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# AFRICAN SLAVERY AND OTHER FORMS OF SOCIAL OPPRESSION ON THE UPPER GUINEA COAST IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ATLANTIC SLAVE-TRADE

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IT has come to be widely accepted that slavery prevailed on the African continent before the arrival of the Europeans, and this indigenous slavery is said to have facilitated the rise and progress of the Atlantic slave-trade. According to P. D. Rinchon, 'from the earliest days of the trade, the majority of the Negroes were living in a state of servitude, and the native chiefs did not have far to seek for the human merchandise'.[1] Daniel Mannix, in one of the most recent accounts of the Atlantic slave-trade, contends that 'many of the Negroes transported to America had been slaves in Africa, born to captivity. Slavery in Africa was an ancient and widespread institution, but it was especially prevalent in the Sudan'.[2] In the opinion of J. D. Fage, 'the presence of a slave class among the coastal peoples meant that there was already a class of human beings who could be sold to Europeans if there was an incentive to do so... So the coastal merchants began by selling the domestic slaves in their own tribes.'[3] The main purpose of this brief study is to test these generalizations with evidence taken from the Upper Guinea Coast—the region between the Gambia and Cape Mount.

Not only did the Upper Guinea Coast have a lengthy association with the Atlantic slave-trade, beginning in the 1460's and extending over four centuries, but it is also a very useful exemplar as far as the present problem is concerned, because the so-called African 'slavery' was known to be widespread in this region during the colonial period, and emancipation was eventually brought about by the intervention of the metropolitan powers involved. Sometimes, what obtained was a quasi-feudal exploitation of labour by a ruling *élite*, who received the greater portion of the harvest.[4] More often than not, however, the 'domestic slaves', as they have been categorized, were members of their masters' households. They could not be sold, except for serious offences; they had their own plots of land and/or rights to a proportion of the fruits of their labour; they could marry; their children had rights of inheritance, and if born of one free parent often

[1] D. Rinchon, *La traite et l'esclavage des Congolais par les Européens* (Brussels, 1929), 169.

[2] D. Mannix in collaboration with M. Cowley, *Black Cargoes, a History of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (London, 1963), 43 (44, 45 are also relevant).

[3] J. D. Fage, *Introduction to the History of West Africa* (London, 1959), 78.

[4] See below, p. 436.

acquired a new status. Such individuals could rise to positions of great trust, including that of chief.[5]

Quite obviously, R. S. Rattray's well-known description of the Ashante 'slave',[6] which is cited in most discussions on this subject,[7] is fully applicable to the Upper Guinea Coast. Rattray was primarily concerned with the 'slave child' (*Odonko ba*), whose privileges were quite different from those of his parents and foreparents. On the Upper Guinea Coast, too, the servants born in the household were distinguished from the individuals who were recruited from captives of war or from those pledged and not redeemed. These latter were vulnerable to sale, being exchanged for goods as well as serving as currency in a number of transactions such as marriage payments. During the latter part of the nineteenth century, after the Atlantic slave-trade had ceased to be conducted from the Upper Guinea Coast, one of the major problems facing the administration of the colony of Sierra Leone was the persistence of the internal slave-trade, mainly supplying victims to the Mande and the Fulas.[8] Thus, an examination of the society of the Upper Guinea Coast at a relatively recent date does reveal the presence of a category of slaves, as well as agricultural serfdom and personal service, which are represented here as 'forms of social oppression', though in many cases the oppression was extremely attenuated.

In seeking the roots of the indigenous slavery and serfdom of the Upper Guinea Coast, and in attempting to juxtapose these phenomena with the Atlantic slave-trade, one is struck by the absence of references to local African slavery in the sixteenth or even the seventeenth century, when such evidence could reasonably be construed to mean that the institution preceded the advent of the Atlantic slave-trade. Sometimes, the word 'slave' was indeed used, but so loosely as to apply to all the common people. For instance, the Jesuit Alonso de Sandoval reported that, when he was in Cartagena in the early seventeenth century, a priest who came over on a slaveship told him that all the talk about the injustice of slavery was nonsense, because all the Negroes were slaves of absolute kings. Sandoval then went on to pinpoint the king of Casanga on the river Casamance as one such absolute monarch whose subjects were his slaves.[9] In this arbitrary and figurative sense, the word 'slave' is equally applicable not only to the common people of Europe at that time but also to the proletariat of the capitalist world.

