in the Recent Decades Have Illuminated the Prehistory of This Vast Region, Revealing Unexpected Complexity in Its Development from 10, 000 B.C. to A.D. 1000” in *American Scientist* 69, 6 (1981), 604.

Sahara. Wild grass collection developed into the domestication of indigenous African crops, which took place in a series of independent African agricultural revolutions between roughly 7000–6000 BCE and 2500 BCE, with early dates coming from linguistic evidence and later dates from archeology. For linguists, the key stimulus may have been the 1,000-year dry period (6500–5500 BCE), when conditions favored agriculture more than fishing. Beginning in these years, agropastoralism displaced fishing as the dominant subsistence strategy in parts of the Sahara. Centers of agricultural innovation also emerged in the Ethiopian highlands and along the West African coastal planting zone. When wet conditions started to return around 5500 BCE, these innovations spread more widely. Eventually, settled populations grew, farming became a central subsistence strategy for some, new crops emerged, and the languages and cultures of farmers spread over a wider area, intertwining in places, while the southern third of Africa remained largely committed to hunting and foraging. Archeologists place these changes at a later date. They point to the fact that African climate entered into a prolonged dry period around roughly 3500 BCE (with the timing being regionally variable), when Saharan – and other wet regions in affected areas – began to desiccate. Early Africans therefore migrated in search of wetter environments, which eventually led to the invention and diffusion of agriculture; indeed, as Roderick McIntosh and Susan Keech McIntosh argue, “The drastic climatic oscillations of c. 4500–2500 BP may have detonated a virtual explosion of experimentation, reinforcement to change and communication about successful innovations.”⁹ We have good archeological evidence for the domestication of crops from this period, including sorghum and various kinds of millet. Whatever the dates, linguists and archeologist agree that major changes occurred between 9000 and 2000 BCE that transformed the ways Africans lived, although wild grass collection, hunting, and fishing remained important for some populations for a long period of time.

These changes were reinforced by the invention of ironworking. First concentrated in a few specific regions, by 500 CE ironworking spread throughout the continent. Iron tools and weapons further aided agriculture and state-building. Finally, between roughly 3500

⁹ Roderick J. McIntosh and Susan Keech McIntosh, “From Siecles Obscurs to Revolutionary Centuries on the Middle Niger” in *World Archaeology* 20, 1 (1988), 146.

BCE and 500 CE, new groups of Africans expanded into and settled the continent south of the equator in what some call the Bantu Migrations. Africans who eventually came to speak a group of related Bantu languages migrated into equatorial, eastern, and southern Africa, bringing with them the subsistence strategies they had earlier developed and inventing new ones along the way. Thus, by 500 CE, African populations consolidated, adopted new technologies, and developed differing – although often interrelated – subsistence strategies as well as foundational cultural, linguistic, and political traditions and structures.

The consolidation of early African societies led Africans to experiment with slavery between roughly 3000 BCE and 500 CE. Although outsiders were no doubt acquired early in the African past, they were most often killed or absorbed into collectivities as full members. Killing captives no doubt helped solidify the boundaries between “us” (insiders) and “them” (outsiders). But as Africans more fully engaged in settled agriculture, the question of what to do with prisoners of war and other captives took on a new meaning. People in these societies had to make the decision about whether to kill, absorb, or exploit captives. Early African slavery emerged because some captors decided it was more useful to exploit captives. New subsistence strategies, social structures, and technologies produced a greater demand – and wider range of uses – for people. At this point, early Africans sought to expand their access to the reproductive potential of dependents, especially wives, children, junior clients, and slaves. This opened new economic and political opportunities for some, but also created tensions between insiders and outsiders, as well as between insiders themselves. Insiders (or people who wanted to become insiders) gained control over people as political resources, which they leveraged to claim more central roles within the community itself.¹⁰ Slaves were of course also useful because they worked in environments that were challenging and sometimes perilous for all Africans. But they were not used to produce commodities for the market. Slaves were often incorporated gradually via marriage, childbirth, and intergenerational mobility. Slavery was but one reproductive strategy that some early Africans pursued; slavery was seldom a central institution. These were in the main societies with slaves and not slave societies.

¹⁰ Specifically, slave owners used their control over people to make claims to more authority, status, land, or crops.

But this era was not dominated only by small-scale societies. Along the Nile Valley, in parts of West Africa and the Ethiopian highlands, Africans built states. This political consolidation was driven by numerous forces, including improved agricultural production, favorable environmental conditions, and the expansion of commerce and trading networks. Along the lower Nile Valley, for example, Egypt emerged as one of the great powers of the ancient world between roughly 2600 and 2100 BCE. Slaves were used in a wide range of occupations, from production to politics, as part of a highly centralized and stratified state. Further south along the Upper Nile, Meroe also emerged as a powerful state between 600 and 300 BCE. Although Meroe was highly urbanized, it relied on rural workers who lived outside the urban core. Meroe city became a center of iron production and trade, including cloth, textiles, gold, and ivory. Slaves were likely to have been widely used as laborers in both skilled and unskilled occupations. In the Ethiopian highlands, the state of Axum, which emerged around 100 CE, was part of a commercial network that linked it to the regions surrounding the Red Sea (and beyond). The rulers of Axum used slaves as government officials and probably more widely as laborers as well. In West Africa, political and economic complexity was well established in parts of the savanna zone long before 500 CE. New kinds of sedentary polities emerged that were tied to the intensification of agriculture and growing commercialization of trade. The Karkarichinkat cluster (in the Tilemsi Valley) and Dhar Tichit (southeastern Mauritania), for example, were focal points for sedentarization, pastoralism, and agriculture (although in all likelihood there was significant seasonal mobility by herders as well as extensive reliance on hunting and fishing) as the Sahara began to desiccate. By 300 BCE, widespread urban clusters emerged along the inland Niger Delta, with the best evidence coming from Jenne-Jeno, where there was extensive occupational specialization and trade but no centralized state. Some of these societies were likely to have used slaves. Archeologists have explored the funeral tumuli and megalithic monuments scattered throughout Senegambia and the Niger bend, which provide evidence for increasing social stratification, kingship, and complex funeral rituals and human sacrifice at least during the first millennium CE. Such evidence suggests that slavery may have been common, but it is also important to note that finding solid evidence of slavery in the historical record is difficult in this period.

