

Article

A Study in Evil: The Slave Trade in Africa

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Abstract: In this special issue on justice, ethics, and philosophy of religion, let us consider a historical case study. The trade of slaves across the Atlantic lasted 400 years and led to the forcible removal of about 12.5 million people from Africa, south of the Sahara. This paper examines the African slave trade in light of the notion that evil of whatever form is a menace to our very existence and a rupture of the very essence of hope. It will focus on the nature, development, and growth of the African/European Slave Trade, as it interrogates issues such as: if evil is coterminous with human cruelty, then the slave trade was the apogee of human evil and avarice; the notion of slavers saving the enslaved from themselves; and providing an avenue for conversion into Abrahamic religions. The essay will also be interested in how slavers—European and Africans alike—rationalized slavery and how the enslaved and onlookers responded to the spectacle of enslavement.

Keywords: slavery; slave trade; Atlantic; Muslim; Africa; domestic; Islam; servitude; evil; greed; enslavement; property

1. A Study in Evil: The Slave Trade in Africa

Sometimes, the current debate on the origins of and compensation for slavery is less than well grounded, historically. This is an historical essay, designed as a prolegomena, setting up the context for further philosophical inquiry. In *The Interesting Narratives* (Equiano 1995), Equiano (1745–1797), born in what is now eastern Nigeria and kidnapped into slavery at age 11, aptly summed up what many consider today as one of the greatest crimes against humanity. Upon experiencing cruel brutality during the Middle Passage, Equiano declared that he “now wished for the last friend, death” to come and take him away and that he “will not recommend this treatment even for [his] enemies” (Equiano 1995). On another level, upon observing the suffering of slaves, Paul E. Isert (d. 1789), a German-born surgeon working for the Danish Guinea Company at Christiansborg in 1786, in present-day Ghana, concluded that, for two centuries, “the Black Slave Trade” constituted “the shame of mankind” (Isert [1788] 1992, pp. 147–59) and the apogee of human avarice. What was the overriding notion about the human condition that drew people to rationalize, often with religious reasons, and engage in the sale of other human beings? Is there such a thing as “just enslavement” to which other people, the so-called descendants of Ham (Genesis ix, pp. 20–27; Sanders 1979, pp. 521–32; and Bashir 2019, pp. 92–116) and those suffering the Qur’anic injunction of “unbelief” (Hunwick 2000; Sanneh 1976) were condemned? How do we account for the harsh realities, and can we define all forms of servitude as “social death” that denies its victims the right to participate in society?

The institution of slavery has had a place in settled societies and has been practiced in various forms since antiquity. Slavery is traced as far back as the early civilizations of Mesopotamia, Egypt, classical Greece, and Rome and into the Slavic countries. In Roman law, for instance, slavery was defined as a relationship issue—between a person and a thing, where the “thing,” the slave, was often categorized as an intruder and not really part of society (Cruz-Uribe 1986, p. 309). From the Republic to the Empire, Rome procured slaves or replenished their slave stock from two sources: (1) prisoners of war, or outright purchase from their borders in exchange for silver and wine from the Mediterranean world, or (2) they relied on the *familia*, as defined by Roman law, which stipulated that infants



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born of slave parents were slaves by law. Just as in most other settled societies, people became slaves and were defined as such when procured through war, sold, bought, and used for a variety of purposes ranging from the cultivation of the land to administration, the military, and domestic services. From the activities of the North African Arab trading networks and raiding, Africans made their way into the Mediterranean world and into the Indian Ocean Basin as slaves. This is not a suggestion that Africans did not have their version of what will later be described as slavery, which will be discussed shortly.

In western societies, the term slavery is often defined as “the legal institutionalization of persons as property” with set rights over the property that included freedoms, the use of its productive and reproductive capacities, and, sometimes, the power over life and death ([Miers and Kopytoff 1977](#), p. 11). It also carried connotations of “ownership, property, and the purchasing of people” ([Miers and Kopytoff 1977](#), p. 11). So defined and practiced in western societies, the term slavery invites lots of “misleading ambiguities” and misinterpretations, especially when applied to Africa and other non-western societies. Suzanne Miers argued in the 1970s that, in Africa, what Europeans misunderstood to mean slavery was African kingship, a concept that sometimes privileged the exercise of control over wives, children, and other family members and required, in some cases, a form of transaction akin to the purchase and disposal of property in western societies. Though Miers’ definition focused on domestic slaves and was unable to capture slaves on plantations and in mines ([Klein and Lovejoy 1979](#), pp. 181–212), nonetheless, it is still accurate to assert that the term slavery was used to refer to a situation far removed from European comprehension. It is thus appropriate, as Bloch cautioned, that the essence in any discussion of slavery must take into account the “two conceptual balancing acts” of (a) an understanding of the system of exploitation of which the system (slavery) forms a part and (b) the evolution of the terminology ([Lane and MacDonald 2011](#)). Certainly, the use of the term “slave” is of foreign origin and has come to mean “Persons who are held in captivity, and who may be bought or sold” ([Lovejoy 1983](#), p. 110). The purpose of all forms of bondage not only defines slavery but was also transformed with European and Arab contact. Contact with Arab and European slavers changed the dynamics of slavery and the slave trade in Africa. It is thus without doubt that the western conception of slavery, and the uses to which slaves were subjected, had different connotations in different parts of the world, and its introduction and evolution in Africa transformed the regime of bondage and servitude (for further discussion, see [Lovejoy et al. 1979](#)).

