

Africa and the Slave Trade

Philip D. Curtin

Africa and African history have a peculiar place in Western historical writing and in Western consciousness. Some of it has to do with the special relationships between Africa and Western civilization over the past 400 or 500 years, and especially with the fact that Africans were the principal slaves in the Western-controlled world from the sixteenth century well into the nineteenth. But that was not always so. The prototypical slaves in the medieval world were Slavs—the people exported from the Black Sea slave trading posts. In classical Latin, the word for “slave” was *servitus*, but the predominance of Slavic people in the medieval trade added a new term, *sclavus*. This word and its successors, like “slave,” have been the dominant terms for people owned by other people in most European languages ever since.

People of African descent were nevertheless the stereotypical slaves in Western societies from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth, and this fact of history was one source of Western suppositions about alleged African racial inferiority. And Africa’s exceptional place in Western thought continued well into the twentieth century. Africa was the last of the inhabited continents to have its history included in the curricula of European and American universities.

AFRICAN ISOLATION

The peculiarity of African-Western relations goes back even further. Sub-Saharan West Africa was close to the Mediterranean world but was comparatively unknown. It had had some contact with the Mediterranean civilizations as far back as the first millennium B.C.—800 to 1000 B.C. But that contact across the Sahara was neither regular nor systemat-

ic. The knowledge of iron smelting crossed from north to south in that first millennium B.C. Knowledge about certain crops first domesticated in tropical Africa—sesame seed, for example—crossed from south to north. But contact was not regular enough to carry with it systematic knowledge. Romans of the empire knew a good deal about the Red Sea, about the fringes of central Asia, about India, and about the East African coast, but they left no recorded knowledge of what went on beyond the Sahara to the west of the Nile Valley.

One way to clarify the long-term relationships between Africa and early civilizations elsewhere is to use the concept of “intercommunicating zones” in world history. Before the Agricultural Revolution, about 10,000 to 5,000 years B.C., when people first began to plant and harvest crops, most people lived in isolated hunting and gathering or fishing societies, each having comparatively little contact with its neighbors. Agriculture made possible an economic surplus over mere subsistence, made possible more specialization, division of labor, and the formation of denser patterns of residence—in time, cities. With cities and trade between them, individual ways of life could change in response to new sources of outside information. Isolated culture areas gave way to intercommunicating zones of more or less homogeneous culture—first in Mesopotamia, then in the Indus Valley of present-day Pakistan, the Nile Valley, and the Yellow River Valley of China. In time, the whole of the Mediterranean basin became part of an intercommunicating zone. By the last centuries B.C., it had regular contact with India, as well as Mesopotamia, and it had distant knowledge of the Chinese empire that was a contemporary of the Roman. Both empires gave political form to intercommunicating zones that were beginning to have a common culture.

At the very earliest stages of the great river valley civilizations like those of Mesopotamia and Egypt, the Sahara desert had been no barrier, but a revolutionary shift in the world’s climatic patterns took place about 2500 B.C. In Europe, it was associated

From *The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex: Essays in Atlantic History*, by Philip D. Curtin, pp. 29-45, Copyright © 1990 by Cambridge University Press. Reprinted with permission.

with the retreat of the last great glaciers. In Africa, it brought about the desiccation of the belt of land between present-day Mauritania and the Red Sea, creating the Sahara desert. It was only a little earlier than this, about 3200 B.C., that the earliest pharaohs of Egypt had united the Nile Valley below the first cataract, giving political form to the culture that had been taking shape in the previous few hundred years. Gradually after 2500 B.C., Egypt and northwestern Africa became more and more closely related to the net of closer intercommunication of the Mediterranean world. Africa south of the desert, however, lost its contacts with that zone. In the intercommunicating zone, new technology or new discoveries in any part of it were quickly known and taken up wherever they appeared to be useful. Sub-Saharan Africa was largely cut off and went its own way as a series of loosely interconnected societies.