There is only one clear instance where labour services on the Upper Guinea Coast were associated with the limitation of the privileges of free

[5] M. McCulloch, *Peoples of Sierra Leone*, Ethnographic Survey of Africa, ed. D. Forde (London, 1964), 28, 29, 68.

[6] R. S. Rattray, *Ashanti* (London, 1923), 40–43, 222, 230.

[7] E.g. Stanley Elkins, *Slavery, a Problem in American Institutional and Social Life* (New York, 1963), 96; and Basil Davidson, *Black Mother* (London, 1961), 40. (For a discussion of African 'slavery' and 'serfdom', see the section on pp. 33–40.)

[8] Christopher Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone* (London, 1962): see index under 'slave trade, internal'.

[9] Alonso de Sanderval, *Natureleza...de Todos Etiopes* (Seville, 1623).

men. In Sierra Leone at the beginning of the seventeenth century, when a subject was in danger in one kingdom he could flee to the court of another king and place himself at the mercy of the latter. He became the 'slave' of that king, either remaining in his service or liable for sale (to the Europeans).[10] At that time, local customs were already influenced by the presence of slave-buying Europeans, as well as by the arrival of an alien Mande ruling element some decades previously; but the essentials of the practice almost certainly preceded these two external factors. In 1507 the Portuguese chronicler Valentim Fernandes made a statement which could refer to nothing else: 'The king has no servants other than his slaves. Sometimes a young stranger arrives and seeks the protection of the king, who looks upon the young man as his own.'[11]

When the occasional references to 'slaves' on the Upper Guinea Coast in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are carefully scrutinized, they therefore point, at the very most, to the presence of a small number of political clients in the households of the kings and chiefs of the area. If they were to have constituted the pad for launching the Atlantic slave-trade, it would never have left the ground.

It is difficult to believe that any observers could possibly have overlooked features such as chattel slaves, agricultural serfs, or even household servants if these had been numerous and markedly disprivileged. Several of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Portuguese descriptions of the Upper Guinea Coast are replete with details of the structure of African society on that section of the West African littoral; and the only distinction that they consistently emphasized was the one between rulers and subjects —the *fidalgos* and *plebeus*.[12] For the neighbouring Senegambia, Valentim Fernandes left testimony that the Wolof nobles had several households, each comprising a wife, children and 'slaves', the latter working six days for the mistress and one day every week for themselves.[13] Alvares de Almada in 1594 also referred to Fula 'slaves' ruling the Wolofs.[14] Both these writers dealt with the area between the Gambia and Cape Mount at great length, without mentioning any similar phenomena.

On matters of trade, even more than on matters of ethnographic interest, the early Portuguese chroniclers were scrupulous in recording details. In the sixteenth and seventeenth century they knew of the trade routes between the Futa Djalon and the coast, linking the littoral peoples

[10] *Biblioteca de la Real Academia de la Historia* (Madrid)—'Papeles de Jesuitas', tomo 185, no. 1346, report of P. Baltezar Barreira, Sierra Leone, 1606.

[11] Th. Monod, A. Texeira da Mota and R. Mauny (eds.), *Description de la côte occidentale d'Afrique (Sénégal au Cap de Monte, Archipels) par Valentim Fernandes (1506–1510)* (Bissau 1951), 82. (To be cited subsequently as 'Valentim Fernandes'.)

[12] Valentim Fernandes, op. cit. 88; Alvares de Almada, 'Tratado Breve dos Rios de Guiné' (1594), in P. Antonio Brasio, *Monumenta missionaria africana, Africa ocidental (1570–1600)*, 2nd series, vol. III (Lisbon, 1964), 323, 324, 333; and Manual Alvares, 'Ethiopia Menor, o descripçao geografica da Provincia de Serra Leoa' (1616), MS. of the *Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa*.

[13] Valentim Fernandes, op. cit. 10.

[14] Alvares de Almada, 'Rios de Guiné', 234, 235.

with the Mande and Fula of the interior. Yet, in enumerating the products exchanged, they never once mentioned or hinted that slaves were involved in this commerce.[15] Cloths, pieces of dried indigo and iron bars were noted as being the circulating media in the barter economy of the Upper Guinea Coast, but never slaves in the early period. Non-mention in such circumstances is presumptive of non-existence.

Though one can identify no African slavery, serfdom or the like on the Upper Guinea Coast during the first phase of European contact, that region was one of the first sections of the West African coast from which slaves were exported; and in the sixteenth century the transfer of Africans from the Upper Guinea Coast to the Spanish Indies was already a significant undertaking. No slave-class was necessary to make this possible, because there was in existence a fundamental class contradiction between the ruling nobility and the commoners; and the ruling class joined hands with the Europeans in exploiting the African masses—a not unfamiliar situation on the African continent today.