For most Africans between 10000 BCE and 500 CE, the use of slaves was not an optimal political or economic strategy. But in some places, Africans came to see the value of slavery. In the large parts of the continent where Africans lived in relatively decentralized and small-scale communities, some big men used slavery to grab power to get around broader governing ideas about reciprocity and kinship, but were still bound by those ideas to some degree. In other parts of the continent early political centralization and commercialization led to the expanded use of slaves as soldiers, officials, and workers. Unlike smaller-scale societies, slaves in complex polities had specific and well-defined roles outside the structures of kinship. Many worked longer and harder in economic or productive roles, but in all cases they remained slaves for a much longer and well-defined period of time. Although the use of slaves was quite limited even by 500 CE, by learning to exploit new technologies and environments in the face of low population densities and environmental challenges, the “colonizing societies” of early Africa also lay the foundations for the consolidation and expansion of slavery in Africa between 500 and 1600 CE, when the political and commercial revolutions that had been limited to small parts of the continent dramatically expanded.¹¹ This led to a further divergence in African slaveries. In some places large numbers of slaves became central to new economic and political structures, whereas in others slavery remained minimally important and played a largely reproductive role in decentralized societies.

The Early Militarization and Commercialization of Slavery in Africa, 500–1600 CE

After 500 CE, slavery became increasingly common in the more populous and well-watered parts of Africa, which relied on sedentary hoe and mixed agriculture. In large (and drier) parts of the continent, low population densities and population mobility mitigated (at least initially) against the widespread use of slaves. But in general, the scale of slavery dramatically expanded between 500 and 1600 CE. This expansion was tied to the economic, military, and political revolutions that reshaped Africa. Although many Africans, as Christopher Ehret notes,

¹¹ The phrase “colonizing societies” is John Iliffe’s, see: *Africans: The History of a Continent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

“stood apart from these trends” by “maintaining or refashioning ... the smaller scale world of their forbears,” large parts of the continent experienced increasing political consolidation, social stratification, and commercialization.¹² The West African Savanna and Sahel was probably most affected by these changes. Increasingly powerful warlords built new kinds of polities that relied on trade, raids, horses, and slavery. But even further south in the West African forest, slaves were used to clear forests, mine for gold, or simply as palace retainers and servants. Beyond West Africa, in this period the East African coast was integrated into new commercial networks via the Indian Ocean, which brought Islam and international trade to the coast. Although slavery existed long before this trade, the development of a coastal urbanized, commercial system along the coast led to an expansion of slavery and the slave trade. Finally, big men in the Central African forests and in the African Great Lakes region used slaves to achieve their goals, but for the most part they were much less integrated into international networks and commerce and slaves tended not to be used very widely in production. Yet, the expansion of slavery in those places demonstrates that decentralized and small-scale societies were both dynamic and could generate a strong demand for slaves.

Between roughly 500 and 1600 CE in the West African Savanna and Sahel, trans-Saharan commerce brought new kinds of trade, ideas, commodities, and credit to the region, which some Africans sought to control. Emergent African rulers – who began as warlords – took advantage of these new forces to build innovative, coercive, and hierarchical states. They created new political structures partially to protect and enhance their access to the booming trade and production of the region. Miller thoughtfully describes this process as transition from war camps to courts.¹³ A series of progressively larger and more powerful (and increasingly Islamic) polities emerged in this region, the best known of which were Ghana, Mali, Songhay, and Kanem. Warriors became (and remained) rulers by using horses and slaves to achieve their political goals (state centralization, expansion of kingly power, territorial control) as well as their economic goals (control over the production of commodities and agricultural products). The use

¹² Christopher Ehret, *The Civilizations of Africa* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), 238.

¹³ Joseph Miller, “Africa” in Paul Finkelman and Joseph C. Miller (eds.), *The Encyclopedia of World Slavery* (New York: Macmillan, 1998), volume I, 31.



FIGURE 6. Body guard of the King of Borno. In Dixon Denham, *Narrative of Travels and Discoveries in Northern and Central Africa, in the years 1822, 1823, and 1824* (London, 1826), facing p. 64. Courtesy of the UVM Bailey-Howe Library.

of cavalry became central to waging war – and to smaller-scale raiding. Horses – like tanks in the modern era – revolutionized the nature of the battlefield and offered military advantages to those who used them (Figure 6). Slaves, on the other hand, were used to produce goods for the rulers and their households as well as soldiers and government officials. Finally, slaves were also sold into the trans-Saharan trade as a means to acquire horses on which the military depended.

But why did emerging rulers turn to slavery in the first place? States like Mali and Songhay were far more powerful than any state in the African past up to 1600 CE (with the exception of Egypt), but their rulers faced many uncertainties. Most rulers were weakened by competition with other aristocrats, especially over the relative power of kingship and questions of succession. Rulers used slaves to control

these aristocrats. The use of slaves as soldiers or as officials often proved to be a better option than relying on ambitious kin who had their eyes on the throne. Likewise, these states sought to incorporate occupational groups, warriors, Muslims, and farmers (for example) into the state, but often lacked the ability to fully compel these populations to obey. Slaves were used as labor to do what free farmers or miners would not. Slaves were, for example, widely used by the fifteenth century as laborers to produce rice, cereal crops, and salt. They were also used as muscle to force people to provide tribute and taxes. Slavery became a solution to the inherent problems of state building. In the swirling, complex, and personalized politics of the West African Savanna, ambitious insiders became *and remained* kings and aristocrats by using outsiders as slaves in pursuit of their broader political and economic strategies. This pattern was not just confined to the West African Savanna. Numerous rulers along the Nile Valley in Sennar, or across the Sahara in Morocco developed parallel slaving strategies.

