

# HISTORY OF SLAVERY IN AFRICA

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*Disclaimer: For participants of the International Workshop for “Dealing with the aftermath of slave trade and slavery.” Elmina (Ghana) 10 – 17 September 2024*

# Introduction

The paper is a synopsis of the history of slavery in Africa.

It examines the nature of indigenous slavery and the rise of modern slavery; from the trans- Saharan slave trade, Atlantic slave trade and the Indian Ocean slavery and the impact on Africa.

The paper also captures the abolitionist debates, emancipation, legacies and modern slavery in Africa

# Pre –colonial

In African societies, the concept of slavery was multifaceted and varied significantly across regions and communities.

Scholars such as Odijie (2024), Libest (2024), and Rossi have explored these complexities, emphasizing how slavery's practice and perception differed depending on cultural, social, and geographical contexts.

In Bantu-speaking communities, including the Abagusii and Abaluyia of Kenya, the term "Omosomba" was used to refer to enslaved individuals.

For instance, in the pre-19th century warfare between the Abanyarwanda and Abaganda, captured women were referred to as "umuja," meaning female slaves (Schoenbrun, 1997).

In Buganda, a free man was called "Musenze," with the right to change allegiance (Merdad, 2007).

The term "Muzaana" became prevalent in the 19th century among the Hutu, Tutsi, and Baganda to describe individuals who entered bondage through captivity or by another person's intervention

Among the Baganda, the term "Nvuma" was used for a female slave, while in

Kinyarwanda, "Ikvume" referred to a scorned person who was not considered part of the community (Merdad, 2007).

In the Dholuo community, the term "Misumba" was used for a slave, contrasting with "Jadak," a tenant at will, and "Kimirwa," someone born into servitude. The "Wasumbini," indicating workers or servants (Cohen & Atieno Odhiambo, 1987).

This nuanced use of terminology across different African societies illustrates the diverse experiences and statuses associated with slavery in these communities.

The 14th century Mali kingdom practiced slavery while in the Nile valley and Sahel region, chattel slavery was commonly practiced . Pawnship was also a practiced in the West Africa communities of the Akan people of Ghana and the Yoruba people of Nigeria .

There also was an aspect of military slaves consisting of conscripted labour units who performed military functions in Buganda Kingdom and in the Sudan region .

The human sacrifice of slaves was a common practice in the ancient kingdom of Benin and Ashanti Empire The indigenous slavery and slaves were kinless to the society that exploited them.

Indigenous slavery was hereditary and the status extended to their children and emancipation from the status of slavery varied in pre-colonial African societies though the initiatives did not necessarily conform to European legal standards of abolitionism.

African communities had integrating mechanism of the enslaved persons into the community.

However some of the African communities perpetuated the hereditary heritage of enslaved individuals for many generations ie Among the Abakosi of Cameroon.

## **The Rise of Modern Slavery in Africa**

The rise of capitalism in Europe and America fueled demand for labour; and this created a fertile ground for slave trade to flourish.

The rise of plantation agriculture in Europe, Americas, Asia and Caribbean's led to the increased demand for slaves and coerced labour. Slaves become movable commodities bought and sold in bulk across significant geographic distances.

As a result of this demand, slave trade activities were carried in all parts of Africa; and slaves ended up in plantations and mining economies in Europe and in the Americas .

The Atlantic slave trade may have begun around 1526 to 1867. Within these period; an estimated 12.5 million slaves were shipped from Africa, and 10.7 million arrived in the Americas. The destination for slaves was in the Americas and the Caribbean's.

The Middle Passage was the most horrific experience and claimed the lives of African slaves. The Indian Ocean Slave trade evolved around the Indian Ocean basin. Slaves were taken from mainland East Africa and sold in markets in the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf.

In contrast to the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the Indian Ocean slave trade was much older.

The Indian Ocean slave trade begun as early as the 9th century under Islamic rule along the east coast of Africa. Slaves captured during these time were sold in the Middle East . The volume of the slave trade increased in the 19th century due to the demand for labour on coastal plantations in Zanzibar, Pemba, Reunion, Mauritius and Madagascar.