Africans experienced three distinct types of slave trades: (1) The European Slave Trade that took Africans across the Atlantic from the mid-fifteenth century until the end of the nineteenth century; (2) the Arab Slave Trade across the Sahara and the Indian Ocean that predated European contact with Africa; and (3) domestic slavery. The three exhibited the distinguishing features of procurement, the capacity for assimilation, treatment, and the purposes for which they acquired slaves, all of which in turn determined the level of cruelty for slaves. Yet, in a 2010 response to Henry Louis Gates on the “African Involvement in the Slave Trade”, Molefi Kete Asante of Temple University argued forcibly that there was no such thing as an African Slave Trade but insisted on two types of slave trades: the European slave trade across the Ocean and the Arab Slave Trade across the desert ([Asante 2014](#)). This falls in line with the discourse on slavery in Africa, which tends to focus less on the origins and nature of slavery but rather on two strands of arguments—(1) whether slavery emerged in response to European and Arab demands for slaves or (2) whether Europeans and Arabs simply tapped into an already existing practice in Africa ([Fage 1969](#), pp. 393–404).

This discourse on the Slave Trade crystalized into two schools of thought led by Walter Rodney and J. D. Fage.¹ While Walter Rodney argued that slavery in Africa emerged in response to European demand, J. D. Fage held the opposing view that slavery is indigenous to Africa and was already widespread and endemic prior to European contact. For Fage, Europeans simply tapped into an already existing system of slavery ([Fage 1969](#), p. 393). In 1980, J. D. Fage continued the discussion by examining published European eyewitness accounts from Angola to Senegal and argued that, during the first contacts in the fifteenth

century, Africans offered European traders what was termed as ‘slaves’ as articles of trade ([Fage 1980](#), p. 310). While there was no such thing as a “slave class” in West Africa, the existence of monarchical governments in Africa whose status rested on dependents, recruited by force or by judicial and economic means, made it possible for masters to exchange such defendants for other forms of wealth. For J. D. Fage, in essence, this constituted slavery, and Africans thus provided the market in which Europeans could trade slaves.

Walter Rodney disagreed with J. D. Fage and contended that occasional references to slaves in the Upper Guinea in the 16th and 17th centuries concerned “political clients” at the king’s courts but was nothing akin to “chattel slaves, agricultural serfs, or even household servants” ([Rodney 1966](#), pp. 431–43). These were people running from danger in one kingdom to another kingdom ([Rodney 1966](#), p. 433). Portuguese records pertaining to the Guinea coast, and descriptions of trade items, make no mention of slavery, which is a reason, Walter Rodney argued, for the absence of slavery akin to European descriptions in the early years of European contact. Interestingly, the first group of African slaves was exported from the Guinea coast.

There is no doubting the existence of collaborators—the ruling classes and the emerging merchant class along the Guinea coast—who joined hands with Europeans to enslave others. John Hawkins (1532–1592), a pioneer of the Triangular Trade, writing on slavery following three visits to the Guinea coast, might be illuminating. Hawkins attested to three factors in the slave trade: (1) British slave trading was nothing short of raiding; (2) it was a dangerous and violent enterprise, which was an acknowledgment of the raiding regime adopted in the acquisition of slaves and the violent responses of the victims, and (3) it was essential to establish a concert with the kings to ensure successful slave trading on the coast ([Kelsey 2003](#); [Hawkins 2010](#), p. 70). John Barbot, an agent of the French Royal African Company who also made two voyages to the coast of West Africa in 1678 and 1682, observed that the African kings he came into contact with “are so absolute, that upon any slight pretense of offenses committed by their subjects, they order them to be sold for slaves, without regard to rank, or possessions” ([Barbot 1732a](#)) This is in addition to allying with European slavers to wage war or attack neighbors.

The existence of collaborators must not, however, reduce the involvement in the slave trade, as Henry Louis Gates opines, to a tacit approval and involvement of all African peoples and kingdoms in the slave trade. Of course, there is no doubt about the involvement of such forest kingdoms as Asante, Dahomey, and Benin and areas along the East African Coast and Central Africa. After all, European agency in the slave trade seemed deliberate and higher than African agency, for the motives for kidnapping and the initiative for transportation rested on Europeans, who also crossed the Atlantic, created an industry that included shipbuilding and insurance companies, and provided the capital and banking systems for the slave trade ([Asante 2014](#)). The emerging African coastal merchants and monarchies acted in concert with the European and Arab slave traders for the success of the slave trade.

For the next 400 years, this arrangement was to determine the organization of the slave trade, with the kings and interested parties organizing raids and wars against peoples of the interior for slaves. For the European, it was about earning profits from their conquest in the New World by supplying cheap and readily available labor to work in their overseas colonies. The participation of African kings and merchants was conditioned by two determinations. First, as Martin Klein argued, there was the political model, where the monarchies had to raid and wage wars continuously to reward their office holders with slaves. The second was the economic model, which favored the trade of slaves for profit, which was in harmony with the endeavors of their Europeans partners. The third might be where sovereignty is marginal to the society, but with the need to get rid of prisoners of war, slavery, marginal as it might be, became an aspect of a societal norm ([Klein 1990](#), p. 233) that gradually turned into an aspect of the state’s economic structure.