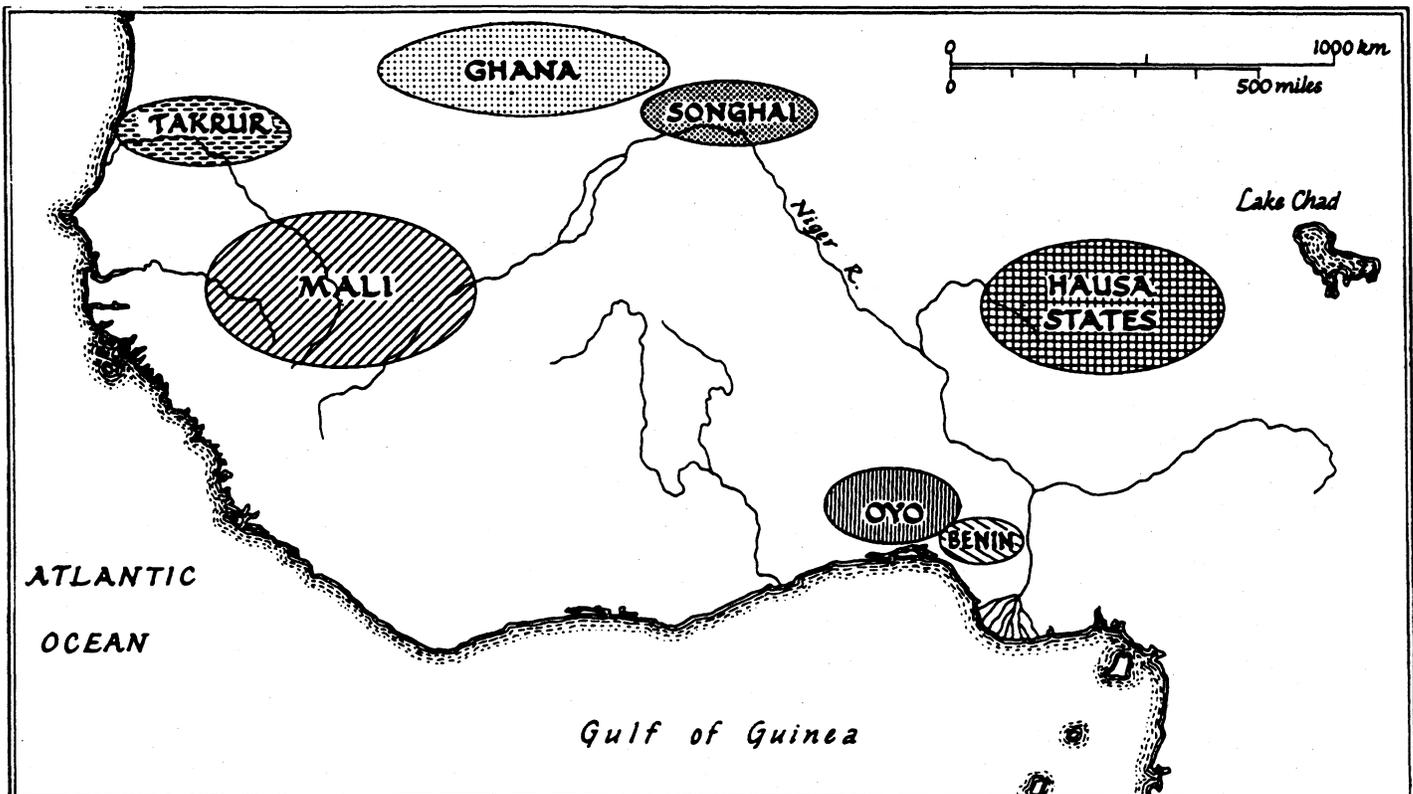
The barrier of the Sahara was not impermeable. The Nile Valley provided one corridor between the Mediterranean and the savanna country south of the desert. The Red Sea was another. The Nilotic Sudan and the Ethiopian highlands were therefore in good contact with the Mediterranean world from Roman times on, but local conditions made it hard to get from these regions to the rest of sub-Saharan Africa. They were, in this sense, semiisolated. Parts of the Nilotic Sudan and the Ethiopian highlands, for

example, converted to Christianity shortly after Rome did.

The comparative isolation of the rest of Africa began to break down in a series of stages lasting for over 2,000 years. The first stage was the increasing intensity of long-distance trade in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean about the second century B.C. By the second century A.D., it was usual for Roman ships (manned by Greek-speaking Egyptians) to sail not only to India but also down the East African coast as far as coastal Tanzania. By the thirteenth century, and probably much earlier, Arab successors of the early Roman mariners had gained control of port towns as far away as Kilwa in southern Tanzania, with further trade contacts south to the Mozambique channel and inland to the gold fields of present-day Zimbabwe.

In West Africa, meanwhile, even the relative isolation began to break down about 500 A.D. with the introduction of camels. These animals had been domesticated in Arabia, and had diffused south into what is now Somalia and then westward along the southern fringes of the Sahara. Desert people, presumed to be the ancestors of the present-day Tuareg, then introduced them into Northwest Africa, the Maghrib in Arabic terminology.