Most slaves were captured from the Great Lakes region; taken to the coastal plantation and others were exported through Zanzibar, Kilwa and Pemba to Turkey, India, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, Iraq and Iran. An estimated 17 million Africans were sold into slavery through the Indian Ocean slave trade from the 7th century to 1920.

# Impact

Slave trade had enormous impact on Africa. From the economic perspective, there was a decline of traditional African industries, such as handicraft, clothing, beading, and mineral mining.

Similarly Africa witnessed loss of human property such as farms, houses and livestock, because of frequent raids. Most active and able bodied men and women were taken into slavery; leaving behind the old and the young hence escalating the crisis of dependency.

# Impact

Slave trade also affected the rise of urbanization along the slave trade routes and ports such as Lagos, Porto Novo, Elimina, Dakar, Ujiji, Tabora and Kota Kota .

The dynamics of slave trade in Africa raised an African entrepreneurial class of slavers who engaged in slave trade. These were the Asantahene of Asante, Jaja of Opopo, Samoure Toure of Mandinka, Chief Kivoi among the Akamba, Mirambo and Nyungu Ya Mawe of the Nyamwezi .

# Impact

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The slave trade led to the emergence of a new breed of people that resulted from the social intermingling of European traders and African women; or even through acts of rape.

The aftermath of this interaction was the mulatto population, whose descendants are found in places like Goree and Dakar, in Senegal. Slave trade also contributed in the spread of cultures such as Islam and the coastal Swahili into the interior of Africa.

This included Swahili dressing, language, architecture, music and dietary habits. Some of the run -away slaves turned to Christianity and sought refugees from missionaries to avoid being taken in as slaves in places such as Freretown and Rabai in the Kenya coast .

# Abolition of Slavery in Africa

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## and its aftermath

The process of abolitionism in Africa was ominous one and influenced by several factors; economic, legal and political. Abolition of slavery in Africa was gradual rather than immediate to ensure compensation to the slave owners and at the same time allow the slave owners to transit to free labour[ The Debates in Parliament Session 1833,47].The moral argument for abolitionism was founded on deep religious feelings against the slave trade and slavery as a iniquitous practice[ The Church Missionary Society 2005, Archive, section IV: Africa Missions Parts 20-24,pp.7-14.]

What ensued was the diplomatic pressure in the signing of international treaties and mobilization of naval ships to intercept slave traders and also trying the captains of ships involved. The European nations adopted the measures of the reciprocal right to search the vessels on the great powers and also declared slave trade as piracy by international law. Britain negotiated treaties with other European nations and obtained the mutual right of search of each other's ships for slaves but the mutuality was largely ineffective because only Britain had the naval capability to search and to enforce the measures.

France, Holland, Sweden and Spain all agreed to Britain's right of search but the United States of America and Portugal resisted[ Jasper Ridley (1970), Lord Palmerston. London: Constable, pp. 184–5. Palmerston was Foreign Secretary from 1830 to 1851 apart from a spell in opposition from 1841 to 1846, Home Secretary 1852–55, and then Prime Minister from 1855 to 1865 apart from four months in 1859.].

The British Admiralty Courts tried slave traders and captains of ships seized. Later there were Mixed Commission Courts with judges from Spain, Portugal, and the Netherlands; sitting at Sierra Leone, Havana, the Cape of Good Hope, Rio, Suriname, Loanda and St Helena. Between 1819 and 1846, 498 vessels were prosecuted before the Mixed Commission Courts in Sierra Leone, of which 473 were condemned. Over those years 63,436 slaves were set free by the Mixed Commission Courts in Sierra Leone[ Hartfield, J. (2017).

The British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, 1838–1956: A History. Oxford: Oxford University Press .pp 70-73. pp 70-73. ]. There were also several cruiser systems searching for slave traders in the high seas. This included the West African Squadron and the Royal Navy policing the slave trade along the East African Coast[Charles H. Allen, (1888). ‘The slave trade in Eastern and Central Africa’, Manchester Guardian, reproduced in Anti-Slavery Reporter, Series 4, Vol. 8, No. 3, May and June 1888, p. 63.]. The process of abolitionism was also delayed by the legal pluralism in many African societies.