The choices made by generations of African rulers and merchants reshaped slavery. Slaves were used in larger numbers in a wider variety of roles. As rulers and merchants adopted Islam, they (as slave owners) could point to an Islamic religious and moral justification of slavery. Islam both legitimized the use of slaves and provided a legal framework that regularized how slaves ought to be acquired and treated. Islam certainly offered protection for slaves, but masters often ignored those protections. Slaves were increasingly marketed and exchanged as property. Slave status meant longer-term bondage and offered fewer routes toward incorporation – although that happened as well, of course. How? Women no doubt made up a large proportion of slaves in this region and they were more readily incorporated via marriage, concubinage, and childbearing. In elite households, slavery became a way to produce loyal dependents. For men, some positions within slavery offered routes to power. Slaves were widely used as officials and soldiers. The privileges that came along with slavery meant that some slaves actually sought to remain slaves. Indeed, Songhay collapsed in 1591 after losing a war against a Moroccan army made up of 4,000 slaves armed with guns. These Moroccan slave soldiers – like those of Songhay – gained so much from their dependent status that they had little interest in rebellion or freedom. In general, then, slavery in the West African Sahel and Savanna by 1600 was large in scale, commercialized, and centered on both politics and production.

A somewhat parallel process emerged on the East African Swahili Coast between 800 and 1600 CE. For centuries, African colonized the varied terrain of Eastern Africa. By 700–800 CE, iron-using farmers, craftsmen, and fisherman populated parts of the Swahili Coast. The earliest towns were built by the end of the eighth century CE. Although they were initially small, the inhabitants of some early towns, like Shanga, were already trading with merchants from the Persian Gulf.¹⁴ Over time, Swahili states arose along the coast, each with its own government, generally composed of wealthy and connected merchant families. Islam became increasingly important. The construction of mosques – as well as gorgeous coral and stone houses – took off in the wealthiest enclaves of the towns. Every Swahili city of note was tied to Indian Ocean commerce and trade. Swahili merchants exported ivory, timber, slaves, iron and copper work, beads, and textiles. Swahili societies along the coast became increasingly wealthy, socially stratified, commercially oriented, and economically diverse. John Middleton has argued that the Swahili were a society of middlemen, who brokered trade between the “world of the sea and the productive one of the interior”:

Like precapitalist port cities everywhere, Swahili towns were polyglot, multiethnic frontiers, composed of Arab merchants and ship owners; Indian financiers; Swahili middlemen, traders, ship builders, sailors, iron and leather workers, weavers, furniture makers, and fishermen; slave laborers; and neighboring farmers, herders, hunters, and traders. Each town had its own particular economic resources, specializations, and exchange systems within the overall ecology of the coast. Market relations were based on personal trust and kinship; kings were merchant princes; lineages acted as corporate trading houses; social identity was forged in intense competition; and status rested on shifting foundations of wealth, exchange, honor, and prestige.¹⁵

The history of the Swahili coast offers remarkable similarities and differences to the West African Savanna and Sahel. In both cases, Africans were tied to an international commercial world (either across the desert or the ocean) that led to an expansion of economic activity,

¹⁴ See, for example, Mark Horton, *Shanga: The Archeology of a Muslim Trading Community of the Coast of East Africa* (London: The British Institute in Eastern Africa, 1996).

¹⁵ Thomas Spear, “Early Swahili Society Reconsidered” in *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 33, 2 (2000), 276 and John Middleton, *The World of the Swahili: An African Mercantile Civilization* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 38–45.

social differentiation, occupational specialization, and increased local production. Unlike West Africa, along the coast, merchants prevailed over warriors. No large state emerged to dominate the region in the same way that Ghana, Mali, and Songhay dominated the West African Savanna. Instead, the Swahili coast remained the home of independent city-states, often ruled by merchants, who were tied together by cultural, family, and commercial relationships. Slaves were widely used along the Swahili coast as laborers, retainers, domestic servants, and concubines. Slaves were also exported in the Indian Ocean slave trade. Wealthy merchants and rulers in large towns, such as Pate and Kilwa, held the largest number of slaves. Although the populations of the coastal towns were tied to trade and the Indian Ocean, until the nineteenth century many Swahili worked small plots of land as farmers. Unfortunately, we really have no idea how many slaves were held in the countryside until the nineteenth century, when a true plantation-style economy emerged.

In Central Africa between 500 and 1600 CE, multiple cultural and political traditions gradually intermingled. Although fewer large states existed – and the entire region was much farther removed from the commercial revolutions that were reshaping West Africa – here too economic and political changes led to slavery. As early Africans colonized large parts of Central Africa, populations were widely dispersed and land remained widely available. Over time, more land was put under production as food cultivators expanded into new regions formerly occupied by foragers. Initially, tropical farmers created societies that were highly assimilative, flexible, and relatively egalitarian. The reciprocal distribution of resources – as well as a communal ethos – shaped social and political relations. As the settlement frontier closed off after 500 CE, it became harder to found new settlements or to dispose of unwanted people simply by having them leave one settlement for another. The invention and spread of metallurgy in forests – and the addition of cereal crop production and pastoralism south of the forests – were also important.¹⁶ Some societies became increasingly stratified, and competed over resources. The structures of kinship and descent became not just a vehicle for identity formation and social cohesion, but also became a means to gain and enforce control over

¹⁶ The classic account of these processes in Jan Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforest: Towards a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).

people. We previously observed that these trends were apparent before 500 CE, but they really took off between 500 and 1600 CE. Slaves were used by large numbers of ambitious big men to increase their own political authority in the context of growing competition between and within households and lineages.