Our knowledge of sub-Saharan West Africa is weak for the period before about 800 A.D., when the rise of



Medieval West Africa

Islam made Arabic records available. Archaeological evidence, however, suggests that the southern shore of the desert was already densely populated by people who had a social organization based on kinship ties, but who also had political forms that are properly called states. They also had cities, based mainly on commerce, at least as far south as Jenne in the southern part of present-day Mali, hundreds of miles south of the desert edge.

Trade by camel caravans became a regular feature of life in the western Sahara between about 500 and 800 A.D. Camels are a somewhat paradoxical beast of burden. Their ability to go for long periods without water is well known; so too is the fact that they cannot thrive in very humid climates, or that they can graze on sparse vegetation where rainfall hardly rises above five inches a year. They were also by far the most efficient pack animals known, with relatively high speeds on the road, low maintenance costs, and low costs in human labor per ton mile. Once camels were available, the Sahara not only stopped being a barrier, it became a region of comparatively cheap transportation—an advantage not unlike that of the sea over most forms of land transport. East-west transport in either North Africa or West Africa often used camels that went out into the desert and returned to the sahel, or desert shore, only as they neared their destination. Some authorities have argued that the introduction of camels into North Africa led to a sharp decline in cart transport using the remains of the Roman road system.¹

The people who pioneered the long-distance trade across the Sahara were from the oases fringing the more arable land in North Africa. These oases were often river valleys, whose streams were underground. They nevertheless made irrigation possible by tapping the flow of water falling on the mountains to the north or west. Otherwise the region was a semidesert, with rainfall in the range of five to twenty inches a year. These conditions were ideal for camel herding. They were also ideal for growing dates. The date palm is one of the most productive trees known. Under favorable conditions, a single date palm can produce 100 to 200 pounds of fruit a year, and conditions in these oases were very favorable. Date palms require irrigation water; rainfall can actually damage them. But, like sugar, dates were not wanted as a staple food. Date producers, however, could maximize their income by trading most of the product to the grain farmers and textile producers of the North African mountains and coastal lowlands, using their camel herds for transport. With this experience, it was a natural step to extend their trade across the Sahara as well.

POLITICAL FORMS SOUTH OF THE SAHARA

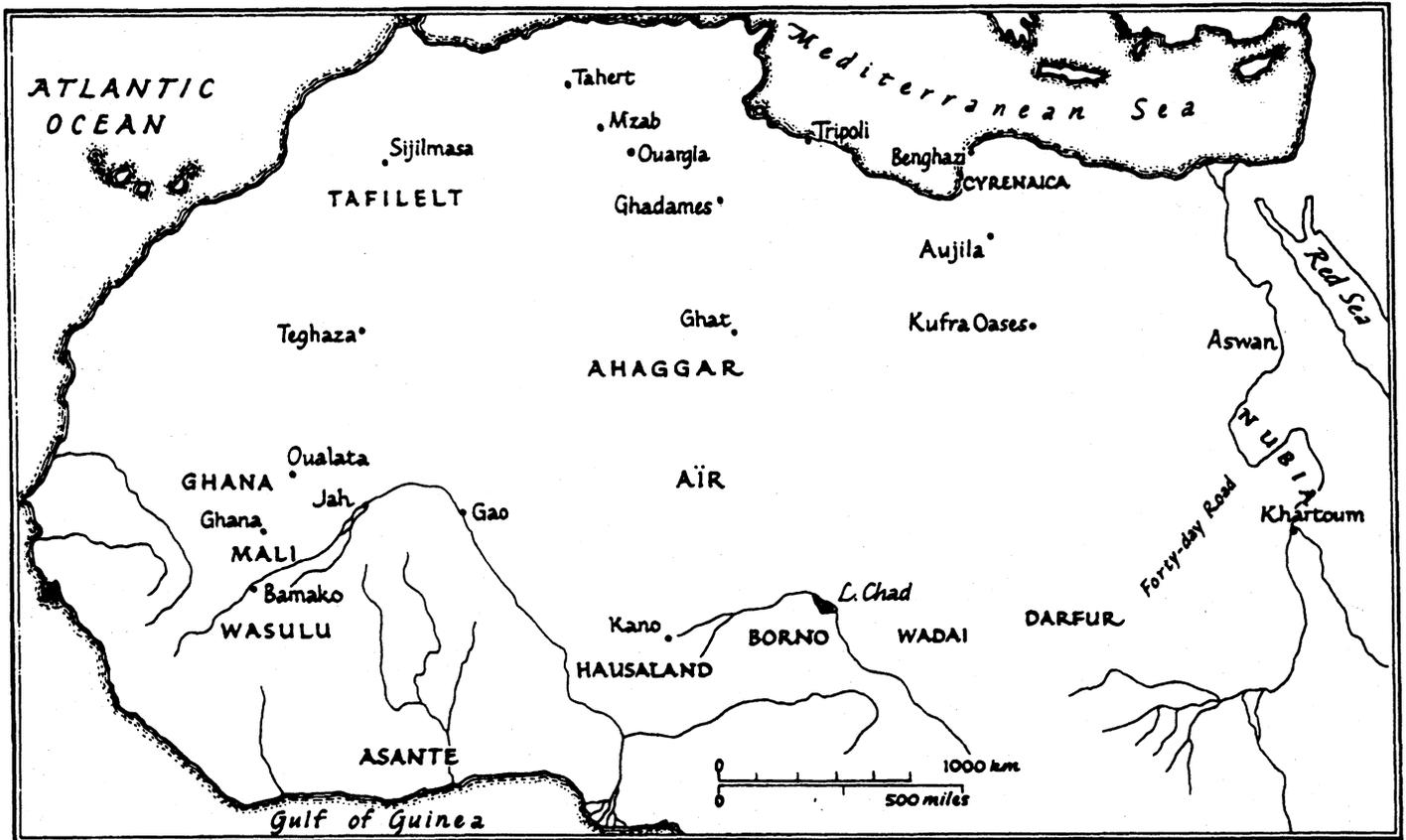
Between about 800 and 1200 A.D., partly in response to these new currents of trade, Africans in the southern sahel developed a set of trading states with an elaborate organization. Many of the courts and merchants converted to Islam, so that they soon became literate in Arabic—in the sense that at least a class of scribes could read and write. Of these states, the best known, from west to east, were Takrur in the Senegal Valley, Ghana in the sahel north of the middle Niger and middle Senegal, Songhai near the Niger bend, and Kanem near Lake Chad.

