

PROBLEMS IN WORLD
HISTORY SERIES

The Atlantic
Slave Trade

Second Edition

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introduction by*

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PART

II

The Slave Trade Within Africa

— VARIETY OF OPINION —

[A] great body of the Negro inhabitants of Africa have continued [in a state of slavery] from the most early period of their history. . . . There are regular markets, where slaves. . . are bought and sold.

MUNGO PARK

Few of the [179] informants had spent much time as slaves. . . . [T]hey were enslaved in their home district and immediately taken down to the coast.

P. E. H. HAIR

Of 100 people seized in Africa, 75 would have reached the market-places in the interior; . . . 64 . . . would have arrived at the coast; . . . 57 would have boarded the ships; . . . and 48 or 49 would have lived to behold their first master in the New World.

JOSEPH C. MILLER

The strong preference of the slave sellers for guns . . . reinforces the slave-gun cycle theory according to which . . . slave gatherers bought more firearms to capture more slaves to buy more firearms.

[T]he more we know about African warfare and resulting enslavement, the less clear and direct the connections between war and the export of slaves becomes.

JOSEPH E. INKORI
JOHN THORNTON

Mungo Park

West Africa in the 1790s

Until the last decades of the Atlantic trade there is very little direct evidence of the mechanisms that delivered slaves to Europeans at the coast. The Scotsman Mungo Park was one of the first Europeans to travel into inland regions of Africa and to observe how people became slaves. He found that most were prisoners taken in warfare and raids, but that others lost their free status as the result of famine, debt, or crimes. Captives were either kept as slaves in Africa or sold abroad.

The slaves in Africa, I suppose, are nearly in the proportion of three to one to the freemen. They claim no reward for their services, except food and clothing; and are treated with kindness or severity, according to the good or bad disposition of their masters. Custom, however, has established certain rules with regard to the treatment of slaves, which it is thought dishonourable to violate. Thus, the domestic slaves, or such as are born in a man's own house, are treated with more lenity than those which are purchased with money. The authority of the master over the domestic slave, as I have elsewhere observed, extends only to

From Mungo Park, *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa: Performed in the Years 1795, 1796, and 1797* (London: John Murray, 1816).

reasonable correction: for the master cannot sell his domestic, without having first brought him to a public trial, before the chief men of the place. But these restrictions on the power of the master extend not to the case of prisoners taken in war, nor to that of slaves purchased with money. All these unfortunate beings are considered as strangers and foreigners, who have no right to the protection of the law, and may be treated with severity, or sold to a stranger, according to the pleasure of their owners. There are, indeed, regular markets, where slaves of this description are bought and sold; and the value of a slave in the eye of an African purchaser, increases in proportion to his distance from his native kingdom; for when slaves are only a few days' journey from the place of their nativity, they frequently effect their escape: but when one or more kingdoms intervene, escape being more difficult, they are more readily reconciled to their situation. On this account, the unhappy slave is frequently transferred from one dealer to another, until he has lost all hopes of returning to his native kingdom. The slaves which are purchased by the Europeans on the Coast, are chiefly of this description; a few of them are collected in the petty wars, hereafter to be described, which take place near the Coast; but by far the greater number are brought down in large caravans from the inland countries, of which many are unknown, even by name, to the Europeans. The slaves which are thus brought from the interior, may be divided into two distinct classes: *first*, such as were slaves from their birth, having been born of enslaved mothers; *secondly*, such as were born free, but who afterwards, by whatever means, became slaves. Those of the first description are by far the most numerous; for prisoners taken in war (at least such as are taken in open and declared war, when one kingdom avows hostilities against another) are generally of this description. The comparatively small proportion of free people, to the enslaved, throughout Africa, has already been noticed; and it must be observed, that men of free condition, have many advantages over the slaves, even in war time. They are in general better armed, and well mounted; and can either fight or escape with some hopes of success; but the slaves, who have only their spears and bows, and of whom great numbers are loaded with baggage, become an easy prey. Thus, when Mansong, King of Bambarra, made war upon Kaarta . . . , he took in one day nine hundred prisoners, of which number not more than seventy were free men. This account I received from Damam Jumma, who had thirty slaves at Kemmo, all of whom were made prisoners by Mansong. Again, when a freeman is taken prisoner, his friends

will sometimes ransom him by giving two slaves in exchange; but when a slave is taken, he has no hopes of such redemption. . . .

