

The Vile Trade

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*To Prince Olagunsoye Oyinlola for his single-minded commitment and
dedication to scholarship and our cultural heritage.*

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Series Editor's Preface

The *Carolina Academic Press African World Series*, inaugurated in 2010, offers significant new works in the field of African and Black World studies. The series provides scholarly and educational texts that can serve both as reference works and as readers in college classes.

Studies in the series are anchored in the existing humanistic and the social scientific traditions. Their goal, however, is the identification and elaboration of the strategic place of Africa and its Diaspora in a shifting global world. More specifically, the studies will address gaps and larger needs in the developing scholarship on Africa and the Black World.

The series intends to fill gaps in areas such as African politics, history, law, religion, culture, sociology, literature, philosophy, visual arts, art history, geography, language, health, and social welfare. Given the complex nature of Africa and its Diaspora, and the constantly shifting perspectives prompted by globalization, the series also meets a vital need for scholarship connecting knowledge with events and practices. Reflecting the fact that life in Africa continues to change, especially in the political arena, the series explores issues emanating from racial and ethnic identities, particularly those connected with the ongoing mobilization of ethnic minorities for inclusion and representation.

Toyin Falola
University of Texas at Austin

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We wish to place on record our sincere appreciation to the present Honourable Minister of State for Defence and former Deputy Governor of Osun State, Erelu Olusola Obada, for finding time to perform the opening ceremony of this Colloquium and also for adding grace and panache to the occasion.

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Our gratitude must be extended to Professors Wole Ogundele, the Director of the Centre, and Abi Derefaka, the Chairman of the Committee that organized this Colloquium, for their ability to manage so many contending forces and conflicting challenges with the sublime skills of a championship-winning ballerina.

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Many thanks to Mr. Oyetunde Oyesiji for his coordinating role of the Local Organizing Committee. Even though there are numerous contributions that made the Colloquium a memorable intellectual exercise as well as an unforgettable social network forum, it will be a blatant omission or an act of commission if we don’t register our sincere appreciation to the following Committee mem-

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To Professor Toyin Falola, a recurring decimal and evergreen mentor, and our publishers, Carolina Academic Press, we owe a debt of gratitude.

Last and not the least, to the man who was the hub that binds all the members together, Mr. Emmanuel A. Odekanyin, who manned the Secretariat with thorough precision and single minded commitment; to him we say a big thank you.

Augustus Babajide Ajibola

Secretary, Organizing Committee for the International
Colloquium on Slavery, Slave Trade and Their Consequences
May 2013

Introduction

Abi Alabo Derefaka

The Vile Trade: Slavery and the Slave Trade in Africa is a major part of the harvest from the International Colloquium on Slavery, Slave Trade and Their Consequences, which took place at Iloko, Osun State, Nigeria, between August 23 and 26, 2010. The contributors to this book discuss the subjects of slavery, slave trade, reparations, and the “blame game” from different intellectual, practical, cultural, and ideological perspectives. Chronologically, the past, present, and future are covered. Geographically, the contributions are from different countries and continents. This book should open up new areas of scholarship on slavery and slave trade, reparations, and the blame game by expanding the body of literature, thereby making substantial contributions to the historiography of the subject matter and opening up new avenues for research.

As indicated by the title of Chapter 1 of this book, by Doudou Diene, this book is essentially a revisiting of the memory of slavery and the slave trade as well as the challenges of reparation. The constraint on our having complete knowledge about this very important episode in Africa’s history is what the great Nigerian playwright John Pepper Clark has aptly referred to as “collective amnesia.” This is why one must agree with Diene, who says that “the paradox is that this huge history is surrounded by silence and invisibility. Silence on the depth of the tragedy, of what happened, how it happened, why it happened. Almost three centuries of violence which has no precedent in human history.”

But then Michael Gomez tells us there is:

historical record of the African American collective memory as it pertains to the transatlantic slave trade ... The examination of African American folklore relating to the period of enslavement makes very clear that Africans and their descendants were deeply involved in an inter-generational conversation about the nature of the slave trade, a dis-

cussion that not only centered on the logistics, but also featured existential and philosophical dimensions. The fundamental query, “How did we get here?” was quickly followed by the more troubling interrogative, “Why are we here?” In attending to these issues, Africans and their descendants did not shy away from either the matter of European and American culpability, nor did they avert their eyes from the arguably more vexing matter of the role of African elites. What therefore developed, in fact, were two traditions about the slave trade. One focused on European deception as the principal reason for so many being captured, and this concept can be found in a series of accounts I have elsewhere dubbed the “red cloth” tales, a reference to the ubiquitous presence and mention of some form of red cloth. These stories clearly and unmistakably make the point that Africans were deceived in their commercial relations with Europeans, who presented themselves in a benign fashion but turned out to be highly toxic and destructive. But the evidence also shows that at the same time that the “red cloth” tales were developing and circulating by the nineteenth century, another tradition also emerged with the very same community, but this one was much more concerned with African involvement in the trade. The “red cloth” tales represent the preferred version of the black community, the version that was most efficacious in communicating the trade’s implications. At the same time, however, it was not possible to eradicate from memory the role played by the African accomplices of the slave interests. The decision to separate these traditions, such that European and American liability was featured exclusively in the “red cloth” tales, was a deliberate decision made to convey that not all culpability is equal. African involvement featured in the second tradition, but it was not as widespread nor did it receive as much attention. African Americans would address the issue, but within a different context. It was their decision to fashion and designate such tales as the “King Buzzard” story as the vehicles by which posterity would learn of African complicity. The use of this folklore challenges us in Africa to examine our folklores and family histories to unearth information about this important period of our past so as to examine aspects (including African complicity) of the trade in human beings.