2. Domestic Slavery

Scholars do not agree as to when exactly slavery was introduced in Africa, but what is certain is that, by the ninth century, slavery had become a dominant practice in the Muslim world, the Persian Gulf, and the Indian Ocean Basin. Arab traders had been involved in the trade networks, and through contacts with North Africa and the East African coast, African slaves became an important item in the Mediterranean world and the Indian Ocean Basin trade. Slaves were mostly procured through trade or as booty in war or raids, but they also came from other sources, such as debtor pawnage, theft, or other forms of offences. While these were responses to the external demand for cheap labor, some states within Africa also made use of slave labor. A few examples of some kingdoms in Africa with varying degrees of engagement and demand for slaves for local use will suffice.

While slavery had been a marginal part of society well into the fifteenth century, it had, by the sixteenth century, transformed into a complex institution with varying impacts on societal structures ([Lovejoy 1983](#), p. 40). This was a result of the growth of the European slave trading activities that benefitted from the infusion of vast resources that made slaves available for both export and for domestic use ([Lovejoy 1983](#)). In the Kongo, and the Gold Coast, for instance, slavery was already an important aspect of society before the arrival of the Portuguese. For instance, in the Kongo, the two principal areas of Mbanza and Mpinda, which had a large population, also boasted large slave holding stations for the nobility. With the greater presence of the Portuguese in the first decades of the sixteenth century, gun and gun powder became readily available for raids and the capture of slaves. Additionally, access to Portuguese soldiers from 1514 made it possible for the state to capture and procure more slaves, which were used for both domestic and external trade. Some of the slaves served as soldiers, while others became part of the retinue of the nobility ([Lovejoy 1983](#)), and some slave masters conducted business through their slaves, but others remained as farm hands. By the turn of the century, Cadamosto could report that the king of the Wolof sold slaves to visiting merchants. He opined that the king also “employs these slaves in cultivating the land” for the merchants and state officials under very harsh conditions. These slaves were also settled in villages where they cultivated millet, sorghum, indigo, and vegetables. Slavery in the nineteenth century transformed from something dependent on a kinship-based society to something undergoing some changes.

The Portuguese, plying along the Guinea coast in the fifteenth century in search of gold resources, procured slaves to sell to Gold Coasters looking for labor in their mines. Other areas where slaves were also used in gold mining in the western Sudan included Bure and Bambuk and, towards the forest region, the Akan gold fields. Scholars have discussed the Asante struggle with states such as Denkyira for the control of the route and access to the coast ([Boahen 1986](#)). First, this was for direct access to the source of guns and gun powder, and second, this was for slaves, who initially were to work in the mines and were later to be sold to Europeans. Slavery had, by the early seventeenth century, become an important institution in the forest state of Asante, where they used slave labor in mining and panning, and some merchants along the Gold Coast also used slaves as porters. Observers intimated that slave labor was the most common way to cart goods and to carry out all kinds of work requiring the use of labor ([Lovejoy 1983](#), p. 41). Asante searched for slaves to satisfy the domestic use; this expanded to include providing slaves to satisfy the European demand, through which they acquired more guns and gun power to capture more slaves, thus symbolizing the gun-slave circle.

In the Sokoto Caliphate, which also had great numbers of slaves by the mid nineteenth century, a typical day in a slave’s life is detailed in Mary F. Smith’s *Baba of Karo: A Woman of Muslim Hausa* ([Smith 1954](#)). Mary Smith gives a vivid picture of a typical day in a slave’s life. Slaves wake up and begin work at 9:30 a.m. stopping by the time of *Asr*, the late afternoon prayer, after which they spend time on their individual plots. They spent most of the day working for their master and had to also find time to cultivate their own little plots from which to feed themselves and their children. Women were especially used for their productive and reproductive capacities. In addition to working on the farm, women

also fetched water, pounded fufu, washed clothes, and kept the compound clean. Women also worked with men on the fields and in craft production and portage or petty trading.

The differences between this form of slavery and Arab and European forms of slavery rest upon the uses to which slaves were put and the methods of acquisition. In Africa, some slaves rose to positions of responsibility in their societies. There are the classic cases of the women slaves at the royal palace in Dahomey, those in the Amazons, and the female soldiers of Dahomey ([Lovejoy 1983](#), p. 115). Male slaves bore the brunt of agricultural work in Western and Central Africa, but it is also true that women also worked on the field and in the compounds, helping to cook and take care of children, and they sometimes served as concubines for their master and their male children ([Klein 1983](#)). There were also the peanut farms in Senegambia and the palm oil production in the Gold Coast and Cameroon.

Many scholars such as Walter Rodney and, recently, Boubacar Barry, following the writings of R. S. Rattray, a British colonial Anthropologist in Ghana, have argued that African domestic slavery had a different meaning from that which pertained in the New World, especially with plantation agriculture.² [Rattray \(1929\)](#) has eloquently discussed the various shades of slavery in Asante in present-day Ghana, where they had the *Odonko* and the *Nsua*, and in other parts of Africa, where these slaves had privileges that created access to freedom and assimilation ([Rattray 1929](#)). One could be a slave and within the next three generations become a person of significance in society. This was the reason for the unwritten constitution of Asante that forbade the identification of persons based on slave lineage.