While the view that African slavery and 'domestic slavery' preceded and stimulated the Atlantic slave-trade has been given wide currency, no thought has been spared for any other possible connexion between the two. Was it merely coincidence that it was only after two and a half centuries of slave-trading that the vast majority of the peoples of the Upper Guinea Coast were said to have been living in a state of subjection? Curiously enough, Mungo Park, though he added his authority to the pro-slavery arguments, had posed this question, while absolving himself from answering it. After describing what amounted to both chattel slavery and household service in the Senegambia and the western Sudan, he wrote: '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.'[16]

It is a striking fact that the greatest agents of the Atlantic slave-trade on the Upper Guinea Coast, the Mande and the Fulas, were the very tribes who subsequently continued to handle the internal slave-trade, and whose society came to include significant numbers of disprivileged individuals labouring under coercion. The sequence of events points in the very direction in which Mungo Park had not cared to look too closely. In the first place, the political and religious dominance of the Mande and Fulas over the littoral peoples of the Upper Guinea Coast in the eighteenth century was based on a mixture of motives, among which the desire to sell more slaves to the Europeans featured prominently. Thus the Atlantic slave-trade can immediately be identified as being partly responsible for the vassalage to which the coastal tribes were reduced. In the second place,

[15] Ibid. 344, 345, 347; and Damiao Peres (ed.), *Duas descriçoes seiscentistas da Guiné de Francisco de Lemos Coelho* (Lisbon, 1953), 59–61, from the description written in 1669. (To be cited subsequently as 'Lemos Coelho'.)

[16] Mungo Park, *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa in the Years 1795, 1796 and 1797* (London, 1799), 297, 298.

the raiding of individuals for sale to the Europeans encouraged the marauding tribes to retain numbers of their captives to serve their own needs. When, for example, the Mandinga *Farim Cabo* raided his neighbours to obtain captives for the slave-ships, he retained a small proportion for his own needs.[17]

One of the most direct connexions between the Atlantic slave-trade and the nineteenth-century pattern of social stratification and oppression on the Upper Guinea Coast lay in the fact that numbers of Africans were captured with a view to being sold to the European slavers, but they remained for greater or lesser periods (or sometimes for ever) in the service of their African captors. To begin with, there was usually a time-lag between capture and the moment when a buyer presented himself. Then, there were always individuals whom the Europeans rejected for one reason or another; while the African merchants also decided against carrying through the sale under certain circumstances.

De Almada related that on one occasion on which the Portuguese refused to buy some 'pieces' who had been kidnapped by Fulas, the latter killed the victims.[18] Such action might have been taken in isolated instances, but, in general, persons who were offered for sale and who were not purchased by the Europeans were utilized for the economic benefit of their African captors. C. B. Wadstrom, an activist in the movement for the colonization of Sierra Leone, addressed himself to interviewing those engaged in the Atlantic slave-trade in the area on this specific point. First, there was the testimony of the chief of Port Loko, who affirmed that those captives whom the Europeans did not buy were always put to work on the coast. Secondly, 'two other intelligent native traders mentioned the great number of slaves now confined on the coast for purchasers: one trader had no fewer than 200... They said that the slaves would certainly not be put to death; for nobody was ever put to death, except in war or for crimes.' Further questioning by Wadstrom revealed that, when the average price of slaves fell from 160 'bars' to 120 'bars', the king of the Fulas, to bring the European slave-traders to terms, forbade his subjects to carry any slaves down to the coast. As a consequence of this manœuvre, the Fula, Mandinga and Susu territories had become full of slaves who were set to cultivate rice.[19]

For the sake of safety the captives were put to work in small groups.[20] Ever since the seventeenth century (and perhaps earlier) it had been the

[17] P. Mateo de Anguiano, *Misiones capuchinas en Africa*, ed. P. Buenaventura de Carrocera, II (Madrid, 1950), 136—missionary report of 1686 on the Atlantic slave-trade as pursued on the Upper Guinea Coast. *Cabo* or *Gabu* was a Mandinga province extending between the Gambia and the Corubal. The ruler was called *Farim* or 'governor', because he was ostensibly a representative of the emperor of Mali.

[18] Alvares de Almada, 'Rios de Guiné', 275.