For instance in the Islamic east African coast; slavery and slave trade was continually justified under Islamic culture long after the international bans[ Deustch, J.G. (2006) Emancipation without Abolition in German East Africa 1884-1914. Oxford: James Currey; Arthur Hardinge consul general Zanzibar 1894-1900 latter to Rev Bins CMS Mission Secretary CMS Miscellaneous papers CMS/Z244/1.]. The assumption that African societies were not abolitionist has been disabused by the emerging literature on the role of the continent on abolitionism.

Those who constituted the local abolitionist groups included African converts in several mission stations along the Swahili coast and some of the run-away slaves who established independent settlement and created sanctuaries for other runaway slaves.[ Lydia Wilson Marshall (2012) Spatiality and the Interpretation of Identity Formation: Fugitive Slave Community Creation in Nineteenth-Century Kenya. In *The African Archaeological Review*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (December 2012), pp. 355-381].

As slavery was being abolished in Africa; the question of emancipation was vaguely implemented. This was because the use and application of imperial decrees as a pathway to emancipation was ambiguous. The certificate of freedom were very often written in languages not understood by the slaves. The colonial government was also slow in funding the programmes for the settlement of freed slaves.[ The Cadbury Archives, Birmingham, CMS annual Report 1976:41-42. ]. Where the mission churches were at the forefront of emancipation; they faced financial difficulties in maintaining the upkeep of freed slaves.

- For example in 1877 in the mission stations of Rabai and Frere town along the Swahili coast; the colonial government often reneged in providing the much anticipated 5pounds for every liberated slaves[ CMS/1909/126 Report of United Mission Conference,7-11 June 1909 KNA PC/CP/6/5/1 Stevenson to McCure,17 November 1917.]. The mission stations also understood emancipation and freedom in the social makers such as the certificate of freedom, new names, bible teaching, prayer and hymns, an education and skills.

These process of enculturating the freed slaves was witnessed in several Christian villages established by the Methodist, CMS and the Roman Catholic Church along the Swahili coast. It also provided avenues of social mobility, identity and economic empowerment though at times the freed slaves ran away and castigated the missionaries of highhandedness and subjugation[ The Cadbury Archives, Birmingham, Anti- Slavery Reporter, June/ July 1899.].

## Legacies of slavery in Africa

The so-called post-slavery environment in Africa has been interpreted as a ubiquitous landscape of slavery. The tangibility and intangibility of the slave trade landscape intersect the descendants of the freed slaves and those of the slavers in an environment that is xenophobic. The landscape is rife with inequities that stem from yesteryears of the slave trade.

The slave routes, ports of call, post-slavery settlement communities, squatter system and landless communities are among the legacies of the slave trade that speck Africa. Abolitionism and emancipation did not necessarily translate into sustainable livelihoods for the descendants of freed slaves because of continued subjugation. The phenomenon of landlessness, denial of citizenship, and precarious livelihoods and structural inequality typify the current post slave populations[ Nyanhoga, A.S et al (2007). The Consequences of slavery heritage at the Kenya coast. Nairobi: CUEA Press.].

The legacies of slavery is well attested in Africa but the silence on this subject should be questioned. The silence reveals the dynamics of power that silence the voices of subalterns, who are mainly slave descendants. Slavery and its legacies have greatly influenced important issues such as access to land, education, freedom to exercise political, religious or administrative duties, as well as the recognition of citizenship or social marginalization of servile groups and their descendants. The integration of slaves in fictive systems of kinship enabled their lifelong subordination and their confinement to inferior roles within kinship and social networks.