Thus, accumulation, stratification, and economic exchange created new opportunities that led to the acquisition of slaves. As much as slavery was an important institution in parts of the Central African forests, they were not used widely in production, nor were they used as officials or soldiers in the same way they were in parts of West Africa. Slaves were generally used to increase the reputation and political power of those who used them.¹⁷ For many men, slavery meant the difference between becoming a big man, acquiring wealth, power, and people, and remaining a dependent, subject to the control of another. On the one hand, big men became powerful because they were good leaders and speakers, but on the other hand, they needed to be able to attract – and dispose of – people (wives, slaves, clients) and control wealth (domestic animals, copper ingots, iron hoes). In this regard, Jan Vansina noted that a key route to political power “was to acquire slaves, especially women slaves. They belonged to the matrilineage of their captor as did their children, while at the same time they could be given in marriage to attract a client or keep a restless bachelor in the house. Slaves before 1700 were acquired in war, or as payment of fines or blood debts rather than by purchase and most were probably female.”¹⁸

The political structures of Central Africa were not uniformly decentralized. In the Savanna zones to the south of the Central African rain forest (especially in the Congo Basin and Upemba depression), some local big men challenged prevailing political norms by using slaves to create new forms of chiefship. Slavery helped fuel a political revolution that led to the consolidation of states. Big men gained control over the distribution of resources and over people. They often used violence to achieve their ends. John Yoder argues that this new authority was not based on family or tradition but instead on the

¹⁷ Miller notes that Central African domestic economies “tended to emphasize reproduction, continuation of the community – rather than production of material surpluses as commodities for sale – and thus sought reproductive females through slaving.” Miller, “Introduction” in *Women and Slavery*, vol 1., 2.

¹⁸ Jan Vansina, “Government in Kasai Before the Lunda” in *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 31, 1 (1998), 8.

“ability to exercise military power, generate wealth, and gain external support.”¹⁹ The pace of these changes only increased after 1600 with the expansion of credit and commerce brought by the transatlantic slave trade, although local trade and raids mattered most in the early period. Early chiefs did not just manipulate ideas of dependency, kinship, clientage, and slavery, but also sought to control the regional production and burgeoning trade of iron, copper, salt, and fish. State consolidation was, then, not simply a product of slaving by incipient chiefs, rulers, and kings, but was deeply tied to political strategies designed to centralize power, acquire dependents and clients, monopolize force, and control key resources. Between 1400 and 1700, the Luba and Rund kingdoms, the Lunda Commonwealth, as well as the kingdoms of Kongo, Tio, and Ndongo further toward the Western Coast emerged. Although most of these states did not *initially* rely heavily on slave labor, slavery nonetheless stimulated broader processes that lay at the foundations of chiefship and kingship. Over time the courts of kings stood at the center of vast systems of authority and tribute taking, where slaves advertised a ruler’s power and prestige, protected rulers, and helped produce goods for the palace and the ruling elite. The Kingdom of Kongo, for example, acquired slaves through war or trade. They placed those slaves in concentrated settlements close to major Kongolese cities (mainly São Salvador and Mbanza Nsoyo), where they produced agricultural products for the cities and courts. Although the Kingdom of Kongo was unique because it was tied to Portuguese commercial networks and the transatlantic slave trade so early, slavery solved a basic internal problem that predated the Portuguese: the need to sustain a large nonproductive population of aristocrats and their households. This in turn reshaped the nature of slavery itself. Working on an aristocrat’s slave farm in the Kongo in the 1500s was a very different experience than that of a female slave working in a decentralized community in Central Africa. The farm slaves had fewer options for incorporation and worked longer, more regimented hours in an economically important sector, compared to a female slave who worked at domestic tasks within the confines of a household, who might marry her master or produce children who might eventually become part of a big man’s household and lineage.

¹⁹ John Yoder, *The Kanyok of Zaire: An Institutional and Ideological History to 1895* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 35.

In the interior of Eastern Africa, parallel processes led to slavery. In the Great Lakes region, for example, big men gained control over territory and successfully integrated followers.²⁰ As people accumulated surpluses, inequality emerged. Some people sought to gain preferential access to land and followers as the open frontier closed. By 1600, access to cattle and banana gardens also became important routes for accumulation. In words of David Schoenbrun, “Rights in persons, the object of ancient Great Lakes and Western Lakes units of social organization now revolved around discriminating and limiting access to productive property. People continued to be the supreme measure of wealth, but the objects of their labor now changed form to include croplands, cattle herds and banana gardens.”²¹ Ambitious, successful, or well-connected men sought access to productive resources and the people to work those resources. They were in competition with other ambitious, successful, or well-connected men. Slavery became a means to recruit and control marginalized, socially excluded dependents. Some big men eventually became chiefs, and some chiefs eventually became kings, who parleyed their control over bananas, cattle, or people (or all three) into political power. Numerous states rose and fell in the region, including Buganda. These states were largely focused on war and plunder as well the control of salt, iron, hides, skins, and agricultural produce.

The involuntary transfer of persons was an old practice, although this did not occur via markets until quite late. Thus, most slaves were acquired as prisoners of war or were exchanged through nonmarket mechanisms. Much of our understanding of slavery in the early history of the Great Lakes region comes from historical linguistics. The word for captivity in this region is at least 2,500–3,000 years old and specifically referred to violent raiding for property (including persons).²² Between 1200 and 1600, historical linguistics also tells us the words for “slave” and “slavery” became more common and widespread. People developed the words for slavery from preexisting words that articulated distinctions between kin and vulnerable outsiders. For example,

²⁰ David Lee Schoenbrun, *A Green Place, A Good Place: Agrarian Change, Gender and Social Identity in the Great Lakes Region to the 15th Century* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998), 105.

²¹ Schoenbrun, *A Green Place, a Good Place*, 139.

²² David Schoenbrun, “Violence, Marginality, Scorn and Honour: Language Evidence of Slavery to the Eighteenth Century” in Médard and Doyle (eds.), *Slavery in the Great Lakes Region of East Africa*, 43.

#mwiru, which meant male client, dependent, or servant, emerged around 1200 CE, while #-zaana meant female servant or slave developed sometime in the 1500s, and, finally, the term *muja was widely distributed in the region and meant dependent, servant, or slave. All of these words evolved from preexisting ideas about the dependence and vulnerability of newcomers: “When people argued that slaves were newcomers . . . they put established principles of acceptable status and authority to work in marginalizing slaves. . . . The distinctive power and sting of such marginalization revolved around notions of honour and the force of scornful speech.”²³ Slaves were certainly used as laborers, but most often served in the courts of rulers as servants or as wives to the elite. In both cases, favored slaves might be able to eventually achieve some kind of social integration over time. Although the scope and scale of militarism increased after 1600, slavery had local origins and emerged as Africans sought to gain control over new resources, technologies, and organizations.