3. Muslim/Arab Slave Trade

Arabs played a crucial role in the slave carrying trade from the seventh century to probably the twentieth century and provided slaves for their domestic use and to the classical world. Arabs practiced slavery before the advent of Islam in the seventh century, but Islam's spread into North Africa in the seventh and eighth centuries changed the dynamics of servitude and slavery in the Western Sudan, across the desert, and later, in the ancient kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai. By the ninth century, Arabs entered the East African coast and the city-states established along the coast. From the two areas, some African slaves, either through kidnapping or purchase as slaves, made their way into the Middle East, the Mediterranean world, and the Indian Ocean. It is estimated that the Arab slave trade led to the enslavement of about 10 million Africans.

Religion has always been central in any rationalization of historic slavery and of the slave trade. Firm legal and social foundations rationalized the Arab Slave Trade. Muslim scholars viewed slavery as a divinely ordained human condition. Man was created to enjoy freedom but, for security reasons, had to satisfy two conditions: becoming a Muslim or come under the protection of the Muslim territory ([Sanneh 1976](#), p. 80). The protection of the Muslim territory could be attained only by conversion to Islam. Those who failed to do so forfeited the enjoyment of the initial offer of freedom for mankind, and this was a justification for their enslavement ([Sanneh 1976](#)).³ The writings of Ahmad Baba, in response to an enquiry from Tuat about the enslavement of other Muslims, made this point clearer ([Hunwick 2000](#)). Ahmad Baba was a Songhai scholar who was taken prisoner in Morocco following the 1571 Moroccan invasion of Songhai. He expressed the difficulty in differentiating Muslim from non-Muslim war captives and made three determinations: (1) An African who was previously Muslim must not be enslaved, for “the reason for enslavement is unbelief.” ([Hunwick 2000](#), p. 133). The curse of Ham, which seemed to have emerged from the need to rationalize the subjugation of Canaan ([Sanders 1979](#), p. 521), was often used as a justification for slavery and the slave trade, but the Arabs and the Muslim world used “unbelief” as their justification ([Bashir 2019](#), p. 96). In *Miraj al-Su'ud* (The Ladder of Ascent), Ahmad Baba contested the curse of Ham and, referring to it as “inauthentic”, argued in favor of the Qur'anic injunction of “unbelief” as a cause of enslavement ([Hunwick and Harrak 2000](#), pp. 25–26). The use of the curse of Ham coincides with the 7th century Arab incursion into North Africa and the influx of Blacks into the

Arab world ([Goldenberg 2003](#), p. 197). This narrative will later be subjected to an Islamic interpretative lens as a justification for the enslavement of Africans under Muslim control ([Firestone 2007](#), p. 53). (2) A non-Muslim who persists in his/her “unbelief” was liable to enslavement, irrespective of the curse of Ham. This refers to those who converted to Islam and for whatever reason return to the situation of “unbelief.” (3) Any war captive who converts to Islam upon capture can continue as a slave. There are several interpretations of Ahmad Baba’s treatise on slavery, but it must be made clear that he was primarily concerned with “original Muslims”, i.e., those who were free Muslims before capture. These were forbidden as slaves.

Ahmad Baba’s treatise sought to refocus the discussion on the justification for enslaving Africans to privilege “original Muslims” ([Hunwick 2000](#)) or “natural origins” ([Bashir 2019](#), p. 101)—those born as Muslims—and to exclude converted Muslims ([Bashir 2019](#), p. 101). His major contribution was the demarcation of West Africa into “lands of Islam” and non-Muslim lands ([Hunwick 2000](#), p. 133). First, it was not permissible to capture slaves from the “lands of Islam”. These areas included Songhai, Katsina, Gobir, Zamfara, generally the entire Hausaland, and Bornu. The second related to persons from areas classified as non-Muslim, and for such people, it was lawful for them to be captured as slaves. The complicated nature of Ahmad Baba’s treatise came to light in a question sent in a letter to him from Sa’id b. Ibrahim al-Jirari of Tuat relating to their conquest and subjugation. It relates to the myth of West Africans, in an earlier past, who had been conquered through “unbelief” or “jihad” but were spared of slavery. How should such populations be classified? Despite this complication, Ahmad Baba determined that enslaved persons claiming to be freeborn Muslims should be spared if they are able to prove they came from “lands of Islam” ([Hunwick 2000](#), p. 133). No one was allowed to keep captives unless they were acquired in defense of the faith. This therefore meant that the procurement of slaves through peaceful means was prohibited, and even prisoners of war were to be freed upon the conclusion of the war.

The treatise of Ahmad Baba and his judgement on slavery became operational in Africa, south of the Sahara, as evidenced in the writings of Uthman dan Fodio ([Hunwick 2000](#), p. 135). The Sultans of the Sokoto Caliphate in the first decades of the nineteenth century invoked Ahmad Baba’s treatise on Muslims and slavery. The complication was that many Muslims ended up as slaves, and it was difficult, as Ahmad Baba had intimated, to determine if these were original pagans, Muslims, or converts after enslavement. For instance, there were many Muslims in the slave population of Bahia, Brazil. Following the 1720s and 1750s revolutions in Futa Jallon and Futa Toro and the later Fulani jihad of 1804, many Muslims were taken into slavery, were sold off to ships bound for the New World, remained as domestic slaves, or were emptied into the Arab Slave Trade network. Some Hausa Muslim slaves gained permission to perform prayers ([Fisher 2001](#), p. 30). There is also evidence of slaves who were able to read and write in Arabic ([Hall 2011](#)). Some of these slaves were noted as smart enough to raise the prices of Mandingo and Fulani slaves in Cuba, for they made excellent servants ([Fisher 2001](#), p. 30). The Mediterranean region is said to have housed numerous African slaves. Malta served as a clearinghouse for slaves and had about 10,000 slaves by 1749, and the Muslim slaves had permission to organize congregational prayers. The Zanji slave revolt led by the Muslim preacher Muhammad ibn ‘Ali is one more example ([Hunwick 2000](#)). The insecurity slavery ushered into Africa ensured that no one, Muslim or non-Muslim, was spared. Slave raiders had no luxury to differentiate between an original pagan and an “original Muslim”.