Slaves of the second description, generally become such by one or other of the following causes, 1. *Captivity*. 2. *Famine*. 3. *Insoberity*. 4. *Crimes*. A freeman may, by the established customs of Africa, become a slave by being taken in war. War is, of all others, the most productive source, and was probably the origin of slavery; for when one nation had taken from another, a greater number of captives than could be exchanged on equal terms, it is natural to suppose that the conquerors, finding it inconvenient to maintain their prisoners, would compel them to labour; at first, perhaps, only for their own support; but afterwards to support their masters. Be this as it may, it is a known fact, that prisoners of war in Africa, are the slaves of the conquerors; and when the weak or unsuccessful warrior, begs for mercy beneath the uplifted spear of his opponent, he gives up at the same time his claim to liberty; and purchases his life at the expence of his freedom. . . .

The wars of Africa are of two kinds, which are distinguished by different appellations: that species which bears the greatest resemblance to our European contests, is denominated *killi*, a word signifying "to call out," because such wars are openly avowed, and previously declared. Wars of this description in Africa, commonly terminate, however, in the course of a single campaign. A battle is fought, the vanquished seldom think of rallying again; the whole inhabitants become panic struck; and the conquerors have only to bind the slaves, and carry off their plunder and their victims. Such of the prisoners as, through age or infirmity, are unable to endure fatigue, or are found unfit for sale, are considered as useless; and I have no doubt are frequently put to death. The same fate commonly awaits a chief, or any other person who has taken a very distinguished part in the war. And here it may be observed that, notwithstanding this exterminating system, it is surprising to behold how soon an African town is rebuilt and re-peopled. The circumstance arises probably from this; that their pitched battles are few; the weakest know their own situation, and seek safety in flight. When their country has been desolated, and their ruined towns and villages deserted by the enemy, such of the inhabitants as have escaped the sword, and the chain, generally return, though with cautious steps, to the place of their nativity; for it seems to be the universal wish of mankind, to spend the evening of their days where they passed their infancy. . . .

The other species of African warfare is distinguished by the appellation of *tegrta*, "plundering or stealing." It arises from a sort of hereditary feud which the inhabitants of one nation or district bear towards another. No immediate cause of hostility is assigned, or notice of attack given, but the inhabitants of each watch every opportunity to plunder and distress the objects of their animosity by predatory excursions. These are very common, particularly about the beginning of the dry season, when the labour of the harvest is over and provisions are plentiful. Schemes of vengeance are then meditated. The chief-man surveys the number and activity of his vassals, as they brandish their spears at festivals; and elated with his own importance, turns his whole thoughts towards revenging some depredation or insult, which either he or his ancestors may have received from a neighbouring state.

Wars of this description are generally conducted with great secrecy. A few resolute individuals, headed by some person of enterprise and courage, march quietly through the woods, surprise in the night some unprotected village, and carry off the inhabitants and their effects, before their neighbours can come to their assistance. One morning, during my stay at Kamalia, we were all much alarmed by a party of this kind. The king of Fooladoo's son, with five hundred horsemen, passed secretly through the woods, a little to the southward of Kamalia, and on the morning following plundered three towns belonging to Madgai, a powerful chief in Jallonkadoo.

The success of this expedition encouraged the governor of Baggassi, a town of Fooladoo, to make a second inroad upon another part of the same country. Having assembled about two hundred of his people, he passed the river Kokoro in the night, and carried off a great number of prisoners. Several of the inhabitants who had escaped these attacks, were afterwards seized by the Mandingoes, as they wandered about in the woods or concealed themselves in the glens and strong places of the mountains.