AFRICA AND THE SLAVE TRADE

Still other states grew up farther south, away from the desert edge but in contact with desert-oriented trade. One of the most important was Mali, centered on the upper Niger River and sometimes ruling territory right to the desert edge. Another set of city-states appeared in what is now northern Nigeria, where the Hausa language was and is still spoken. Still others lay to the south near the boundary between the open savanna and the tropical forest. Oyo, in present-day western Nigeria, was one of these, and the nearby kingdom of Benin lay in the forest itself and had access to the sea through the system of creeks and lagoons that stretched westward from the Niger delta.

But state formation in tropical Africa was not simply a reflex of developing external trade. Well before 1500 A.D., a number of states had come into existence, that had no connection at all with the trade across the Sahara. Some, like the kingdom of Kongo near the mouth of the Congo or Zaire River, were in the savanna belt south of the tropical forest—well out of range of trade to the Mediterranean at any period before the Portuguese mariners appeared in the fifteenth century.

But much of sub-Saharan Africa was not organized in states, much less in large empires on the order of Mali. West Africa had many regions of "stateless society," where kinship patterns formed the basis for settling disputes and where no one individual was permanently in charge; no individual, or any small group, held or claimed a monopoly over the right to use force. In the past, some historians thought that these stateless societies were "primitive" or "less developed" forms of government that would naturally give way to the state forms as soon as people found out about state styles of government. More recently,



Northern Africa

it became clear that a powerful state is not necessarily an advantage for those who live under its control. Stateless societies have therefore persisted alongside states for centuries, apparently by choice. Many of these stateless peoples, for that matter, have had more advanced agricultural techniques than those who lived in states. Historians now believe that statelessness was often preferred, but that states were sometimes essential to meet the threat of foreign military power. States were also useful though not essential, for the protection of long-distance trade.

THE TRANS-SAHARA TRADE

Long-distance trade was very old in West Africa and the Congo basin alike, certainly older than the developed caravan trade across the desert. Trade tended to emerge wherever climatic differences, like those along the desert fringe, made exchange between cattleherding seminomads and sedentary farmers a good bargain for either side. Farther south, along the fringe between the forest and the savanna, conditions for trade were also favorable. Kola nuts from the forest were a stimulant a little like coffee,

and they were widely sold in the savanna country from an early period. Foodstuffs from the forest or savanna also moved back and forth over short distances. Salt was generally in short supply in West Africa, so that most regions had to import it from the coastal salt pans or from rock salt deposits in the desert. Placer gold deposits were also worked at several points in West Africa and in time gold became the most important export to the north.