Religion was a major factor particularly in north-African and Eastern Africa coastal societies, which used Islam to legitimize the enslavement of sub-Saharan populations. This resulted in the "racialization" of relationships based on slavery. The combination of religion, race and enslavement continue to impact negativity on the subalterns in Sahelian and Indian-Ocean spaces[ Nyanhoga, A.S et al (2007). The Consequences of slavery heritage at the Kenya coast. Nairobi: CUEA Press]

The slave descendants currently deal with issues of stigmatization, marginalization, representation and under-representation within social classificatory structures in various countries such as , Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Mauritius, Re- union and Madagascar and Mauritania. This has resulted in articulation of grass-roots activism putting pressure on national policies to recognize the economic emancipation and political representation of the descendant of slavery and slave trade.

In Africa and African states such as the Re- Union, Mauritius, Kenya and Tanzania represents a unique case of study memorialization of slavery. The Creole community in Mauritius and Re-Union also memorialize the slavery through songs as forms of resilience of the Afro-Kreol descendants whose ancestors were victims of slavery. The Morn'iman rezistans song written and sung by Jean Jacques ( Zanzak) Arjoon highlight the centrality of Le Morne Brabant Mountain; reflect the subaltern voices and symbol of conscience[ Kauffman, L.A (1990). "The Anti-Politics of Identity," Socialist Review (Oakland, Calif.) 20, no. 1. 67–80.

Le Morne Heritage Trust Fund and Ministry of Arts and Culture. (2007).

The Le Morne Cultural Landscape. Application for Inscription on the World Heritage List. Republic of Mauritius. Available at Nelson Mandela Centre for African and Kreol Culture.]. The tarabu music sung by ex-slaves such as Binti Siti as symbols of constructing new forms of mobility and identity. Through the tarabu music, the former slaves would ridicule and challenge the hegemonic status of former slave owners.

## **Metaphorical Slavery in Africa**

The Modern forms of slavery in Africa range from sex trafficking prevalent in countries with poor economic conditions and high incidences of violence such as Eritrea, Burundi, Central African Republic, Mauritania, South Sudan, Algeria Djibouti, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Somalia, Sudan and Tunisia. Forced labour is commonly practiced in Mauritania and Niger, South Sudan, Mali, Cote –d Voire.

African countries that have high incidents of child soldiers include Algeria, Angola, Burundi, Congo-Brazzaville, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Uganda, Comoros, Guinea-Bissau, and Senegal. Other forms of servitude conditions commonly practiced in Africa include bonded labour or debt bondage, domestic labour, child soldiers and forced marriage [Maslen, S. The Use of Children as Soldiers in Africa A country analysis of child recruitment and participation in armed conflict in

<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/C157333FCA91F573C1256C130033E448-chilsold.htm>

The metaphors of slavery are replicated across Africa[ Rossi, B. (2009). Reconfiguring Slavery: West African Trajectories: Liverpool Studies in International Slavery Volume: 2. Liverpool University Press.] and hence becomes the basis of exclusion and subjugation. Along the Swahili coast, from northern Mozambique, Tanzania, Kenya to southern Somalia the metaphors of slavery reinforce a hierarchy of rights, privileges, dispossession and subjugation. Slave concepts such as “kijakazi”, “mtumwa”, “mushunguli” mzigula, implied “worker”, “foreigner”, and “slave” and entrench dispossession; subjugation and inter- generation exclusion of the slave descendants.

Arabic words (eubudia, r1aqin, aistiebad) implied enslavement, serfdom, servitude and bondage. Some concepts implied social classificatory system hence creating a binary between slaves, their descendants and slave master. The place names such as “shimoni” and “gazi” signified oppression and subjugation of those associated with slave ancestry. Other place names such as “mtito- andei” in local Akamba language refers to a place of vultures where slaves captured in the inland but unable to make it to the Swahili Coast slave market were abandoned and devoured by vultures. In Rabai "wazalia" refers to those who came and constitute a nucleus settlement of slave descendants (bukini) characterized with stigma, isolation, poverty, rejection from the indigenous Rabai population.

# CONCLUSION

**The paper has established that slavery in Africa has mutated over the years. Currently the greatest challenges of slavery in Africa are the inter-general legacies that continue to create binary between the “free” and “unfree”.**

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# THANK YOU

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