[19] C. B. Wadstrom, *An Essay on Colonisation* (London, 1795), part 2, pp. 113–117. A 'bar' originally signified an iron bar about 9 inches long. It came to be a unit of currency in the trade of the Upper Guinea Coast with a very imprecise and fluctuating value. Wadstrom estimated it at about 3*s*. (p. 56).

[20] C. B. Wadstrom, op. cit. part 2, p. 117.

habit of the Mandinga *Farim Cabo* to disperse his captives among his own subjects, expecting to have them returned when a buyer was available.[21] Those captives thus became for a while literally 'household slaves' of the Mandingas. At any given moment, therefore, two of the components of the domestic slave population of the Upper Guinea Coast as viewed by observers at the end of the eighteenth century would have been, first, captives drafted into alien tribes in servile disprivileged positions, as by-products of the Atlantic slaving industry, and, secondly, the real products, who were stock-piled in bond for export.

The majority of the tribes of the Upper Guinea Coast were active participants in the Atlantic slave-trade, and most of them must have retained supplies of slaves for domestic consumption. But the Mandingas, Susus and Fulas stood well to the fore—partly because of their own key role in the slaving operations on the Upper Guinea Coast, and partly because they succeeded in reducing many of the littoral peoples and the inhabitants of the Futa Djalon to a state of vassalage, under the banner of Islam. Military conquest and political ascendancy involved in most cases nothing more than the payment of tribute, but in some instances the Mande or Fula ruling class was directly superimposed on the subjugated peoples. The latter were not dispersed within individual households, but were grouped together in villages, which were economic units producing for the benefit of the master class.

During the latter part of the eighteenth century, some of the Mandinga chiefs on the Upper Guinea Coast had 'slave towns' with as many as 1,000 inhabitants.[22] Travelling in Sierra Leone in 1823, Major Laing found that Falaba, the capital of the Sulima Susus, had its own 'slave town', Konko-doogorée. Intense agricultural activities were carried on there, and the fields in that area were the best tilled and best laid out that Laing had seen in his travels.[23] The 'slave town' was known to the Fulas as the *rounde*. The inhabitants (*rimaibe*) worked under the supervision of a *satigi* who was not himself a free man, although he had the full confidence of the Muslim *Alimamy* or chief of the *diwal*, and was in complete control of the *rounde*. At the end of each harvest, the *satigi* immediately dispatched a bundle of reeds to the *Alimamy*, with the number of stalks indicating the number of loads of grain harvested.[24] This situation has been quite justifiably equated with serfdom, and it was most prevalent in the Futa Djalon after the success of the Muslim *jihad*.[25]

It was also at the tail-end of the Atlantic slave-trade that evidence was

[21] P. Cultru, *Premier voyage de Sieur de la Courbe, fait à la Coste d'Afrique en 1685* (Paris, 1913), 252.

[22] John Mathews, *A Voyage to the River Sierra Leone* (London, 1788).

[23] A. G. Laing, *Travels in the Timannee, Kooranko and Soolima Countries* (London, 1825), 221.

[24] P. Marty, 'Islam in French Guinea' (trans.) in *Sierra Leone Studies* no. XIX (old series, 1936), 49–129.

[25] L. Tauxier, *Mœurs et histoire des Peuhls* (Paris, 1937), 9. He renders the word *rimaibe* as 'agricultural serfs'. The singular is *dimadio*.

forthcoming about the existence of an internal trade in slaves, and there is every reason to believe that this was an accurate reflexion on the date that it came into being. Captain Canot, who was familiar with the Upper Guinea Coast in the 1820's and 1830's, wrote vividly on both the Atlantic slave-trade and the internal slave-trade, implicitly linking the two. With the Atlantic slave-trade as the main preoccupation of the Susus and Fulas, 'a man, therefore, becomes the standard of prices. A slave is a note of hand that may be discounted or pawned; he is a bill of exchange that carries himself to his destination and pays a debt bodily; he is a tax that walks corporately into the chieftain's treasury.' As far as the home market was concerned, the victims not only became agricultural labourers, but men were required as personal attendants and women as wives or concubines.[26]

While one major contribution to the rise of 'domestic slavery' on the Upper Guinea Coast was made by the coastwards thrust of the interior peoples and their involvement in the slave-trade, an equally great contribution was being made by the European forces acting on the littoral from the seaward side.