Before the Maritime Revolution brought the Portuguese to the coasts, trade in West Africa and across the desert was carried by a series of interlocked trade diasporas—people of similar ethnic background who settled along the trade routes to facilitate trade by people like themselves. One group of similar diasporas originated in the oases fringing North Africa—places like Sijilmasa in the Ziz Valley of Morocco and the Mzab Valley of southern Algeria, or cities like Ghat and Ghadames in the Fezzan region of central Libya. They had the camels and access to North African or European goods from the north. They carried these goods to one of a series of desert ports on the fringes of arable land to the south—points that were often the capitals of the northern fringe of West African states.

At this point, trade passed over to another set of trade diasporas based south of the Sahara—most often Soninke in culture in the far west, Songhai on the Niger River up or downstream from the northern bend, or Hausa-speaking people south and west of Lake Chad. By the fifteenth century, these desert-edge traders had reached south to the main sources of gold, even to the Akan gold fields in the forests of present-day Ghana. They or other diasporas originating near the forest fringe brought kola nuts for distribution in the savanna and even for sale to North Africa. Still other groups carried goods east and west—like the Mali traders who worked the east-west salt trade from the lower Gambia inland to the Niger Valley. South of the forest, still other trade diasporas carried goods through the savannas south of the Congo basin.

When the European mariners landed on the coasts, they found a network of trade routes that crisscrossed tropical Africa. These routes carried a variety of goods for internal sale—kola nuts, shea butter, several kinds of salt, textiles in varying styles and patterns, iron and iron tools, and some slaves for sale within West Africa. Most African societies made it a practice to enslave war prisoners, but the victors rarely kept these people as servants. If they came from nearby, it was all too easy to escape, perhaps killing some of the captor's people in the process. Many, if not most, war prisoners were therefore sold to passing traders, who took them along the trade routes with their other goods to sell them in distant places where escape would be more difficult.

Traders also carried a variety of goods to the desert edge for export to the north; gold was the most important, but exports included several kinds of pepper, shea butter, some dried meat and hides, and a little ivory. They also carried some slaves for sale in North Africa, but not as the dominant export. Recent estimates put this trade in the range of 500 to 4,000 slaves a year, with a substantial margin for error. When the Europeans appeared on the coast, they found existing trade networks that they could use. They had no need to set up trading posts or to introduce new currents of trade, as they did in dealing with the Amerindians of North America.

DISEASE AND ISOLATION

When they arrived on the African coasts, the Europeans found a situation different from anything they encountered in the Americas or in Asia. The West African disease environment was nearly as dangerous for them as their European diseases were for the American Indians. And it was equally dangerous for the North African traders, who rarely took up resi-

dence south of the port cities on the desert edge. From any point of view, tropical West Africa had a terrible disease environment for human beings of any origin. Infection rates with yaws, Guinea worm, trypanosomiasis (sleeping sickness), onchocerciasis (river blindness), and schistosomiasis (liver flukes) were extremely high. In addition, the Africans had the usual range of Old World diseases, such as smallpox, measles, and the common childhood diseases that killed the American Indians. The only diseases that were markedly less serious than they were in Europe were pneumonia and tuberculosis.

What made the environment so dangerous for outsiders, however, was a combination of yellow fever and *Plasmodium falciparum*, the most fatal form of malaria. Africa also had the two most effective insect vectors for malaria found anywhere in the world—*Anopheles gambiae* and *Anopheles funestus*. As a result of these insects, almost the whole of tropical Africa is still considered to be hyperendemic with *falciparum* malaria, which means, in effect, that the chance of an alien visitor's escaping an infective bite for as long as a year is negligible. Nor is this merely a matter of high humidity in the tropical rain forest. These particular vectors are just as effective in the open savanna country, and they provide some infective bites even during the long dry season.

Falciparum malaria is now found on all continents, but many authorities believe that it originated in West Africa. Whereas the most common species of *plasmodia* found in Europe or in the Americas are mainly debilitating, *falciparum* malaria is often fatal, especially to children or to adults who are infected for the first time. For nonimmune adults before quinine was available, the case fatality rate varied between about 25 and 75 percent. Children who escaped death still kept the parasite in their bloodstream, but without clinical symptoms as long as they were reinfected with the same strain of *P. falciparum*. Thus, all African children fought a life-and-death battle with the disease. If they survived to the age of five or so, they acquired an apparent immunity—paid for with an infant mortality from malaria alone that would kill half or more of all children before they reached the age of five.