Between 500 and 1600 CE, innovative militarized states and commercial networks led to the further consolidation of slavery in Africa. The creation of political and institutional hierarchies – as well as economic opportunities brought by technological change and the expansion of trade – led to the use of slaves in new roles. Slavery became essential in both politics and production in some places. These changes were probably most dramatic and revolutionary in the Savanna and Sahel zones of West Africa, although the roles of slaves also expanded along the Swahili coast and in parts of Central and West Central Africa. Some societies in the forest zone of West Africa used slaves for economic purposes (mining for gold, clearance of forests for farmland among the Akan of modern Ghana) or in politics and the military (in the state of Benin, in what is now Nigeria). Throughout huge parts of the continent, however, slavery simply did not exist. Labor was mobilized through kinship networks, or via the communal labor of free people. Finally, in other places slavery functioned within the structures of kinship. Slavery could still be exploitative, but slaves were used for purposes other than production within collectivities. Between 1600 and 1800, new opportunities for trade and state-building led many more Africans in many more regions to pursue slaving, to which we will now turn.

²³ Schoenbrun, “Violence, Marginality, Scorn and Honour,” 46.

Slavery in the Era of Atlantic Commerce, 1600–1800

In the 1960s, Walter Rodney argued that slavery did not exist before the arrival of Europeans.²⁴ Scholars subsequently modified Rodney's conclusions by acknowledging that slavery existed before European demand. African ideas about slavery – as well as African decision making – are now acknowledged as central a part of the transatlantic slave trade as European traders, forts, and New World plantations. In the West African Savanna and parts of Eastern and Central Africa, Africans leveraged slavery to take advantage of new opportunities. The growth of the transatlantic slave trade provided similar opportunities for ambitious rulers or merchants to build new political and economic structures. This process began before 1600 in Senegambia and really took off after 1600 with the consolidation of Oyo, Asante, and Dahomey.

Africans were part of international trade networks long before 1600. African traders and goods flowed across the Sahara and the Indian Ocean. Commodities were widely exchanged within the African continent as well. But by the end of the fifteenth century, European trade became increasingly attractive for Africans who lived on the West and West Central African coasts. Africans provided commodities, including human beings and gold, first to Portuguese traders and in later centuries to traders from France, Holland, Denmark, and Great Britain. For a price Africans also provided food and other essentials to Europeans who took up longer-term residence in coastal forts and towns. Until the nineteenth century, Africans generally had the upper hand (with the exception perhaps of the Kingdom of Kongo). Europeans were militarily weak, remained vulnerable to tropical diseases, and were always at risk of having their food supplies cut off by angry Africans. Africans also demanded rent for the small parcels of land that Europeans occupied. Africans were in a commanding position to negotiate good terms of trade for commodities, and the prices of slaves rose accordingly.

Between 1600 and 1800, European demand for slaves dramatically increased. This insatiable demand was generated by the labor requirements of New World plantations, focused especially in Brazil,

²⁴ See Walter Rodney, "African Slavery and Other Forms of Social Oppression on the Upper Guinea Coast in the Context of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade" in *The Journal of African History* 8, 3 (1966), 431–443.

the Caribbean, and North America. How did Africans respond to the growing international demand for human beings? Some African rulers and merchants specialized in the production or trade of slaves. Slavery existed long before Europeans set foot on the coast. So did the mechanisms to supply slaves via war, judicial punishment, and market exchange. The transatlantic slave trade gave Africans an opportunity to use a preexisting institution – slavery – to acquire valuable and rare commodities. Some imported goods – like guns – had important military uses. But others, like textiles, metals, or cowrie shells (a currency in parts of West Africa) were used by Africans to attract and retain followers. By exchanging acquired outsiders for imported commodities, African insiders increased their ability to wage war and the numbers of people they controlled, which in turn increased their political power and prestige. Over time, these same people retained some of the slaves they bought or captured, most often women, and used them as local laborers, concubines, and servants.

The pattern of African imports reveals two contradictory dimensions of the export slave trade: its elite and mass characteristics. On the one hand, the slave trade served the interests of an elite. The slave-trading elite grasped the best clothes and liquor, the most prestigious luxury goods, and most of the firearms. These imported goods served to reflect and to reinforce the dominant positions of monarchs, big men, and great merchants. On the other hand, the slave trade involved all levels of society. The plainer textiles and much of the tobacco and alcoholic beverages passed into the hands of the common people. Some of these commoners had sold one or two slaves themselves; some purchased imports with income they gained otherwise.²⁵

The slave trade made African big men that much bigger. Between 1600 and 1800, human beings became the most important commodity in the Atlantic exchange. Africans sold more than 7.4 million slaves into the transatlantic slave trade in these years, concentrated in regions along the coast of West and West Central Africa. The total number of slaves sold during the entire period of the trade approached 11–12 million.²⁶ Many millions of slaves were retained for local use by

²⁵ Patrick Manning, *Slavery and African Life: Occidental, Oriental, and African Slave Trades* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 100.

²⁶ For the debate on the numbers, see, for example Paul E. Lovejoy, “The Volume of the Atlantic Slave Trade: A Synthesis” in *Journal of African History* 23, 4 (1982), 473–501 and David Eltis, “The Volume and Structure of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A Reassessment” in *The William and Mary Quarterly* 58, 1 (2001), 17–46.