These plundering excursions always produce speedy retaliation; and when large parties cannot be collected for this purpose, a few friends will combine together, and advance into the enemy's country, with a view to plunder, or carry off the inhabitants. A single individual has been known to take his bow and quiver, and proceed in like manner. Such an attempt is doubtless in him an act of rashness; but when it is considered that in one of these predatory wars, he has probably

been deprived of his child, or his nearest relation, his situation will rather call for pity than censure. The poor sufferer, urged on by the feelings of domestic or paternal attachment, and the ardour of revenge, conceals himself among the bushes, until some young or unarmed person passes by. He then, tiger-like, springs upon his prey; drags his victim into the thicket, and in the night carries him off as a slave.

When a Negro has, by means like these, once fallen into the hands of his enemies, he is either retained as the slave of his conqueror, or bartered into a distant kingdom: for an African, when he has once subdued his enemy, will seldom give him an opportunity of lifting up his hand against him at a future period. A conqueror commonly disposes of his captives according to the rank which they held in their native kingdom. Such of the domestic slaves as appear to be of a mild disposition, and particularly the young women, are retained as his own slaves. Others that display marks of discontent, are disposed of in a distant country; and such of the freemen or slaves, as have taken an active part in the war, are either sold to the Slatées, or put to death. War, therefore, is certainly the most general and most productive source of slavery; and the desolations of war often (but not always) produce the second cause of slavery, *famine*; in which case a freeman becomes a slave to avoid a greater calamity.

Perhaps, by a philosophic and reflecting mind, death itself would scarcely be considered as a greater calamity than slavery; but the poor Negro, when fainting with hunger, thinks like Esau of old; "*behold I am at the point to die, and what profits shall this birthright do to me?*" There are many instances of free men voluntarily surrendering up their liberty to save their lives. During a great scarcity which lasted for three years, in the countries of the Gambia, great numbers of people became slaves in this manner. . . . Large families are very often exposed to absolute want: and as the parents have almost unlimited authority over their children, it frequently happens, in all parts of Africa, that some of the latter are sold to purchase provisions for the rest of the family. When I was at Jatta, Daman Jumma pointed out to me three young slaves which he had purchased in this manner. I have already related another instance which I saw at Wonda: and I was informed that in Fooladoo, at that time, it was a very common practice.

The third cause of slavery, is *insolvency*. Of all the offences (if insolvency may be so called) to which the laws of Africa have affixed the punishment of slavery, this is the most common. A Negro trader commonly contracts debts on some mercantile speculation, either from his

neighbours, to purchase such articles as will sell to advantage in a distant market, or from the European traders on the Coast; payment to be made in a given time. In both cases, the situation of the adventurer is exactly the same. If he succeeds, he may secure an independency. If he is unsuccessful, his person and services are at the disposal of another; for, in Africa, not only the effects of the insolvent, but even the insolvent himself, are sold to satisfy the lawful demands of his creditors.

The fourth cause above enumerated, is *the commission of crimes, on which the laws of the country affix slavery as a punishment*. In Africa, the only offences of this class are murder, adultery, and witchcraft: and I am happy to say, that they did not appear to me to be common. In cases of murder, I was informed, that the nearest relation of the deceased had it in his power, after conviction, either to kill the offender with his own hand, or sell him into slavery. When adultery occurs, it is generally left to the option of the person injured, either to sell the culprit, or accept such a ransom for him as he may think equivalent to the injury he has sustained. By witchcraft, is meant pretended magic, by which the lives or healths of persons are affected: in other words, it is the administering of poison. No trial for this offence, however, came under my observation while I was in Africa: and I therefore suppose that the crime, and its punishment, occur but very seldom.