In the forts and factories of the Royal African Company, a distinction was made between 'sale slaves' and 'castle slaves' or 'factory slaves'. Both were acquired in the same way, but, while the former were destined to face the Middle Passage, the latter were retained around the forts and factories to help in the conduct of trade.[27] The directors took some interest in these 'castle slaves'. In 1702 they issued instructions that a Negro overseer should be appointed over them. They were to be converted to Christianity, given names, taught to speak English, and be allowed to have one wife (another 'castle slave'). Perhaps the most important provision from the company's point of view was that the 'castle slaves' should be taught skills to enhance their value and utility. Such workers were not to be sold or transported overseas except for great crimes.[28]

Apparently, no record remains of the number of 'castle slaves' in the forts of York and Bence Island and their subsidiary factories, but in 1702 it was felt that there were too many in Sierra Leone, and that some should be transferred to Cape Coast Castle.[29] However, some years later there was talk of shortage. At least, the directors had been made to understand that it was cheaper to use their own slaves than to hire African servants, and they gave their factors authority to purchase slaves for the factories.[30] Walter Charles, the last of the chief factors of the Royal African Company in Sierra Leone, was certainly convinced that, if the Company used their

[26] Captain Canot, *The Adventures of an African Slaver* (London, 1928), 128, 129. (This account was actually written in 1854 by one Brantz Meyer to whom Canot related his experiences.)

[27] *Public Record Office*, London (to be cited below as *P.R.O.*), T 70/1465: diary of agent Walter Charles, 1728. This mentions 'Cayoba, a castle slave who had been made such from a sale slave'.

[28] *P.R.O.* T 70/51: instructions to agent Freeman, 4 August 1702.

[29] *P.R.O.* T 70/51: instructions to agent Freeman, 1 December 1702.

[30] *P.R.O.* T 70/60: instructions from the directors, 5 October 1723.

own slaves, it would be cheaper and more convenient; and he urged that some 'castle slaves' should be sent to Sierra Leone from the Gambia establishments.[31] The same situation was to be found in the Portuguese trading centre of Cacheu, where the captain-major argued in 1694 that it cost too much to get the help of the Africans.[32]

Apart from the trading companies, private European traders also owned slaves on the coast, so that altogether the numbers of Africans bought by Europeans and remaining in servitude on the Upper Guinea Coast were considerable. The practice probably began with the arrival of Portuguese ships in the fifteenth century, giving rise to the term *grumete* ('sailor's slave'). In practice, the *grumete* (or *grommetto*, as the English came to use the word) was seldom a chattel. More often than not he was a wage-earner, and in many cases African rulers on the Upper Guinea Coast voluntarily sent their children to live with the Europeans and to serve as auxiliaries in the coastal trade.[33] There was a somewhat similar practice in the nineteenth century, involving the sending of children from the hinterland to the colony of Sierra Leone to learn 'white man fashion'. However, these children were usually only unpaid servants, and, when they grew old enough to realize that they were free, they were sold to the Mande and Fula traders.[34]

Some of the Africans purchased by and remaining in the service of the resident Europeans were little better off than slaves in the New World. The 'castle slaves', like their American counterparts, were branded with their owners' marks.[35] When a 'castle slave' committed a crime his punishment was often brutal. In February 1682 the Bence Island factor reported that some of the 'castle slaves' had stolen, and he had executed one as an example.[36] Escape and rebellion led to the same fate. If the 'castle slave' was not sold, executed or did not die an early natural death, then he could look forward to being freed when he was 'old and useless'.[37] With the private traders, it was equally obvious that unmitigated chattel slavery prevailed at times. Occasionally, the owners displayed those fits of sadism which afflict those who hold absolute power over human life. When in 1694 Francisco Vaz, member of a prominent Afro-Portuguese trading family, cruelly disposed of twelve of his slaves in his Nunez emporium, the matter reached the ears of the Conselho Ultramarino.[38] In the latter

[31] *P.R.O.* T 70/1465: diary of agent Walter Charles.

[32] *Arquivo historico ultramarino*, Lisbon (to be cited below as *A.H.U.*), Guiné, caixa II, no. 230, minute of the Conselho Ultramarino, 30 October 1694.

[33] Alvares de Almada, 'Rios de Guiné', 326, and Fr. Francisco de Santiago, 'Chronica da Provincia Franciscana de Nossa Senhora da Soledade' (MS.), extracts in A. J. Dias, 'Crenças e costumes dos indigenas da Ilha de Bissau no seculo XVIII', *Portugal em Africa*, II, no. 9 (1945), 159–69.

[34] Christopher Fyfe, op. cit. 270.

[35] *P.R.O.* T 70/53: instructions to agent Plunkett, 9 February 1721. (He was sent a new branding iron.)