Africans. Although it is important not to reduce the entire history of this region to the history of the slave trade – there was much that happened that was unrelated to Afro-European trade – new, more centralized and militarized states emerged in Atlantic Africa that were primarily tied to the production and trade of slaves.²⁷ These states reproduced themselves through slavery and slaving. Participation in the trade did not simply lead to the consolidation of states, but to the fragmentation of them as well. Sometimes local political structures proved unable to manage the new forces unleashed by the trade. In other cases, ambitious big men used the slave trade to destroy older states that failed to adapt successfully. Moreover, decentralized societies, which have often been portrayed solely as victims of predatory, centralized states, effectively defended themselves from slave raids. Some preserved their independence by raiding for and trading in slaves themselves. Igbo traders in West Africa and Bobangi trading firms in West Central Africa, for example, provided slaves efficiently independent of state involvement; indeed, as Walter Hawthorne argues, “One of the cruel ironies of the Atlantic slave trade was that, in desperate times, individuals living on the frontiers of powerful regional states might one day have feared being swept up in an attack by a large army but on the next day might have used the power that they wielded locally to participate in the kidnapping of a stranger for sale abroad.”²⁸ Many decentralized societies also retained slaves to use as labor, although they mostly preferred women who became wives or children who might eventually be incorporated.

Predatory States and Slavery in Atlantic Africa

In Senegambia, the slave trade began quite early. The rulers of the Jolof Empire waged wars against their neighbors – using cavalry – and acquired slaves. They traded slaves to the Portuguese and continued to send them into Saharan networks in exchange for horses. Although this initially enhanced the wealth and power of the Jolof Empire, slave

²⁷ On this issue, see John Thornton, “Cannibals, Witches, and Slave Traders in the Atlantic World” in *The William and Mary Quarterly* **60**, 2 (2003), 277.

²⁸ Walter Hawthorne, *Planting Rice and Harvesting Slaves: Transformations along the Guinea-Bissau Coast, 1400–1900* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003), 12. See also Martin A. Klein, “The Slave Trade and Decentralized Societies” in *The Journal of African History* **42**, 1 (2001), 49–65.

raiding also increased political instability.²⁹ Instead of being preyed upon by the Jolof, surrounding peoples (including the Sereer) sold slaves to acquire horses that they used to challenge Jolof power. Instability even occurred within the Jolof Empire. Members of the Jolof political elite acquired horses and slaves and then challenged the power of the king. This led to the creation of new states (like Kaabu) and to the disintegration of the Jolof Empire into independent kingdoms in the sixteenth century: “The weakness brought about by competing power interests bolstered by the Atlantic trade had precipitated a decisive shift in political organisation in Senegambia. Kingdoms like Cajor and Siin had new access to horses and could free themselves from the old Jolof heartland.”³⁰ Thus, participation in the Atlantic trade drew on a preexisting slave trade and led to both political fragmentation and consolidation.

Predatory, slaving states became more common in West Africa between 1600 and 1800. Oyo, Dahomey, and Asante, for example, emerged during this period. These states were deeply involved in the transatlantic slave trade and became increasingly militarized. Their rulers acquired slaves by launching regular wars, raids, and by trading for them. They then used the generated wealth to centralize executive and state power. They became dependent on the slave trade politically and economically. The impact of the trade, however, was not uniform or all encompassing.³¹ Rulers and states often pursued policies that were unrelated to the trade in slaves; indeed, the choices rulers made were often produced by internal factors. *Asantehene* (or King) Osei Bonsu of Asante proclaimed that he did not “make war to catch slaves in a bush, like a thief. . . . But if I fight a King, and kill him when he is insolent, then certainly . . . his gold, and his slaves, and the people are mine too. . . . I did not make war for slaves, but because [the King] sent me an arrogant message and killed my people.”³²

The expanding trade – and local use of slaves – fueled economic growth. It also initiated and perpetuated a cycle of militarization,

²⁹ See Boubacar Barry, *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

³⁰ Toby Green, *The Rise of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in Western Africa, 1300–1589* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 91.

³¹ See Green, 93.

³² Joseph Dupuis, *Journal of a Residence in Ashantee* (London: H. Colburn, 1824), 163–164 as cited by Trevor R. Getz, *Slavery and Reform in West Africa: Toward Emancipation in Nineteenth-Century Senegal and Gold Coast* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004), 11.

political fragmentation, and violence. Security and prosperity generally increased within the borders of the slaving states themselves. The areas subject to slave raids faced increasing insecurity. In the case of Asante, Rebecca Shumway notes: "When the Asantes waged war ... they not only built a new state ... they also killed people, enslaved people, destabilized societies by removing political authorities, and established obligatory tribute payments that the conquered people were obliged to pay, in part, by enslaving more people."³³ Not all slaving states were successful. Oyo expanded to become an empire and generated a large number of slaves, but was unable to contain the impact of the trade. By the 1790s Oyo descended into a civil war and in 1835 it collapsed. Oyo was replaced by a number of smaller Yoruba city-states. Dahomey, on the other hand, became a powerful militarized state, but was remarkably dependent on the slavery and slave trade. Asante pursued more of a middle course. Its rulers traded in slaves but also sought other economic options and pursued many imperial goals that were unrelated to the trade.

Outside West Africa, vast regions of West Central and Central Africa exported millions of slaves into the transatlantic slave trade; during the eighteenth century alone, 2,331,800 were exported from the coast of West Central Africa. The Lozi, Lunda, and Luba of Central Africa became increasingly focused not just on imperial expansion but also on capturing slaves who were transported by Ovimbundu caravans to the West Central African coast and then across the Atlantic on European ships. Violence and disorder was as much a product of the trade as political consolidation and expansion. By the seventeenth century, for example, predatory Imbangala warlords (with reputations as cannibals) ravaged large parts of the region. The slaves they captured were exchanged for weapons and other goods or (if male and young enough) initiated into the Imbangala war bands as future soldiers. They also kept women to work, for sacrifice, or for marriage. The Imbangala lived, as John Thornton notes, "by pillage and plunder" and as a "suggestive sample of their attitude, Imbangala soldiers would cut down palm trees to obtain the sap rather than simply tapping them as was the normal custom; theirs was a wasteful practice that devastated the economies of the regions they traversed in search of more palm groves to destroy."³⁴

³³ Rebecca Shumway, *The Fante and the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2011), 57.

³⁴ Thornton, "Cannibals, Witches and Slave Traders," 289.