When a freeman has become a slave by any one of the causes before mentioned, he generally continues so for life, and his children (if they are born of an enslaved mother) are brought up in the same state of servitude. There are, however, a few instances of slaves obtaining their freedom, and sometimes even with the consent of their masters, as by performing some singular piece of service, or by going to battle, and bringing home two slaves as a ransom; but the common way of regaining freedom is by escape; and when slaves have once set their minds on running away, they often succeed. Some of them will wait for years before an opportunity presents itself, and during that period shew no signs of discontent. In general, it may be remarked that slaves who come from a hilly country, and have been much accustomed to hunting and travel, are more apt to attempt their escape, than such as are born in a flat country, and have been employed in cultivating the land.

Such are the general outlines of that system of slavery which prevails in Africa; and it is evident from its nature and extent, that it is a system of no modern date. It probably had its origin in the remote ages of antiquity, before the Mahomedans explored a path across the Desert.

How far it is maintained and supported by the slave traffic, which, for two hundred years, the nations of Europe have carried on with the natives of the Coast, it is neither within my province, nor in my power, to explain. If my sentiments should be required concerning the effect which a discontinuance of that commerce would produce on the manners of the natives, I should have no hesitation in observing, that, in the present unenlightened state of their minds, my opinion is, the effect would neither be so extensive or beneficial, as many wise and worthy persons fondly expect.

P. E. H. Hair

African Narratives of Enslavement

In this selection, Professor Paul Hair of the University of Liverpool (U.K.) analyzes the many tales of enslavement collected by a German missionary in Sierra Leone from Africans rescued from slave ships by British patrols in the first part of the nineteenth century. He enhances the value of these rare accounts by actual slaves by identifying where they came from and grouping them by the causes of their enslavement. His results are very close to Park's impressions, except for a much lower incidence of people born to slavery.

S. W. Koelle in his *Polyglotta Africana* of 1854 . . . supplied notes on 210 informants, but only 179 were definitely stated to be ex-slaves. . . . Of the ex-slaves, 177 were men and 2 women. Koelle chose these informants, out of the 40,000 or so ex-slaves in the Freetown district in 1850, because each individual (occasionally, two individuals) represented a different African language. Hence . . . the informants were

Excerpted from "The Enslavement of Koelle's Informants," *Journal of African History* 6, 2, 1965, pp. 193-201. Reprinted with the permission of Cambridge University Press.

drawn from a very large number of language groups, covering a large part of West and West Central Africa and a few outlying districts in East Africa. Though the societies involved were so various and so scattered, the accounts of the informants' enslavement, analysed below, suggest a general pattern of reaction to the economic and social opportunities—and intrusions—of the slave trade. . . . [Because] we have available here only 179 biographical records of a process involving many millions of unrecorded life-histories . . . , we take care to indicate the provenance—by language—of each informant discussed in any detail. (The first name given is always Koelle's name for the language: while the name in capitals is either the modern name for the language, or the name of a better known grouping which includes the language. . . .)

. . . [A]llmost all were enslaved before they were forty; three-quarters were enslaved before they were thirty; one-half were enslaved during their twenties. . . . The earliest enslavement date was 1795, the latest 1847. Three-quarters of the informants had been enslaved—that is, in almost all cases, had left their homeland—more than ten years before the date of interview; and nearly half had been enslaved more than twenty years before. The oldest man interviewed was probably nearly eighty, the youngest was in his early twenties. . . .

Few of the informants had spent much time as slaves. Five of them had spent periods of years in America (and had come to Freetown after emancipation), and twenty-nine had spent periods of years in Africa, mainly as slaves to Africans. The remainder had reached Sierra Leone shortly after enslavement (though an exact period of months or years was seldom stated); that is, they were enslaved in their home district and immediately taken down to the coast (a journey which occasionally took many months, however), and were shortly afterwards captured aboard a slave ship and brought straightway to Freetown. . . .