[36] *P.R.O.* T 70/16: letter from agent Edmund Pierce, February 1682.

[37] *P.R.O.* T 70/361: Bence Island accounts, 1682.

[38] *A.H.U.*, Cabo Verde, caixa VI: Bishop of Cape Verde to the Conselho Ultramarino, 27 July 1694.

years of the eighteenth century John Ormond, thirty-five years a slave-trader in Baga territory, was notorious for amusing himself at the expense of the lives and limbs of his servants, in much the same way as his contemporaries in Saint Domingue.[39]

The servitude directly introduced on to the Upper Guinea Coast by the Europeans slowly assumed an African character. The slave owners were originally white and foreigners, but the late eighteenth century saw the emergence of powerful mulatto slave-trading chiefs, who were said to own large numbers of 'domestic slaves'. Wadstrom explains that 'if an African slave is impertinent he is sold. The children of such are occasionally sold also. But with the rich traders this is not common.'[40] The rich traders he refers to were mulattoes like the Caulkers and the Clevelands, the progeny of English slave dealers and African women. They kept 'slaves' not only to serve as crews on the coastal and riverain vessels and to act as porters, but also to provide labour for the production of food and manufactures, which indirectly facilitated the Atlantic slave-trade. In the latter part of the eighteenth century Chief William Cleveland (grandson of the original white Cleveland, who died in 1758) had a large 'slave town' on the mainland opposite the Banana Islands. The inhabitants were employed in cultivating extensive rice fields, described as being some of the largest in Africa at the time, and equalled only by the Susu plantations which were also employing forced labour. In another smaller village, whose people were said to have been owned by Cleveland, there was a thriving mat and cotton industry.[41]

Whether as agricultural labourers or sailing *grumetes*, whether as temporary members of households or as permanent residents of *roundes*, a large number of Africans on the Upper Guinea Coast at the end of the eighteenth century had been reduced to servile status through the agency of the Atlantic slave-trade. A few quickly emerged as trusted servants and lieutenants, but the majority signalled their oppression by rebelling or escaping when the opportunity presented itself. They had every reason for so doing; because, having been spawned by the Atlantic slave-trade, they in turn constituted the section of the society most liable to be exported. Again it is from Captain Canot's account that the interrelationship between the two phenomena most clearly emerges. When, on one occasion, Canot visited Timbo, the capital of the Futa Djalon, the inhabitants of Findo and Furto, two slave settlements on the outskirts of the city, fled in consternation on hearing that he wanted slaves. They knew that they were earmarked as the first to be exported; and, as it turned out, flight did them no good, because they were hunted by Fulas on horseback, and Canot was provided with his coffle to return to the waterside.[42]

[39] C.B. Wadstrom, op. cit. part 2, pp. 84, 85, 87.

[40] Ibid. part 2, p. 117.

[41] British Museum, Add. MS. 12131: papers relating to Sierra Leone, 1792–96, journals by Mr Gray and Mr Watt, 1795.

[42] Captain Canot, op. cit. 168, 169.

The village of local slaves thus became a warren supplying the Europeans. This was the ultimate degradation to which the Atlantic slave-trade had brought the African society of the Upper Guinea Coast. Without a doubt, as far as this region is concerned, to speak of African slavery as being ancient, and to suggest that this provided the initial stimulus and early recruiting ground for slaves exported to Europe and the Americas is to stand history on its head.[43] When the European powers involved in the area (namely Britain, France and Portugal) intervened to end slavery and serfdom in their respective colonies, they were simply undoing their own handiwork.

While it is the main concern of this paper to demonstrate that the generalization that the Atlantic slave-trade was at its inception stimulated by African slavery and 'domestic slavery' cannot be sustained when applied to the Upper Guinea Coast, the validity of the thesis as a whole is open to question. The weaknesses of the generalization can be seen by reverting to the three statements quoted at the outset.

No attempt was made by Rinchon to substantiate his sweeping assertion that the majority of the Africans lived in a state of servitude. Nor does he define 'servitude', and it does seem that he is using the word in a very arbitrary and imaginative sense. Propositions stated in this manner cannot be entertained.