How did these changes impact slavery? First, the expansion of slave-trading networks meant that more slaves were acquired than ever before. African rulers and merchants retained a large number of slaves between 1600 and 1800. Although population statistics are very unreliable for this period in African history, it is likely that 15–30 percent of the population of core slaving regions were of slave status. Many of these slaves were women.³⁵ Second, slaves continued to be used in a variety of ways. But by 1800, many more slaves were used as laborers, producing food for palaces as well as commodities for exchange. Slavery became a central institution in Atlantic Africa because more slaves were used in production; they had a central economic role not just as objects of exchange but also as labor. Third, retained slaves were widely used as soldiers who captured the slaves to be used for labor or sent into the transatlantic slave trade. Slavery became important for the continued production of new slaves. As these changes took hold – and as high-density slavery became dominant in Atlantic Africa – slavery became increasingly closed. The incorporation of slaves took longer. Masters and slaves were more often in conflict. Slaves were not regarded as lesser kin, but as objects to be bought, sold, and used. This was resisted by slaves, who fought for inclusion.

Despite these changes in Atlantic Africa, the transformation of slavery into a central productive institution only occurred after the abolition of the slave trade in the early to mid-nineteenth century. Women and children were in many places still incorporated. For men, mobility into positions of authority or responsibility remained possible. Slaves sought out and gained political and economic privileges. Slave labor was intensified, but slaves worked much as they always had, mostly in loosely supervised small groups attached to farms on which they lived as well. Many slaves remained only marginally connected to productive activities and worked instead within households, were killed as sacrifices, married as wives, or used as government officials. Finally, there was a marked regional difference in slave use between West and West Central Africa. Fewer slaves were retained for productive use in West Central Africa; instead, the societies and states of this region simply chose to export as many slaves as possible: “In general the export trade drained population from productive sectors, except in a few places where became an important

³⁵ See, for example, Manning, *Slavery and African Life*.

component of production.”³⁶ However, even in this region the use of slaves in production occurred in a number of places, including Luanda and Benguela.

What happened in the many parts of Africa that were not impacted – or only marginally impacted – by Atlantic commerce and the transatlantic slave trade? In these cases slavery was unnecessary because other forms of labor or political mobilization proved effective. But slavery also dominated places that were very far removed from the transatlantic slave trade. Access to various combinations of commerce, horses, firearms, credit, and markets continued to offer some Africans opportunities to acquire outsiders. In the Islamic West African Savanna, for example, slavery remained centrally important to the economics and politics of numerous states between 1600 and 1800. No large imperial state emerged to fill the void after the fall of Songhay in 1591. Instead, states jostled for dominance. Some states – especially those in the Western Sudan – sold slaves into both the Saharan and transatlantic slave trades, and used slaves in production and in politics. But most states in the Savanna zone – including the Hausa city-states, Dar Fur, and Borno – had no ties to the transatlantic slave trade. These states raided for slaves, sold slaves across the desert in exchange for commodities, and used slaves in productive tasks ranging from weaving to mining to farming. Indeed, the number of slaves exported across the Sahara desert approached the total number of slaves exported across the Atlantic (although the trans-Saharan trade took place over a longer time). For the region as a whole, the percentage of those held in slavery easily reached 25 percent, with the highest concentrations in centers of political and economic development. The period between 1600 and 1800 accentuated patterns of the previous period. Slavery continued to be a central institution. Along the Swahili coast of Eastern Africa, the Indian Ocean trade continued to encourage the growth of commerce and credit between 1600 and 1800. Slaves also remained important as producers, objects of exchange, and as domestic servants and retainers for the elite, although the scale and scope of slavery really expanded only in the nineteenth century, along with the formalization of Omani domination and commercial control of the coast. In South Africa, European settlers imported tens of thousands of slaves into the Cape Colony, where they were used in urban and rural tasks. The expansion of the Dutch East India Company led

³⁶ Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery*, 127.

to European settlement at Cape Town, which produced an increasing demand for labor. Although many South African farmers were poor, some generated a substantial income, had access to credit, and purchased slaves supplied by the Dutch East India Company. By the 1700s, slave labor was absolutely essential to the production of cereal crops and grapes (for wine), and its importance endured well into the nineteenth century. The transatlantic slave trade did not directly impact South Africa, but the consolidation of slavery in the region was indeed tied to, in the words of Paul E. Lovejoy, “the expansion of the European economy . . . and the growth of trade with Asia.”³⁷ The centrality of slavery would only increase for large parts of Africa in the nineteenth century.

The Transformative Nineteenth Century

Africans experienced dramatic change during the nineteenth century. In 1800, the transatlantic slave trade was still in high gear, and Europeans remained largely confined to the coast. By the end of the century, the transatlantic slave trade had been abolished, and Europeans were in the process of occupying large parts of the continent. Islamic revolutions swept through the West African Savanna. In East Africa, the Omani Arabs built a commercial empire on the Swahili coast. This all led to a major economic reorientation, focused on commodity production and international trade. Slavery changed as well. The number of slaves held in captivity continued to expand, especially in the areas of greatest economic and political growth. More slaves were used in economically important roles. Slavery continued to play an important role in the consolidation of new states. Some of these states developed strong and stable political institutions by using slaves, while others used slaves to build states that were primarily geared to pillage and war. Overall, the major historical changes of the period led to the creation or further consolidation of high-density slavery, which became the dominant form of slavery in large parts of Africa. By the end of the nineteenth century, slavery had indeed become a central institution.