In any case, Muslim societies adopted an enlightened attitude towards slavery because of the Qur’anic ruling that allowed for the freeing and good treatment of slaves as part of an expression of piety. Slaves in the Muslim world engaged in agricultural work, were artisans, engaged in caravan work, and served as concubines and “luxury slaves”—those who followed the master around to ensure his comfort, be it holding the horse for him to dismount or keeping the master’s sword while he rode on the horse. There were acceptable methods for a slave to gain freedom, including the decisions of dying masters on their

deathbeds or mere acts of piety. However, even then, no matter how “easy” it was to become free or the better treatment a slave enjoyed, there is no such thing as a better form of servitude; all forms of slavery entail a loss of freedom.

It is crucial to mention here that African Muslim slaves found in Islam principles that buttressed ideologies of slavery, even as they furthered their own interest, including resistance (Hall 2011, p. 280). Some literate slaves wrote letters in Arabic, and, fortunately, some are extant. Bruce Hall (2011) examined three of these letters written by slaves acting as literate commercial agents for their masters and argued that these letters portray the ways in which Muslim slaves tried to use their Muslim identity as a negotiating tool and to demonstrate that their fidelity to their master’s commands is a result of their piety and moral character as Muslims. Muslim slaves displayed their knowledge and cultural familiarity not as an instrument with which to contest their marginal relations with masters but as avenues for improving relations with their masters. In the Senegambia area, where the French had ended slavery, Lamin Sanneh (1976) writes of cleric slave masters opening Qur’anic schools for their former slaves, who, in some ways, continued to pay monies to their former masters (Sanneh 1976). This ensured that the financial benefits from having slaves continued but under the guise of providing education. A brief discussion of how Europeans engaged in African slavery, which follows afterwards, will be necessary.

Paul Lovejoy interpreted the Muslim attitude to slavery as a form of “religious apprenticeship” through which slaves could become Muslims (Lovejoy 1983, pp. 15, 117)—a St. Augustine type of human progression toward Western civilization. The “religious apprenticeship” stance speaks to the argument that many Africans flocked to Islam to avoid slavery and that slavery was a tool for conversion to Islam, but this argument has been recently discredited (Sanneh 1976, p. 81 and Fisher 2001, pp. 1–39), as shown in Ahmad’s Baba’s treatise on Muslims and slaves discussed in earlier paragraphs. People would not just abandon their stance against Islam simply to avoid enslavement, and Muslim leaders, reasonably, may not have permitted this kind of en masse conversion, for this could hurt the slave population. This perhaps stems from the leniency of Islam towards slaves and the available avenues for manumission as an expression of piety that drew some slaves to convert to Islam. There was also the ‘Kindness towards Slaves’ principle enjoined on Muslim slave masters; yet there was no accepted method for preventing the abuse of slaves, and warfare for the capture of slaves became a legitimate venture. These slaves were used for their productive and reproductive capabilities. Some became concubines, while others worked in the military and government or as agricultural workers. For well over 700 years, and before 1450, when Europeans emerged on the African scene, the Arab world had dominated the Slave Trade in Africa. It is estimated that about 10 million slaves were taken from Africa into the Arab world.

4. European Slave Trade

The Portuguese were the first to initiate what would become the Atlantic Slave Trade, the trade of slaves across the Atlantic that lasted from the fifteenth century until abolition in the nineteenth century. Having established exclusive rights to the Guinea coast through the Pope, they made their first attempt in 1441, scouting for articles of trade, but left having kidnapped some free Africans. In 1482, they built the Sao Jorge da Mina (The Elmina Castle) in the Gold Coast in present-day Ghana to facilitate their gold and ivory trade to Lisbon. The castle later served as a “factory”, the *Feitoria da Mina*, for African slaves en route to the New World. Beginning in 1492, when Columbus supposedly discovered the Americas, marking the Columbian era, the obnoxious institution of slavery assumed a new significance and meaning. By the first decades of the sixteenth century, just a few years following the discovery of the New World, the Spanish government requested that 200 human cargos be sent to the West Indies to work on the vast and recently discovered sugar plantations. This modest beginning was to mark the beginning of the obnoxious slave trade.

The first batch of slaves was delivered to the West Indies in 1518. From this humble beginning, the Triangular Trade was initiated, which began in Europe, where traders brought goods such as rum, guns, gunpowder, textiles, metals, etc. to African chiefs, elites, and later merchants in exchange for slaves. The slaves were in turn transported to the New World, where they were sold, and the proceeds were used to buy items such as sugar, coffee, indigo, and ginger, among other goods. They were then transported to Europe for sale, thus completing the triangle. Britain and France had, by 1500, challenged the monopoly of Spain and Portugal and participated in transporting or outright procuring slaves for their sugar plantations in the New World. The wealth of the major colonial powers came to eventually rest upon their possessions in the New World. While Great Britain controlled Jamaica and Barbados, Spain had Cuba, and the French had Santo Domingo. Other nations such as the Dutch, the Swedes, and America also joined the Slave Trade.