Yellow fever works differently. It is caused by a virus, not a protozoan, like malaria. With yellow fever it is possible to acquire lifelong immunity after an infection, with no clinical symptoms at all. This kind of immunity is common among children who grow up in regions where yellow fever is found. Non-immune adults who encounter the disease for the first time, however, have a case fatality rate of 75 percent or more, but the survivors acquire lifelong immunity. This pattern of immunity means that the

disease appears mainly as an epidemic among non-immune persons, and it might well disappear but for the fact that the virus parasitizes a number of forest monkeys as well as humans.

For visitors to West Africa who arrived as adults, the combination could be disastrous. A lot depended on the incidence of yellow fever epidemics, but the cost of sending European adults to serve in West Africa was always high. So was the cost to North Africans who crossed the desert, as the French were to find when they sent Algerians to build the Senegal Railway in the late nineteenth century. One survey, based on the personnel records of the Royal African Company between 1695 and 1722, showed that, of every ten men it sent to serve in West Africa, six died in the first year, two died in the second through the seventh years, and only one lived to be discharged in Britain.² In the period 1817-36, prequinine years when both Britain and France kept European troops on the West African coast, the range of loss lay between 165 and 430 per thousand. Clearly, this rate was too high to justify a very heavy commitment of Europeans to African campaigns.

AFRICAN, MUSLIM, AND EUROPEAN SLAVERY

The essence of the slave trade was that people, defined in some way as slaves, were purchased in Africa and sold in the Americas or to North Africa. But the term "slave" creates problems. In common use, it usually means a person over whom another person holds certain rights, which are, in turn, transferable to a third party in return for payment. But this simple matter of salability is not always the most important characteristic of human institutions of social subordination. Serfs on medieval manors in northern Europe were social subordinates, but normally they could only be transferred along with the land they worked. Wives in many societies had no more rights than slaves, but they were frequently hard to transfer. Many aspects other than the manner of transfer could be far more important—the nature of the work organization, the rights of a subordinate against his master, his chances of manumission, and so on.

The kind of slavery that became dominant in the American plantation was special, different from slavery in most of the Muslim world and different again from slavery in West Africa. The slave was purchased to serve as a unit of labor, normally labor in agricultural work under continuous supervision during the entire work day. In sugar fields, this meant gang work with a driver giving orders hour by hour, if not minute by minute. Tightly disciplined gang work is obviously very different from domestic

service, where the slave is a member of the household, however subordinate, and different again from other kinds of agricultural labor where the slave controlled his own activities, paying the master part of his total income. All three of these forms of work organization existed in American slavery, so that even within the Americas the status of slaves was not the same everywhere.

Slavery in the Muslim world, where African slaves also went, was again different in both theory and practice. There the slave was not a labor unit. The sanction for slavery came from Islam, principally from the belief that pagans were without the law but that they could legitimately be converted by force through enslavement. A slave was thought of as part of the master's household, as a kind of ward undergoing education. His or her status was assimilated to that of a child in the same society, but still as a person—not just a possession. The master was obliged to undertake his or her religious education, though it rarely reached a very high level. Nor was a slave restricted to hard agricultural labor.

Slaves were subordinate aliens, and Muslim society thought of certain occupations as peculiarly appropriate for them. Most of these were service occupations, often the intimate domestic service of the master such as that of a concubine or harem guard. As strangers, slaves lacked kin or other supporters in the local society. As an owner of strangers, a master might find it useful to have them exercise authority in his own name, even over free people. In the Ottoman Empire, much of the bureaucracy was staffed by specially recruited slaves. Slave armies in the Muslim world—like the Jannisaries of the Ottoman Empire, the Mamluks in Egypt, or the elite black guards, the *'abid*, in Morocco—often found themselves in the position of making and unmaking sultans, simply because they had the power to do so.

South of the Sahara, the position of slaves was similar but far more various. The northern fringe of the West African savanna was largely Muslim by the fifteenth century. It therefore constituted a mixed case between North Africa and much of the rest of the continent. But the underlying environmental conditions were different. West Africa was chronically underpopulated; land had little value without people to work it. A kinship or other group could increase its power and wealth only by adding people, and the most readily available way to add people quickly was by purchase. The owner often wanted to assimilate the slave to a kinship position, even though it was a subordinate one. In many African societies, this subordination was only transitional, until the slave could be assimilated into the group. In some cases, slaves could become freedmen in one generation and

even rise to positions of leadership. Slaves in West Africa did all kinds of work. Some were commanders of the armies or palace servants on the Muslim model. Many were concubines or wives. Others did agricultural labor, sometimes under daily instruction, but sometimes under their own direction, owing nothing but a kind of rent.