In Chapter 5, Okorobia focuses on Servile Institutions in Nembe in the Niger Delta. He says:

Historically, a number of institutions have been identified as “servile” institutions. These include slavery, pawnship, servile marriage, cult or ritual slavery (*oru-omoni*), peonage, serfdom, forced labour, etc. Of these, only a few, such as slavery, pawnship, servile marriage, cult or ritual slavery (*oru-omoni*), and forced labour were practiced by the Nembe. It is reasonable to believe that all, or at least, most of them were already being practiced before the Nembe’s contact with the Europeans via the Atlantic trade ...

Servile Marriage (Wife Purchase/Iyorobo Bere) was a union between a man and a woman in which the husband saw the wife as his personal property over whose productive and reproductive powers he exercised unrestrained control. Many men from matrilineal societies who go outside their societies to marry by means of the high bride-wealth system present their wives as personal properties to their people at home.

Cult/Ritual Slavery (Oru-Omoni) was a religious custom among the Nembe in which persons who were unable to carry out certain expensive rituals gave themselves up to the deity to serve it for life, with the implication that their descendants would inherit the status. This was most common with the national deity, Ogidiga, whose totem, the royal python, *python regius (ekekoru)*, was on no account to be killed or seen dead. Anyone adjudged guilty of breaking this taboo was in early times, executed, but in recent times, such individuals are given the option of offering themselves as slaves of the deity at the shrine in Oruamabiri.

Forced Labour is a system of compulsory work whereby someone is made to execute a task against his or her will, either as a punishment or as a means of debt repayment.

Among some Nembe, the distinction between the servile institutions of slavery, pawnship, servile marriage, cult or ritual slavery (*oru-omoni*) and forced labour is marginal, and sometimes pretty difficult to establish. The general understanding of most informants tended towards equating slavery with these other institutions. This explains, partially, why most informants declined to name former victims of pawnship, servile marriage, cult or ritual slavery (*oru-omoni*) and forced labour or their descendants, since it was considered status to which the emotionally and culturally sensitive stigma of slavery could be associated.

When studied closely, however, it is possible to identify many more differences in the character of these servile institutions. A pawn (*pagi*), for instance, occupied a position between the free citizens, *furo-owoma*, living in the comfort and security of a kin group and the *slave* (*omoni* or *igbo*) who is totally alienated from his or her original natal group, and therefore, treated as pure chattel. Some informants (such as Mangi-Pegi, 1/1/90) could only struggle to differentiate between the Nembe term for pawnship, *pagi*, as *kala deri*, “mini-slavery” or “a mini-sale” as opposed to virtual slave, as being “sold already.”

Paul Lovejoy’s contribution examines “the nature of slavery, from enslavement to trafficking and the impact of the external trade in slaves across the Sahara, Indian Ocean and Atlantic on Africa ... (and) how patterns of slavery in Africa changed over time.” He says, “An examination of the uses and abuses of enslaved individuals demonstrates that the persistence of slavery is a factor in African history.”

In the last chapter of this book, Chinweizu provides a useful summary when he says:

When the era of the so-called Slave Trade is examined comprehensively, what do we find? Its three main features were interminable wars, forced labour and terrorism; and the targets of all three were the Black/African Race; and the entire thing was organized by Whites of European stock, and they were its prime beneficiaries. It was a system of war and violence on four continents and on their interconnecting seas. This war system operated in three zones: (1) There was Africa, the war front, the zone of daily battles, skirmishes, raids, kidnappings and ambushes, which yielded war prisoners for carrying off into captivity. (2) There was the Diaspora zone, the rear area of the Europeans, made up of the transit waters (the Atlantic and Indian Oceans), together with the territories of the Americas well as the plantation islands in the Indian Ocean, off shore from East Africa (Mauritius, Seychelles, Reunion, Zanzibar, etc). For the Black war captives, this was the zone of permanent martial law and terrorism (especially on the plantations, mines and slaveholding towns); the zone of forced labour (the Gulags and Siberias of their time); the zone of daily resistance by the captives, and of their periodic escapes, mutinies and revolts, and of the brutal suppression thereof (there were some 250 recorded revolts in the USA alone, an average of one a year for the era before Emancipation); the zone of guerrilla wars between the Maroon com-

munities (hundreds of which existed at any one time all over the Americas) and the slave-owner communities around them which sought to re-enslave them; and the zone of full-scale wars between the slave-owner states and the liberation movements, as between France and its slaves in Haiti, or between the USA and the Black Seminoles. And (3) There was Europe, the headquarters from where the entire far-flung system of daily warfare was masterminded, stimulated, coordinated, armed and financed, and to which the bulk of the resulting riches was taken. It needs to be pointed out that, in its search for cheap labour, Europe took war to the Black Race; that Europeans went to Africa as deliberate war provocateurs, and craftily fomented wars, and committed and suborned warlike acts, in order to stimulate a harvest of war prisoners.