These controlling powers, determined to profit from the conquest in the New World, built their wealth through the production of sugar (Hart 2006), rice, tobacco, cotton, coffee, and indigo and the exploitation of metals, among other products. The cultivation of most of these products was a labor-intensive venture and required more hands to work the fields for longer hours. The Indian populations could not resolve the labor situation, for the colonies were sparsely populated, and this was also because of diseases and the inability of the Indian population to withstand the hardship brought upon them by plantation agriculture. Large numbers of Indian people perished from overwork and disease, and following the suggestion of Pastor De Las Casas,⁴ the transport of Africans was deemed the best yet cheap source of labor and resources for the plantation agriculture of the New World. African slaves were more attractive to Europeans because of their relative immunity to diseases and the proximity of Africa to the New World, in addition to the low purchase prices of slaves in Africa (Lovejoy 1983, p. 21). In any case, Casas was himself a former slave holder and was conversant with the brutalities this brought upon the natives of the Americas. De Las Casas intended to mitigate the suffering of the natives but, in doing so, instituted the suffering of others—Africans. Ironically, a basilica is named after De Las Casas in Chiapas, and his image as a savior has become permanent.

By the middle of the seventeenth century, both European and African societies became enmeshed in slavery and defined it in the same way—a subordinate member of the family and, as such, “permanent children”. Relying on the sweat of slaves, many slave-trading nations built their glories at a time when the institution of slavery had become acceptable to all, blinding the moral sensibilities to appreciate the humanness of the enslaved (Williams 2021). By the end of the slave trade, in the 1870s, it was estimated that about 12 million Africans were physically transported as slaves to the New World. The question that arises is whether there is anything like “just enslavement” to which the so-called children of Ham were condemned?

5. Just Enslavement

In an attempt to explain away the immorality of the institution of slavery, European scholars such as Robert Norris (1791) and Archibald Dalzel (1793), writing on Dahomey, argued separately that it was essential to enslave Africans for two reasons: (1) Africans needed to be protected from inevitable human sacrifices, since West Africans were bound to enslave themselves anyway, and (2) European slavery introduced Africans to Christianity, a benefit, they claimed, they probably would not have enjoyed in Africa (Norris 1791).⁵ This determination was in spite of Archibald Dalzel’s description of the cruelties of the slave trade, which he attributed, interestingly, to the nature of African society but not the slave trade.

Archibald Dalzel describes the horrors of the slave trade and, though not advocating for its abolition, saw its continuation a blessing for the victims. In one of the first European attempts at writing the history of a West African state, Dahomey, he described the human sacrifices and fetishes the kings of Dahomey performed, appropriating the parts of the body—the head going to the King, the blood going to the priest, and the rest of the body

given to the common people for the “purpose of eating” ([Dalzel 1793](#)). Dalzel argued that taking Africans to Europe as slaves was a better deal than the inhuman treatment meted out to enemies taken from war, which he indicated was a common sight in Africa. Again, the superstitions of the people of Dahomey barred all avenues of pity for enemies taken in these wars, with the “only instrument of mercy” remaining the European necessity for labor ([Dalzel 1793](#), p. 24). Those taken as slaves abroad were lucky to be saved once more, not only from themselves but also from human sacrifices and cannibalism. This also explains the make-up of the crew of slave ships. Ships carrying slaves had a resident minister of God, who, upon boarding and before setting sail, baptized the slaves en masse, as a preface to the conversion to Christianity, one might say. Africans were thus saved from themselves, and this was a sort of a moral justification for slavery and the slave trade in West Africa.

Other European writers expressed similar sentiments in their description of slavery in Africa. John Barbot, an agent for the French Royal African Company, in which capacity he made two visits to the West African coast, insisted that the fate of the slaves taken to the New World was “less deplorable than those who end their days in their native country” ([Barbot 1732a](#)), for, according to John Barbot, they were better taken care of during the Middle Passage and as slaves in the New World such that they lived longer lives. Of course, and as many had argued, Africans also reaped the benefit of becoming Christians ([Barbot 1732b](#)).

The African, left alone, even after emancipation, was incapable of fending for himself. For instance, upon accumulating enough money to buy his freedom, Equiano challenged his master, a Quaker, to honor his word and set him free. The master, after sending him away to draw up the manumission papers, reiterated the prevailing and accepted notion of the slave: “Let him go, he will come running. He will soon realize freedom is a heavy burden ([Hall and Duffield 2013](#))”. The inhumane act of slavery was thus considered a mercy ([Dalzel 1793](#), p. 24) for those less human and incapable of enjoying the initial freedoms God had guaranteed to all. In the religious realm, the justification for slavery remained permanent for both Christianity and Islam.

6. Harsh Realities of the Trade

Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, a slave whose experiences have been captured for posterity, relates the horrors he felt upon seeing Africans chained in twos, some “hand-cuffed and some with their hands tied behind” ([Carretta 1999](#), pp. 12–16). His experience is an epitome of the experiences of many others who experienced slavery. Quobna was placed in a prison at the castle for three days, from which he could hear the groans and cries of other slaves from adjoining holding cells. On the third day, when the ship had arrived and the slaves were matched to begin the journey of no return, Quobna records that “it was the most horrible sense; there was nothing to be heard but rattling of chains, smacking of whips, and groans and cries of our fellow men. Some would not stir from the ground when they were lashed and beaten in the most horrible manner” ([Carretta 1999](#), pp. 12–16).