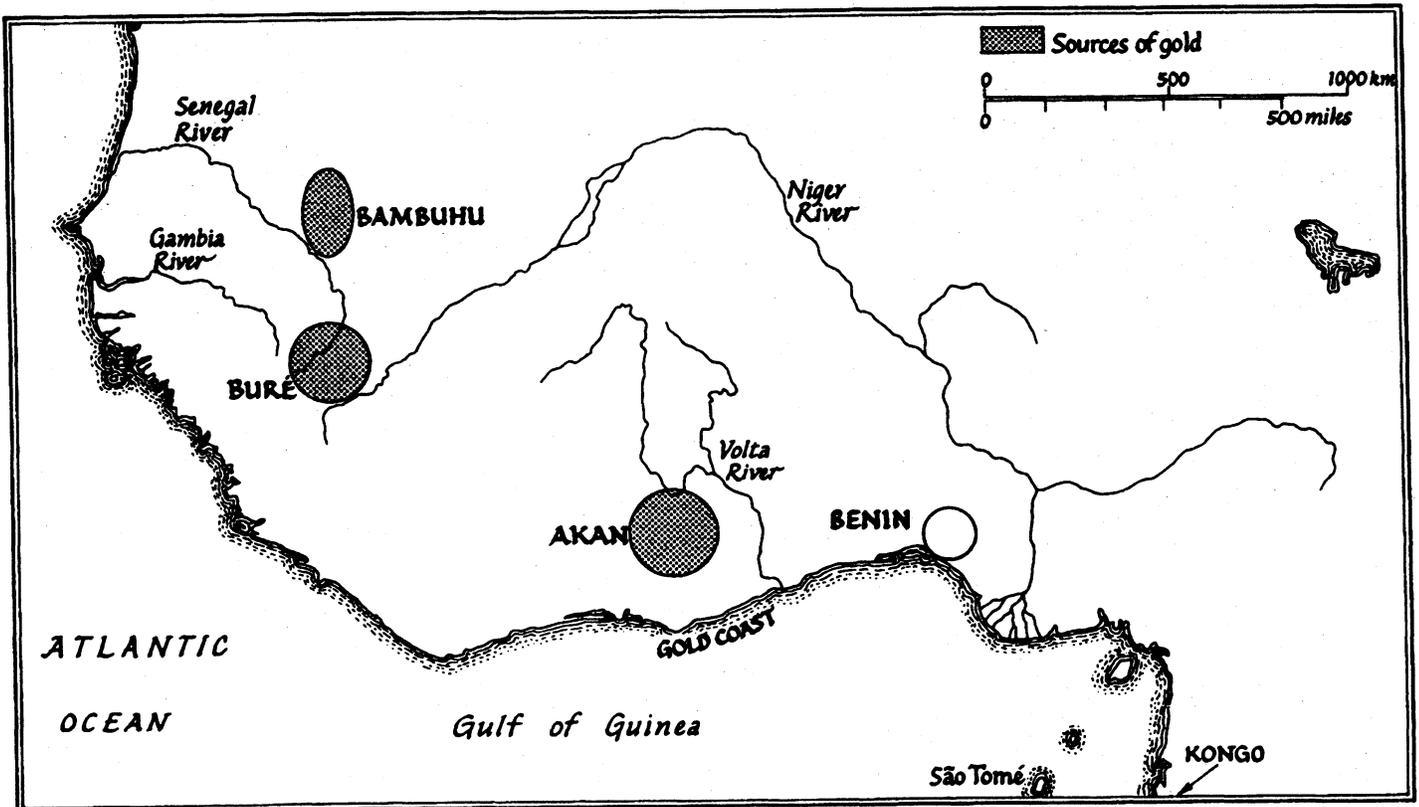
But this variety of position belonged only to settled slaves. West African societies made a sharp distinction between trade slaves and settled slaves. A freshly captured slave or a freshly condemned criminal had no rights. His life was forfeit, and the master could do as he liked. For a few months, each newly captured slave would live as a trade slave, but sooner or later the merchant/owner would sell him to Europeans or North Africans on the coast or sahel, or else sell him into West African slavery far from home. From that time, the purchaser began trying to assimilate the newcomer. If he accepted his new position, he gradually won membership in the new group and the protection of the laws. He could be resold—but other members of the group could often be sold as well, in time of famine, for example. Economic factors also discouraged resale. A trade slave, recently captured, was a potential danger to his captor. The cap-

tor often sold him or her at a low price, almost always less than the cost of supporting a child to the age of fourteen or so, when working life began. After assimilation, however, the slave was worth far more to his new society.