Manner of Enslavement: (a) War

Forty-eight of the informants (34% of those detailing their manner of enslavement) had been "taken in war." Twenty-five of these, and two who had been "kidnapped," were taken by the Fula during their razzias. These extended from the Futa Jalon (modern Guinea) to Adamawa (Camerouns). Thus, two Soso/SUSU were captured by the Fula c. 1820

and c. 1830, while about a dozen men from tribes of Adamawa and the North Cameroons provided evidence of Fula raids from 1820 onwards.

About his twenty-fourth year [c. 1825], a people came from a far and unknown country, who were called Belyi or Beleyi, and burnt all their towns, the capital not excepted, so that all who could run, escaped into the woods. There he [an Afudu/TANGALE] was caught by them. . . .

Two years before Nyamsi, or Andrew Wilhelm of Freetown, [a Param/BAMILLEKE] was kidnapped [c. 1825], the Tebale had invaded his country and committed the most ferocious atrocities: e.g., they took children by their legs and dashed their brains out against trees; ripped up the pregnant women; caught four hundred children of the King's family and the families of other great men, made a large fire, and burnt them alive. . . .

. . . the Tebale who had come from afar on horses and had conquered many countries, spreading terror before them on account of their poisoned weapons, by a mere touch of which they killed their enemies. . . . [c. 1835, a Bagba/ŊNKOM].

. . . the Fula and Nupes invaded and conquered Jumu, destroying all its towns. In this war he was taken captive. . . . [a Jumu/YORUBA].

Lamaji, or John Smith of Campbell Town [a Gbali/GBARI], born at Gugu where he lived to see three grandchildren when he was kidnapped by some Fulani. . . . [c. 1847].

Here he may also be mentioned the JAR man who, as a boy of twelve was sent to the Fula emir of Bauchi, as part of the annual tribute of slaves. But the Fula biter was sometimes bit:

Adamu, or Edward Klein of Freetown [a Fulbe/FULA] brought up in Kano, had been five years married to his two wives when he had to join the annual war-expedition [in 1845] against the Maladis, an independent Hausa tribe, on which occasion they had to flee from the Maladis and he was caught in the flight by night. This enabled the Maladis who had caught him to carry him to another country by stealth, and to sell him there: for there is a law among the Maladis that all Fulbe taken in war are to be killed forthwith.

Samba, [a Pulo/FULA] born in the town of Ganyeg, where he also resided till his eldest child was twelve years old, when he was taken prisoner on a plundering expedition against the Mandangas. . . . [c. 1810].

Manner of Enslavement: (b) Kidnapping

Forty-three of Koelle's informants (30%) stated that they had been 'kidnapped' into slavery. Many gave no further details and appear to have been kidnapped by fellow-tribesmen. . . . Travel outside the homelands was dangerous.

Sem, or Peter Kondo of Gloucester, [a Kaure/TEM] born in the village Wuram, where he was brought up and was probably upwards of thirty years old when he was kidnapped in the Bassare country, where he had gone to buy corn.

Yapanda, or William Seek of Wellington, [a Tiwi/TV], born in the village of Torowo, where he lived till his twenty-fourth year, when he was kidnapped on a trading-tour to Hausa.

William Harding, an Ondo/YORUBA, was kidnapped on a trading journey by the Ilesha/YORUBA An Abaja/BO and an Oworo/YORUBA were each kidnapped by "a treacherous friend." The treacherous friend of a Muntu/YAO enticed him on board a Portuguese ship and then took money for him. A Bagbalang/GRUSI was kidnapped at the instigation of his brother-in-law.

Manner of Enslavement: (c) Sold by Relatives or Superiors

Ten of the informants who did not claim they were kidnapped (7%) stated that they were sold by relatives or tribal superiors. Of those who gave details, it is clear that in some cases the victim considered he had been treated badly.