This was how it all began:

The captains of two of Prince Henry's exploring caravels brought back with them to Lisbon in 1442 a dozen Africans, whom they had captured on the West Coast in the course of a wholly unprovoked attack upon an African village. Further exploits of a similar kind followed. After Columbus "discovered" America, and sturdy labor was needed for plantations there, the raiding of Africa for slaves became the official business of rival European states. By the early 18th century, it brought war, war of the most atrocious and desolating character, and on a scale until then unimagined, to Africa, and "made of England the great slave trader of the world." ... The trade had grown so large that mere kidnapping raids conducted by white men in the immediate neighbourhood of the coast-line were insufficient to meet its requirements. Regions inaccessible to the European had to be tapped by the organization of civil wars ... Tribe was bribed to fight tribe, community to raid community ... Tribal feuds and individual hatreds were alike intensified, and while wide stretches of countryside were systematically ravaged by organized bands of raiders armed with muskets, "hunting down victims for the English trader whose blasting influence, like some malignant providence extended over mighty regions where the face of a white man was never seen," the trade put within the reach of the individual the means of satisfying personal grudge and of ministering to a private vengeance. This inter-Black warfare which Europeans stimulated and orchestrated yielded a steady harvest of war prisoners. The Euro-

peans then carried this harvest into captivity across the waters, and converted them into chattel-slaves. It should be emphasized that, while being carted out of Africa, the captives were not yet actually slaves. They were turned into slaves only after they were landed in the Americas where the slave plantations received them and broke them in, and put them to toil under a system of state and private terrorism. For example: For a hundred years slaves in Barbados were mutilated, tortured, gibbeted alive and left to starve to death, burnt alive, flung into coppers of boiling sugar, whipped to death.

These quotations are a representative sample of the range of issues and concerns discussed by the authors of the nineteen chapters of this book. The editors of this book expect that this volume will be a useful addition to the growing literature on this important subject matter.

Finally, the deliberations/key conclusions and recommendations of the colloquium that gave birth to this publication need to be reflected here. They are as follows:

Deliberations/Key Conclusions

1. The slave trade in all its dimensions in all the regions it occurred, constitute an important element of African and global history.
2. Slavery and the slave trade generated the largest forced migration in human history that was characterised by a legacy of violence and insecurity which had enormous consequences on Africans and the African diaspora.
3. Slavery and slave trade undermined the dignity, self worth and aspiration of all Africans and the African diaspora as a result of which they continue to suffer debilitating discrimination and violation of human rights, psychological pain, and suffering across the globe.
4. The present state knowledge of the enslavement of Africans in all its dimensions is inadequate in explaining and understanding the place, role and significance of Africa and her descendants in the structure of contemporary global power relations.
5. There is a critical link between contemporary forms of enslavement and the Atlantic slave trade which needs to be adequately studied and understood by scholars and policy makers.
6. Following the Durban and UNESCO Declarations of the slave trade as a crime against humanity, there is both moral and legal justification to vig-

rously pursue the course of reconciliation, reparation and rehabilitation for Africa and the African diaspora.

Recommendations

After full deliberations, participants at the colloquium recommended the following:

1. That African governments should include the study of slavery and slave trade in their history books and support the teaching of such history in their schools at all levels.
2. That African governments should establish and support a network of scholars involved in research on slavery and slave trade.
3. That the history of slavery and the slave trade in all its ramifications should be re-interrogated by scholars, in order to integrate the particular experiences, struggles and triumphs of the enslaved.
4. That scholars should continue to address more vigorously the experiences of women, children and other issues of gender which are largely neglected aspects of the history of slavery and slave trade in Africa.
5. That African governments should complement the current efforts of UNESCO, the Centre for Black and African Arts and Culture (CBAAC), and Centre for Black Culture and International Understanding (CBCIU), etc, in actualising the teaching of the general history of Africa at all levels as a way of improving the knowledge of African culture and civilization.
6. That African governments should adopt and domesticate in their legal systems the Durban and UNESCO Declarations that the slave trade is a crime against humanity.
7. That African Union and the African Parliamentary Union, CARRICOM and other African diaspora organizations, in collaboration with relevant UN affiliates like the UNESCO and International Court of Justice (ICJ), should pursue the course of reconciliation, reparations and rehabilitation both as a moral duty and a right with all sense of purpose and determination.
8. That in the globalized world of the 21st century, state and non-state actors in the international system should strengthen their capacity to fight contemporary enslavement in all its numerous dimensions.