THE BEGINNING OF THE ATLANTIC TRADE

Most histories tend to treat the slave trade as it was at its height in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. We therefore tend to think of slaves as Africa's only export, or at least the main export until well into the nineteenth century. In fact, slaves were comparatively unimportant during the first two centuries of maritime contact—roughly the period of 1450 to 1650 A.D. The Portuguese mariners went down the coast looking for gold, not slaves. The availability of slaves for sale was a fortuitous and unexpected by-product of the gold trade. Yet the first centuries of trade were important, because they established the relationships that continued into the period of more extensive trade that was to follow.

From the first, the lure of gold concentrated Portuguese attention on two points on the West African coast. They could reach the gold fields of Buré and



West African trading regions.

Bambuhu most easily from trading stations on the Gambia River. The Portuguese seized the uninhabited Cape Verde Islands offshore as a secure entrepôt for that trade. The lower Gambia was already important in West African trade as a source of sea salt, and an existing trade route carried it into the interior. Slaves were available for sale on the Gambia, and the Portuguese began to buy them, though the numbers were not large—perhaps 1,300 a year exported to Europe before 1500 A.D. and another 500 a year to the Atlantic islands (not counting São Tomé).

The second point of coastal contact was the Gold Coast as an entry to the Akan gold fields. In 1480 A.D., the Portuguese began building a trade castle at Elmina to protect the gold awaiting shipment. There too, a slave trade was already in progress, but the Akan were interested in buying slaves, not selling them.

The Portuguese obliged by entering the coastal slave trade. They already traded with the important African kingdoms at Benin and Kongo, both of which had slaves for sale. By the 1520s, São Tomé's own sugar industry had begun to grow, and the island made a convenient center for the slave trade as well. São Tomé imported about 2,000 slaves a year from all sources. The Portuguese on the island put some of them to work on local sugar plantations, and sold about 500 a year to the Akan on the Gold Coast and a few to Portugal as well. Slave shipments from Africa directly to the Americas did not begin until 1532—to the Spanish West Indies and, still later, to Brazil.

The opening up of the Brazil market for slaves was more significant than mere distances on the map may indicate. The long east-west coast of West Africa has a strong ocean current and prevailing winds from the west. To reach either Europe or the West Indies, a sailing vessel had to drop south of the equator to

catch the southeast trades, then cross the equator once more in midocean to catch the northeast trades for the main Atlantic crossing—or go north to the Azores for the westerlies that would carry it to Europe. Each crossing of the equator meant passing through a belt of calms, the doldrums, which greatly increased the time required for the voyage.

After about 1550, however, the situation changed. Political disturbance in the kingdom of Kongo increased the supply of slaves; the beginning of the Brazilian sugar industry increased the demand. The voyage to the new sugar plantations was a straight run with the southeast trades, far shorter and more predictable than the trip to the West Indies. This gave Brazil an early advantage over the Caribbean. Brazilian sugar had to travel farther to reach Europe, but Brazil had easier access to African labor.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Ajayi, J. F., and Michael Crowder, *History of West Africa*, 2 vols., 3rd. ed. (London: Longman, 1985).
- Connah, Graham, *African Civilization. Precolonial Cities and States in Tropical Africa: An Archaeological Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
- Curtin, Philip D., *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984) pp. 15-59.
- Lovejoy, Paul E., *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
- Kopytoff, Igor, "African Slavery as an Institution of Marginality," in Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff, *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977), pp. 3-81.

ENDNOTES

¹ Richard W. Bulliet, *The Camel and the Wheel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975); W. H. McNeil, "The Eccentricity of Wheels, or Eurasian Transportation in Historical Perspective," *American Historical Review*, 92:1111-26 (1987).

² K. G. Davies, "The Living and the Dead: White Mortality in West Africa, 1684-1732," in Stanley L. Engerman and Eugene D. Genovese (eds.), *Race and Slavery in the Western Hemisphere: Quantitative Studies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), pp. 83-98.