The Middle Passage started from the interior of Africa, contrary to accepted usage, for the journey started with the loss of one’s freedom at the point of capture, and, in most cases, deep down in the interior of Africa. Africans captured by raiding parties were forced-marched for days and sometimes months and were sent to holding pens or factories at the coast, where they waited for the next ship. After capture, slaves were yoked, and their feet chained in such a way as to prevent escape and allowed only minimal space for walking. The parties rested at designated spots until they made it to the holding pens at the coast. During these forced marches, slaves suffered from inadequate food supplies, sexual abuse, and often death. From the coast to the New World, the ships traveled from four to six weeks, during which period slaves were poorly fed, were cramped, and had little space for movement, which caused the death of many. Diseases spread easily too, and many slaves died from the wars at the point of capture, the march to the coast and holding pens, as well as the trip across the ocean. Scholars do not agree on the numbers, but it seems clear that about 12 million people were forcibly taken across the Atlantic to the New World

and Europe, and approximately four million people died from the interior march to the coast. It is also estimated that about 50% of slaves died during the middle passage.

There was the psychological trauma to go with the physical beating. In any case, the perpetual image of “a horrible destiny [that] awaits them across the Atlantic” haunted the enslaved (McGowan 1990, pp. 21–22). While some believed that Europeans killed Africans and turned their blood into red wine that was then returned in exchanged for more slaves, others felt that whites ate human flesh and that the bones of dead slaves were ground to make gunpowder.

In imagining the possibilities of escape, Equiano felt like a hunted deer, a piece of imagery portraying the duality of enslavement, as it draws on the demarcations between human and animal, slave and free person, and master and slave. This harsh treatment compelled Equiano to question the goodness in humanity, “O ye nominal Christians! Might not an African ask of you, learned [sic] you this from your God, who says unto you, do unto all men as you would men should do unto you?” (Equiano 1995, p. 69). Equiano questioned the faith and morality of those who enslaved others (Africans). Scholars such as Ahmad Baba have concluded that the Curse of Ham narrative, which leveled a punishment on the supposed sons of Ham, was “inauthentic”. Such a narrative emerged from the need to rationalize the subjugation of Canaan (Sanders 1979, p. 521). The preoccupation with the Qur’anic injunction of “unbelief” as a religious justification for the enslavement of Africans under Muslim control has lots of complications, as discussed in the section on Muslim slavery. The question here is: if God created us in His own image and God is everything good, why did man became so evil as to enslave other humans? It was in recognition of the ways in which scripture was misinterpreted and used to enslave others that Pope John Paul II, on a visit in 2009 to Senegal’s notorious “Gate of no Return”, is said to have apologized for the role of the Roman Catholic Church in this obnoxious institution. Even then, can we define all forms of servitude as “social death” that denies its victims the right to participate in society?

7. Social Death

Orlando Peterson, a Harvard sociologist, was the first to describe slavery as a form of “social death” in his *Slavery and Social Death* (Patterson 1982), where he determined that slavery was (a) an extreme form of the relationship of domination (b) that invests absolute power in the master while (c) marginalizing and rendering slaves powerless (Patterson 1982, p. 3). Slaves breathe and, though alive, have no right to participate in society in the same way as those of “free status”, except as a “proxy of a free person”, the master. The institution of slavery thus becomes one of “human parasitism”, where the slave master, who is considered human, becomes the stem and the slave, by default, becomes less human and the parasite.

This begins from the point of capture during war or kidnapping, where slaves lose not only their freedoms but also kinship. Kinship is a crucial marker of identity in African society, and slaves, by virtue of loss and physical relocation, become kinless and thus without roots, with no source to fall back on for support. Again, slaves were not identified by age, a marker of status in African societies. This lack of a formal status for adults made it possible for free persons younger than slaves to have respect and power above slaves of whatever age (Lovejoy 1983, p. 120). Slave status is thus the beginning of turning one into a powerless person without recourse to support from anywhere, for the slave possesses life, but that too is not his own, for the master alone has the power over life and death.

“Social death” took other forms, such as alternate means of identifying. From the castles or factories in Africa, the slaves were branded and given numbers and, later, assumed the names of their masters on the plantations in the New World. The dramatization of the forcible changing of the name of a slave is made clear in “Kunta Kente”, where Kunta, the hero, is lashed repeatedly to abandon his native given name for one the slave master provides (Harley 1977). This was a classic way in which one lost his/her identity; slaves no longer referred to themselves in the way they were used to as free men. On top of this,

slaves had a definite dress code, which defined them as such in the eyes of the free. These acts ensured that their social condition was powerless and worthless.

Many slaves came from the Muslim-dominated areas of Futa Toro, northern Nigeria, and the area around the Senegambia River, and these territories had been exposed to Islam since the ninth century. The baptism of slaves was meant to do two things: (1) establish the moral justification for slavery—as discussed under “Just Enslavement”—and (2) deprive slaves and create a permanent picture of their inferiority, even in ways of worship.

Infants born to slaves were classified as slaves. The infant was always with the parent in the economic model, where the parents lived on the plantation or farm, providing for the upkeep of the baby. As soon the child turns ten and can farm, he/she becomes the property of the slave master, who either sold out or kept the infant slave on his farm (Klein 1983, p. 84). This is not a suggestion that slaves took this treatment hook, line, and sinker, for they adopted ways of resisting. While some maimed themselves to render themselves incapable of plantation work, others went as far as hurting their own children to avoid the emotional trauma of outright sale and physical separation.