J. D. Fage is very careful in defining 'domestic slavery' and circumscribing the numbers involved; but he feels that it 'nevertheless' gave a fillip to the Atlantic slave-trade. This highlights a certain contradiction. The 'domestic slave' was the member of a royal or noble household. What reason is there to suppose that the ruling class would first dispose of the affinal members of their own family? Perhaps the continued employment of the term 'slave', however qualified, has some bearing on the conclusion. Rattray himself ended by referring to the 'so-called "slaves"'; and, though perhaps the label 'domestic slave' is meant to express this idea, it carries with it the same associations with the Americas which the pro-slavery interests were at pains to evoke, especially since the literature on American slavery has already made familiar the distinction between the domestic or household slave and the field slave on the basis simply of their place of work; while it is well known what constituted the principal 'domestic institution' of the Old South.[44]

To recognize that 'domestic slavery' is a misnomer is to avoid much confusion, and it does not mean losing sight of the possible existence within fifteenth- and sixteenth-century West African coastal society of authentic chattel slavery and other forms of social oppression such as serfdom and household service with limited rights and onerous obligations. If these can

[43] J. J. Crooks, in his *A History of the Colony of Sierra Leone* (Dublin, 1903), holds to the view of African slavery being ancient, but he makes no connexion with the Atlantic slave-trade.

[44] See, for example, Eric McKitrick (ed.), *Slavery Defended: the Views of the Old South* (New Jersey, 1963).

be shown to have prevailed, then the Upper Guinea Coast would be atypical in its social structure and the link with the Atlantic slave-trade would appear extremely credible. But it is quite remarkable that so far no contemporary fifteenth- or sixteenth-century evidence for any West African coastal region has been marshalled behind this imposing generalization.[45]

On the question of identifying African slavery, Mannix gives a much more acceptable picture, legitimately citing Mungo Park to establish a distinction between household servants on the one hand and captives and newly purchased slaves on the other. However, when Park added that these social institutions were ancient and widespread in Africa, he was speculating rather than making a factual observation, so that it is pointless to echo him.[46] It is similarly inconclusive to give a modern ethnographic description (as Fage seems to have done) and leave the impression that this was part of the ancient and traditional order of things in Africa. Here it will be useful to take as an example the contention that people could be enslaved in punishment for a civil or criminal offence, and to test it with evidence from the Upper Guinea Coast.

In describing the societies of the littoral peoples of the Upper Guinea Coast the Portuguese did not omit mention of the regime of law and punishment. It was reported at the beginning of the sixteenth century that the Temnes had no capital punishment, while only murder was punishable by death among the Bulloms. The main punishments were in the form of fines. Adultery, for instance, was easily resolved, the offending male paying the damages.[47] Deprivation of liberty was not listed as a legal penalty at this early date. It makes its appearance in the seventeenth century, when the process of law had become warped under the pressure of the Atlantic slave-trade, and there was hardly an offence which did not carry the penalty of sale into the hands of the Europeans.[48] When therefore a modern ethnographic survey of the region indicates that 'punishments formerly included' enslavement for a wide variety of crimes, this itself needs to be

[45] Obviously, the early records of the Portuguese in Benin and the Congo could be of vital importance here. Basil Davidson cited Pacheco Pereira to the effect that there were wars in Benin providing captives for the Europeans, and added that 'these wars provided slaves for domestic use, much as in medieval Europe'. This is a reasonable presumption, but it is nevertheless an interpolation and not the evidence of Pacheco Pereira (*Old Africa Rediscovered*, 124, and *Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis*, ed. Mauny, 134). For the Congo (121, 122) Davidson cites a secondary work: A. Ihle, *Das alte Königreich Kongo* (1929).

[46] Besides, Mungo Park was heavily influenced by the West Indian slave-owner Bryan Edwards; and it was one of the pro-slavery arguments that, if the majority of Africans were already slaves in Africa, then it would be no improvement in their lot to end the Atlantic slave-trade and American slavery. For a discussion of the extent to which Park was influenced by Edwards, see the introduction by John Murray to the publication of Park's second Niger journey, *The Journal of a Mission to Africa in the Year 1805*.

[47] Valentim Fernandes, op. cit. 92, 96.

[48] See, for example, the report of three Spanish Capuchin missionaries on the conduct of the Atlantic slave-trade on the Upper Guinea Coast in the latter part of the seventeenth century in P. Mateo de Anguiano, *Misiones capuchinas en Africa*, II, 132–46 (written in 1686).

placed in historical perspective rather than accepted as historical evidence.[49]

The examples of African slavery documented at an early date which immediately spring to mind come from the western Sudan, with its large centralized expansionist states and its developed system of production and distribution. Not only were slaves exported across the Sahara, but peoples in the region were also being reduced to vassalage and made captives in the large-scale wars that were fought in the open savanna. Their labour was then exploited within an economy which was characterized by some amount of specialization. These would seem to be the prerequisites for a society to incorporate slaves, serfs and the like.