Fije, of John Campbell, [a Mahi/EWE] born in the town of Igbege, where he grew up, married two wives, and on his father's death, inherited twenty-two more. . . . when he was sold by his uncle because he had not presented him with a female slave and cows on his father's death.

Rumago, or Thomas Nicol of Kissy, [a Bidjogo/BIDYOGO] had a child who was just beginning to walk when he was sold by his elder brother to the Portuguese because they could not agree.

Dosu, of John Carew of Freetown, [a Mahi/EWE]. . . had a child about six years old when he was sold by his elder brother on account of

a quarrel respecting the property of their father who had been killed in a war against the Dahomeyans.

Aboyade, or James Cole, hawkler at Freetown, [a YORUBA] born in the town Ogbomoshu, where he lived till his first child was about three years old, when he was sold by a war-chief, because he refused to give him his wife.

A Diwala/DUALA boy of sixteen was sold to the Portuguese by his guardian, his parents being dead: a Mbofon/NDE was sold by his relatives for a gun and powder: a Bumbete/MBETTE from the Congo was sold because his mother had run away from his father, presumably by his father's family. The case of a Cameroons man may be included under this heading.

Edia, or Thomas Renner of Bathurst, [a Nhadlemoe/MBO] born in the village of Baringar, where he also grew up, had seven wives and a child of about ten years of age, when he was sold by his countrymen out of jealousy of his ability and influence. . . .

Manner of Enslavement: (d) Debt

Ten informants (7%) stated that they had been sold to pay debts, in most cases not of their own contracting. A KAMUKU was sold because of a debt incurred by his father, a butcher: a Baseke/KOTA and a Nki/BOKI were also sold because of paternal debts. Responsibility for debts was considered to extend further than the family circle.

Nyamase, or James Hardy of Freetown, [a Bamom/BAMILEKE] . . . lived in Tiapou, a town five days' journey from the capital, to his twenty-fourth year, when he was seized on a trading tour to the Bakoon country, for the debt of another Tiapou man.

Tete, or Frederick Gibbon of Freetown, [an Adampe/EWE] born in the town of Gbotue, where he was married and had a child five years of age, when he was seized by the Gata people, because another Gbotue man, with whom he was in no wise connected, owed them a debt.

Possibly some of those who were "sold by relatives" were sold to pay debts. In rare cases the obligation for the debt was fully accepted by the victim, and one such case is reported by Koelle: The account is moving and deserves to be repeated in full.

Oga, or John Taylor of Freetown, [a Yala/YALA] born in the town of Gbeku, where he also grew up, married five wives and had thirteen children, eleven of whom died and the eldest of the two remaining was about twenty years of age when a friend sent him to buy a slave, returning with whom they were attacked by a wild cow which killed the slave. The friend then wanted to sell the messenger [i.e., the son] as a restitution for the loss of his slave: but Oga, rather than have his son lose his liberty, offered himself as a slave and was accordingly sold. He was afterwards captured and brought to Sierra Leone, where he has now been twenty years and is the only representative of his tribe. He is now a very old grey-headed man.

Manner of Enslavement: (e) Judicial Process

Persons who were condemned by judicial process in African societies were often enslaved. Sixteen of Koelle's informants (11%) admitted that they had been condemned, and it is likely that some of those who only stated that they had been "sold by relatives" were also, by the laws of their own society, "criminals."

Eleven men . . . had been sold "on account of adultery," a charge which they did not challenge. Two related cases were these:

Asu, or Thomas Harry of Hastings [a Konguang/ANTANG] . . . married two wives, the unfaithfulness of one of whom led him to slay a man, on which account he was sold by the king.

Nanga, or John Smart of Freetown [a Lubalo/KIMBUNDU] born in the town of Mulakala, where he lived to about his twenty-fourth year, when he was given in pawn by his mother for a brother of hers, who had been sold on account of adultery: but before he could be redeemed by his mother, he was placed in the hands of the Portuguese in Loando, who at once shipped him.