Violence was essential in the slave–master relation, deployed as part of the “intrusive rituals” (Patterson 1982, p. 71) of adding people of lesser status, obtained from multiple sources such as enemies from war, capture, or theft, into the master’s society. Whipping on the slightest pretext, for instance, and for jural minors, had no age limitation. It was used as a demeaning device to remind slaves of their station in life (Patterson 1982, p. 86). Slaves were thus rejected from society, were considered *permanent* parasites that had no heirs and no social structure and suffered a social death.

The “moral deprivation” and the denial to participate in society followed the slave even in death. Social death spread to include the significant rituals performed with the passing of a person in African societies. These include the mourning of the dead and burial ceremonies. Upon death, slaves had no families to perform the crucial rituals of mourning and burial. Some were lucky enough to be buried, while some lost even that privilege and thus lost the opportunity to become ancestors. It is only with a proper burial that a slave was ensured a place in the ancestral world, where they continued to participate in family life. Slaves were thus “denied (once more) the outpouring of affection from family and friends” which marks proper African funerals (Lovejoy 1983, p. 116). Again, a slave was always a slave, even in death, for, in some societies, such as Asante, Dahomey, and Benin, slaves were sacrificed or sent to accompany their master in the next world (Dalzel 1793, chaps. 5, 7), where it was believed that they continued their roles as subordinate members. The death of a slave only formed part of the death of the master.

If philosophical wisdom comes from hindsight, how do we explain the practice of modern-day slavery? What issues debased man enough to stoop so low as to engage in the obnoxious institution of slavery? Greed is at the core of human behavior, pushing some to enslave others. This kind of unbridled greed is still with us and accounts for modern-day slavery, where unsuspecting Africans and Asians are lured to the western world in the hope of greener pastures. Most have their passports seized and end up as sex slaves or perform other forms of menial jobs with little to no pay. The numerous documentaries warning non-Westerners of the dangers of these recruiters land on deaf ears, for the perpetual specter of hunger, endemic poverty, and civil wars still hangs over most places where the recruits are lured by recruiters. In Sudan today, we still hear of bondage that is akin to slavery.

8. Conclusions

Religion has always been central in the rationalization of historic slavery and of the slave trade. It would therefore be pertinent to return to the comments in the introduction by way of conclusion. If philosophical wisdom comes from hindsight, why do we still engage in slavery? Why has mankind stooped so low as to engage in this obnoxious institution? It comes down to that green-eyed monster—human avarice—that clouds our judgment and destroys everything in its path. Scriptural misinterpretations have been used to rationalize the slave trade. First, the Hamitic curse narratives, pivotal in classifying Africans as sons of

Ham, destined to perpetual servitude (Goldenberg 2003, p. 98; and Davis 1984, p. 42), have been dismissed by many scholars as a credible justification for the enslavement of Africans (Bashir 2019, p. 103; Hunwick and Harrak 2000). Second, Ahmad Baba's treatise on slavery and the Qur'anic interpretation of "unbelief" as a religious justification for the enslavement of "non-Muslims" and Africans under Muslim control have lots of complications (Hunwick and Harrak 2000). Yet, for 400 years, these religious ideas condemned the people of Africa to perpetual servitude and ensured their forcible relocation into other societies, where they suffered "social death" and experienced the harsh realities of slavery and the slave trade.

In any case, two great personalities, who made two separate visits to the "Door of no Return" and the Goree Island in Senegal, responded in two different ways but with the same human reaction to this drama of human history. Pope John Paul II was said to have apologized for the role of the Roman Catholic Church in the slave trade, and Nelson Mandela broke down in tears; these are sure demonstrations of the goodness in humanity, for every modern generation rediscovers the horrors of the obnoxious institution of the slave trade and of slavery.

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Notes

- 1 This is in addition to the later controversial discussion on the number of slaves that Europeans took out of Africa, which began with the publication of Phillip Curtin's (1969).
- 2 R. S. Rattray was a British colonial anthropologist working at the Asante Anthropological Institute in the then Gold Coast. His discussions of slavery in Asante in his *Asanti Law and Constitution* (Rattray 1929), and his *Ashanti* (Rattray 1923) complicate the notions of what in African history corresponds to a European understanding of slavery.
- 3 Note that this did not necessarily include Christians, referred to in the Qur'an as "People of the Book". In some societies, in order to enjoy that freedom without becoming a Muslim, the non-Muslim was made to pay a protection tax. It is informative to know that slavery did not originate from the Arabs, but living in the Mediterranean world, they also adopted that culture and rationalized its practice. Some scholars have mistaken this to mean that Arabs introduced slavery.
- 4 Father De Las Casas, who was to earn the title of Protector of the Indian Population and was a one-time slave owner, argued that the Indian people were not suited for plantation agriculture but were also not barbarians and were predisposed to become Christians. He advocated for their preservation and conversion to Christianity and for the refocusing of energies to procuring Africans as slaves for plantation work.
- 5 Robert Norris (1791). Electronic edition. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/norris/norris.html>, accessed on 29 February 2016. It is of crucial significance in the history of eighteenth-century Dahomey, and it is probably the first European attempt at writing the history of a West African state. The publication was also included in Archibald Dalzel's (1793) *History of Dahomey*. Archibald was a surgeon who spent most of his life on the slave trade.

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