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Slavery and slaving in African history

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Abstract

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The book is thus very significant in illuminating new paths for historians and academics to explore.

Slavery and slaving in African history

(New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014, xvi + 223 pp., figures, maps, diagrams and illustrations, index. ISBN: 978-0-521-17188-5)

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This volume is the eighth in the series "New approaches to African History", which Cambridge University Press launched in 2002 with the publication of Frederick Cooper's much-acclaimed *Africa since 1940: The past of the present*. All the volumes in the series are aimed both at students and "general readers". Each introduces a particular topic in African history, summarises the state of the literature, outlines key issues in that field and provokes discussion and debate. All the volumes in the series have proved excellent resources for those of us who teach African history.

Sean Stilwell's new study that assesses the place of slavery in the African past is as impressive as predecessor volumes in delivering its difficult brief of digesting specialist knowledge, engaging in important debates and providing readers with a coherent synopsis of its topic. Although I might express an occasional reservation about some very dense and long paragraphs, I stand in considerable awe at the author's ability to communicate clearly, without trivialising or over-simplifying the material.

One can be reasonably assured that all students of African history become aware early in their studies of the importance of slavery. Seldom, however, has a more persuasive case been assembled for a consideration of the significance of slavery in the African past. This text ranges over approximately between 10 000 and 12 000 years and takes into account a vast array of historical settings and conditions; in all of them, slavery was a critical element. While not suggesting that slave experience was always the same – indeed, it was often dynamic and it

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was certainly very diverse – the author nonetheless does convey that slavery was a centrally important institution in African history.

The text has been organised into six chapters. The first two are perhaps best considered together, as Chapter 1 grapples with how to define slavery, while Chapter 2 seeks to historicise these definitions through placing them chronologically within different periods and places. The author leads the reader very clearly through the "slippery" concepts of slavery and freedom (p. 5ff). Despite the difficulties of defining precisely what slavery entailed across the continent, slaves in Africa were "usually produced through violence, were regarded as kinless outsiders, were often treated as property, and were believed to lack honor" (p. 26). They were the "ultimate form" of human capital and a "special kind of dependent" as "moral and social outsiders". This last-mentioned concept is particularly well teased out in Chapter 2, where "insiders" in different contexts and societies actively used "outsiders" (or slaves) to promote their own influence, power and status. The author divides African history into four main chronological periods: the period up to the year 500CE that laid the foundations of slavery, that from 500 to 1600 when early militarisation and commercialisation occurred, the years 1600 to 1800 which saw the domination of Atlantic commerce, and the transformative nineteenth century, when high-density slavery was created and consolidated. This illustrates the main argument that slavery was not an "early modern" or nineteenth-century institution driven by forces external to the continent. Rather, it was one grounded in the long African past and embedded in many different early and later struggles, in which slaves as "outsiders" enabled the building and consolidation of states, ruling dynasties, and local households.

Chapter 3 deals with a theme which is certainly often neglected, if not completely overlooked, by non-specialists: slavery in kinship-orientated societies and decentralised communities. The material presented here suggests quite clearly that the absence of state structures did not mean people existed within timeless and disorganised, albeit generally inclusive, units. Slavery existed in a "low-density" form, operating both politically and economically, to bolster and to advance both the status and the wealth enjoyed by certain lineages. This chapter is an important corrective to many who understand slavery to be something solely tied to state formation and the history of the more recent African past, and particularly that of the period between the 1500s and the 1800s.

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The place and the role of slaves within African states will be more familiar to many historians and students of Africa than the ground covered in Chapter 3, so the challenge here is different from the previous chapter. The core argument, that slavery was central to the success and viability of states and the institutions within them, is well advanced. This chapter moves forward briskly, and shows a fine ability to meld the general line of analysis with useful case studies and examples from different contexts in western, central and southern Africa.

Slavery and economics is the main focus of Chapter 5. While the chapter does not downplay the importance of external forces – the trans-Atlantic, the Indian Ocean and the Sahara trade in slaves – it is primarily interested in exploring internal dynamics and influences. It shows the shift over time of the use of slaves by mainly elites within African states to the use of slaves by non-elites, and argues that African households more broadly came to depend on slave labour for the production of goods. This complex and uneven process is outlined in what is the longest chapter of the book. By the end of the nineteenth century, millions of Africans were in bondage on the African continent itself, almost certainly some one-third of the population in some regions. Agricultural production was heavily dependent on the use and labour of slaves, sometimes in very significant numbers, but the success of economic pursuits such as weaving and mining was also reliant on slavery. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the evidence presented demonstrates that some Africans "had created dynamic and profoundly exploitative economies based on slave labor" (p. 175), a conclusion which will not delight those who argue that slavery was essentially an immoral system imposed by Europeans and other outsiders for their own economic enrichment at the expense of Africans.

If slavery was so successfully embedded in Africa, in the ongoing success of many states and in the advancement of African economies, why did it end? This forms the subject of the final chapter of the book, Chapter 6. Essentially, the author traces the process of the impact of colonialism in Africa, and the "double game" played by colonialists of technically abolishing slavery while at the same time ensuring that the supply of labour that was so necessary for the colonial project to succeed was seldom compromised. This often meant, of course, that coercive labour practices were employed. The move to wage labour was frequently a difficult and uneven process, and neither did it necessarily imply "freedom", itself another "slippery" concept. Slaves themselves were not passive bystanders in this process either, and often were able

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to shape their lives and futures in important ways. While slavery as a system was certainly substantially eliminated by the middle of the twentieth century, its legacy remained strong, and free waged labour did not of itself imply an absence of exploitation. These arguments are cogently expanded upon in this important final chapter.

Stilwell is particularly adept at handling both the broad narrative and the particular case study or region. A good example of this is his handling of slavery in southern Africa in the context of the economic use of slaves (pp. 124, 154-157; see also pp. 185-187). He provides an extremely useful and compressed discussion of slavery in the Dutch-dominated Cape, both on the "arable farms" (correcting an earlier allusion to "plantations" in the Cape [p. 111]) as well as in urban Cape Town. There are also some very valid remarks about the continuation of coercive and dependent relationships in all parts of southern Africa after the formal ending of Cape slavery in the 1830s (pp. 185-186, 213) – a theme which is more widely developed in the final chapter on the ending of slavery in Africa. Hardly surprisingly, given the critical significance of slavery in Africa over many centuries, the "end" of slavery was neither definitive nor absolute, and its consequences have lingered well into the second half of the twentieth century.

My only real quibble with this study is the absence of a select bibliography. The footnote references are indeed very useful in pointing the reader to key sources on particular debates and slavery in different contexts, but a consolidated list of references would surely have added value, particularly in guiding novices towards the major sources. The provision of such a list would have enhanced rather than diminished "the more general appeal of this book" (p. xi).

Slavery and slaving in African history is an extremely stimulating text, and deserves wide readership and circulation.

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