Another man, a Melong/MBO was enslaved for murder; an Ilwee/BINI was "sold on a charge of theft"; and a Kanyika/LUBA "had one child which could not walk when he was sold on account of bad conduct." Two men from the Congo coast had been enslaved because of witchcraft accusations.

Kumbu, or Thomas Parker of Wilberforce [a Nyombe/KONGCO] . . . had a child about five years old, when he was sold because his sister had been accused of witchcraft.

Bembi, or William Davis of Freetown [a Pangala/UMBUNDU] ... was sold in about his twenty-eighth year because his family had been accused of having occasioned the king's death by means of witchcraft.

Conclusion

Some of the brief life-histories recorded by Koelle describe odd facets of individual behaviour. Nineteenth-century Africans, while exhibiting the normal tendency to conformity of behaviour, were also capable of a wide range of individual reaction to intrusive events.

Tando, or John James of Gloucester [a Mbe/BAMILEKE] ... has been in Sierra Leone ten years with five countrymen, all of whom appear to be very stupid; thus, e.g., one of them who had eight wives and five children in his country could not even count up to five: and when I expressed my astonishment at this, he said, "Please, Sir, I was a gentleman's son in my country, and they do nothing but eat, sleep and make war."

Muhammodu [a Pulo/FULA] ... born in the town of Wurokone ... was taken to Jamaica more than forty years ago, and after nine years' stay there to Sierra Leone, where he has now been a discharged soldier for twenty years. I give his specimen chiefly in order to furnish an opportunity for judging the great strength of a Fula's memory; for beside his long absence from home, Muhammodu is a drunkard, resides in Sierra Leone quite by himself, and holds no intercourse with other Fulbe.

Musewo, or Toki Petro of Freetown [a SONGO] born in the town Bopunt, where he was kidnapped in about his fifteenth year and carried to Loanda. He remained there twenty-one years, during most of which time he was employed by the Portuguese Henrique Consale to buy Songo slaves, with whom he had always to speak Songo. At his master's death, he became free and went to the Brasils, where he was employed by a Portuguese in the African slave-trade for six years, during which period he made the passage seven times; but in the eighth the ship was captured by the cruisers and brought to Freetown.

... [T]he 179 life-histories here analysed may be claimed to present a miniature of the slave trade within Western tropical Africa in the early nineteenth century, which, though limited in scope and perhaps largely confirmatory of accepted accounts, is well-nigh unique in that it is based solely on information supplied by individual Africans.

Joseph C. Miller

West Central Africa

In his acclaimed account of the Angolan slave trade, Professor Joseph C. Miller of the University of Virginia reconstructs Africans' long, painful, and deadly treks from the deep interior of the continent to the ships awaiting them in the coastal ports. Miller's calculation of the deaths during each stage of the trade is a chilling reminder of the callous losses of human life, although it may be that losses on the way to the coast were lower in other parts of Africa.

The background hunger and epidemics that sometimes forced patrons to give up clients and compelled parents to part with children set a tone of physical weakness and vulnerability behind slaving in the interior. Where warfare and violence stimulated the initial capture, the victims would have begun their odysseys in exhausted, shaken, and perhaps wounded physical condition. Though the buyers preferred strong adult males, the people actually captured in warfare, even in pitched battles between formal armies, included disproportionately high numbers of less fit women and children, since the men could take flight and leave the less mobile retinue of young and female dependents to the pursuers. People sold for food, the last resort in time of famine, also started out physically ill-prepared for the rigors of the journey to come. In the commercialized areas, lords, creditors, and patrons, employing less dramatic methods to seize and sell the dependents who paid for imports or covered their debts, would have selected the least promising among their followings—young boys, older women, the sick, the indebted, the troublesome, and the lame. Populations raided consistently by stronger neighbors, harassed and driven from their homes and fields, and refugee populations hiding on infertile mountaintops could not have been as well-nourished as stronger groups who yielded fewer of their members to the slave trade.

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