Great Britain abolished the transatlantic slave trade in 1807. In subsequent decades, other nations followed suit. Although abolition was

³⁷ Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery*, 133.

not initially effective – approximately 3,446,000 slaves were exported via the Atlantic in the nineteenth century – it became increasingly difficult for Africans to export slaves. Instead, the trade of so-called legitimate commodities (palm oil and groundnuts, for example) expanded as European demand increasingly turned to those products. The end of the slave trade had variable impact on Africa. The rulers of a few states in Atlantic Africa – like Oyo – experienced a crisis of adaptation after abolition. Some rulers were unable to adapt to the end of the slave trade. Other rulers and merchants, however, dealt with the potential economic impact of abolition by retaining an increasing number of slaves in Africa. The commercial and military networks that supplied slaves for the transatlantic slave trade were reoriented to meet African demand. Africans used slaves to produce legitimate commodities that were in high demand. They also produced goods consumed by ruling elites (as slaves had done long before the nineteenth century). Thus, the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade led to the expansion of high-density slavery in Africa. Slaves worked on agricultural estates throughout Atlantic Africa. They produced commodities that were centrally important to the success and survival of rulers and states. These agricultural estates varied in size. Slaves still worked in small groups, and had their own plots of land to farm and significant opportunity for mobility. But increasingly, the creation of slave-dominated agricultural estates – as well as the widespread use of slaves in craft production and mining – led to the increased exploitation of slaves and to fewer opportunities for any kind of social mobility. Slaves certainly resisted these changes, but often had little ability to force masters to provide them with privileges.

The consolidation of a system of slave supply, exchange, and production also occurred in the Islamic Savanna of West Africa and the Swahili Coast of East Africa. In the Savanna, a series of revolutionary Islamic holy wars led to the creation of large, stable Islamic states, the most successful being the Sokoto Caliphate. Although the rulers of these states were firmly opposed to the enslavement of other “good” Muslims, they had no compunctions about enslaving “bad” Muslims or non-Muslims. The holy wars of the West African Savanna produced *millions* of slaves, as did the raids and wars that continued afterward. By the end of the century, 25–30 percent (or more) of local populations labored in slavery; indeed, the state founded in 1818 by Seku Ahmadu – with its capital at Hamdullahi – relied extensively on

slave labor. Although many of the slaves continued to work in noneconomic roles – as concubines, officials, domestic servants – many more were put to work on agricultural estates or in salt mines. Slaves still had options that led to the amelioration of their working conditions or eventual manumission – as slaves did virtually everywhere they were used – but in the nineteenth century slaves worked longer and harder in a productive capacity; in short, social mobility took longer and was more contested than ever before. Those slaves who did not work in the fields provided essential political, military, and reproductive labor. As soldiers, slaves went to war to protect the state and to provide a steady supply of slaves. As government officials, slaves managed taxation and other vital state functions. As concubines, slaves helped the ruling elite reproduce itself via childbearing, child-rearing, and as basic labor in the service of elite households. On the East African coast, Omani Arabs – and Swahili merchants – invested heavily in the production of cloves, as well as other agricultural products (coconuts, cereals), which led to the expansion of slavery along the coast. Slaves and ivory were brought from the interior and sold into the Indian Ocean trade or retained for use as labor in agricultural estates that specialized in commodity production. Close to a *million* slaves were held on the coast by the end of the nineteenth century. Although the size of agricultural estates varied – as did the importance of slavery in production – the nature of slavery changed. Customary protections that were formerly offered to slaves were revoked in order to increase their productive capacity and to enhance the overall control of masters. Finally, the expansion of slavery took place far beyond these two regions. For example, Egypt invaded the upper Nile Valley – now mainly Sudan – in an effort to seize slaves for use as soldiers in Egyptian armies. New irrigation techniques that came along with Egyptian rule expanded agricultural production, which eventually led to the extensive use of slave labor. In South Africa, Afrikaner frontiersmen migrated away from the Cape into the interior of South Africa beginning in the 1830s, where they built independent states. Afrikaners continued to raid and use slaves, although their dependence on slavery was cloaked by claiming that they were “apprentices.”

The consolidation of high-density slavery and new political structures also led to disorder and conflict. In West Africa, new predatory states emerged – like Rabih’s state, for example – that conquered huge parts of the Savanna while raiding, trading, and using slaves. This state was not bureaucratically stable like the Sokoto Caliphate, but

essentially lived off plunder. In the interior of East Africa, the demand for slaves along the coast led to increasing violence and instability. Commercial credit and caravans moved many slaves along routes to the coast, but the distinction between slave trading and raiding was often blurry, as coastal adventurers and entrepreneurs regularly acquired slaves by using violence. In other cases, predatory states – like that of Msiri or the Cokwe – were made possible only by raiding, selling, and using slaves. Thus, the demand for slaves on the Swahili Coast helped lead to the expansion of slave trading and slave use into the interior.

Conclusion: Slavery in African History

In this chapter I focused not merely on the “whys” of African slavery but also on the ways that different forms of slavery (political, domestic, productive) became dominant and changed over time. By the end of the nineteenth century, slavery was a central institution throughout the continent. More Africans were held in high-density slavery, and slavery was fundamentally tied to markets and production. Even in places where low-density slavery predominated, slavery dynamically changed and sometimes became a central institution. These changes were part of a contingent – and even a contradictory – process. People did not always take the long view, even as political, economic, or social forces encouraged them to acquire and use slaves. Slavery was not simply a nineteenth-century phenomenon. Nor was it primarily a response to external pressure generated in Europe, the Indian Ocean, or the Mediterranean; rather, slavery was a very old institution grounded in the earliest political, social, and economic struggles Africans faced. Although the forms of slavery varied dramatically, in the end, slaving allowed insiders to acquire outsiders and use them in ways that enhanced the insiders’ power. The way slave owners used – and took advantage of – that inequality varied: sometimes slaves were acquired to add members to a lineage, to be used as soldiers, married, or placed on farms to produce commodities for a market. The ways slaves were acquired and used in turn shaped the extent to which slavery became closed, open, or something in between. Early African slavery was a way for the ambitious or powerful to expand their numbers and resources; slavery was largely concerned with securing access to the reproductive potential of outsiders. Over time, credit, commerce, and

technology transformed African political and economic structures. Large, stable, and often highly militarized states were created by insiders who depended on outsiders as slaves. Slaves were used in specifically productive roles, but also helped build or protect new states and their rulers as soldiers, officials, and concubines. In short, slaves came to play a central role in the continuation of states, the ruling classes, government institutions, local households, and entire economies. The use of outsiders in this way had consequences, of course, which often led to further change, as other Africans adopted the slavers' strategies. We will now turn to a closer examination of the historical dynamics – the practice – of slavery in particular contexts, beginning with the complexities of slavery in decentralized societies.