In many respects the Senegambia was an extension of the western Sudan, and so was the Gold Coast area around Mina. The Africans around Mina actually purchased slaves from the Portuguese in the fifteenth and early sixteenth century, those slaves being brought from other sections of the coast and exchanged for gold.[50] In the Senegambia the pattern was even more instructive. As indicated earlier, the Portuguese chroniclers did report 'household slaves' among the Wolof. They also recorded that the district was exporting slaves in directions other than westwards to the Atlantic. In fact, by a curious cycle of barter, the Portuguese took slaves from the Upper Guinea Coast in the sixteenth century and exchanged them for iron from the Wolofs. The latter apparently handed on most of the slaves to the Moors, while the Portuguese took the iron and bartered it for further captives on the Upper Guinea Coast, making a surplus which was destined for the Spanish Americas.[51] Richard Jobson also bore witness in 1620–21 that slaves were traded inland from the lower and middle Gambia, though 'among themselves... they make little use thereof'.[52]

Two issues would be worth pursuing on the basis of the Mina and Senegambia examples, especially the latter. The first is the extent to which these societies were representative of the West African littoral; and at a glance it would appear that there were far greater areas where the social structure was parallel to the Upper Guinea Coast. The second matter to be noted is the tremendous increase in local slavery in the Senegambia between the voyages of Jobson and Mungo Park—separated by nearly two centuries in which the ruling class had committed itself to a slaving partnership with the Europeans. Quite obviously, Mungo Park's question must have been quite pertinent to the Senegambia,[53] even though slavery and serfdom were encountered in some measure before the arrival of the Portuguese caravels. There must have been some connexion between the *status quo* at the end of the eighteenth century and the Atlantic slave-trade.

A random selection of examples drawn from farther afield indicates the

[49] M. McCulloch, op. cit. 24, 25.

[50] Raymond Mauny (ed.), *Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis, par Duarte Pacheco Pereira (vers 1506–1508)* (Bissau, 1956), 134, 126. [51] Alvares de Almada, op. cit. 301.

[52] Richard Jobson, *The Golden Trade* (London, 1933), 108, 109. The 'slaves' in the Gambia were owned by the Muslim *imams*. [53] See above, p. 434.

likelihood of a widespread impact of the Atlantic slave-trade along the lines followed on the Upper Guinea Coast. The Nyamwezi were the great traders in ivory and slaves who supplied the coastal slaving towns in the vicinity of Zanzibar. While they were travelling between the coast and their sources of supply deep in the interior, their lands were worked by slaves acquired for that purpose.[54] In the case of the Nike of eastern Nigeria, the correlation between their participation in the Atlantic slave-trade and their accumulation of slaves was even more definite. Nike acted as the northern agents of the Aro, and were among the principal recruiters of slaves in eastern Nigeria. In the process, they acquired great tracts of land and large numbers of captives remained in their hands, giving rise subsequently to mitigated forms of household service.[55] In this respect, the Ashanti may well repay investigation.

The Nyamwezi and the Nike would correspond to the Mande and Fula of the Upper Guinea Coast; while the resident European and mulatto slave-traders of the Upper Guinea Coast also had counterparts elsewhere, notably in Angola. There too, 'sale slaves' were employed in agricultural activities for a period of time, while some were kept permanently on the coast. When the Portuguese sought to abolish slavery in Angola in the nineteenth century, what was involved was the ownership of Africans by whites and mulattoes.[56] This can be maintained without contradiction, even if it can be proved that there were tribal slaves within the hierarchical society of the Congo–Angola area in the fifteenth and sixteenth century, and that these constituted the first victims of the Atlantic slave-trade. However, while this latter hypothesis has been shown to be unsatisfactory in many respects, there seems to be at least a *prima facie* case for the counter-assertion that many of the forms of slavery and subjection present in Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and considered indigenous to that continent were in reality engendered by the Atlantic slave-trade.

[54] R. Oliver and J. D. Fage, *A Short History of Africa* (London, 1962), 172.

[55] R. K. Udo, 'The migrant tenant farmer of eastern Nigeria, in *Africa*, XXXIV, no. 4 (October, 1964), 333. There is a reference to the regime of household service in southern Nigeria in *Black Mother*, 39.

[56] James Duffy, *Portugal in Africa* (London, 1962), 61, 62, 69.