



*Afrika Zamani*, Nos. 11 & 12, 2003–2004, pp. 27–48

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& Association of African Historians, 2006 (ISSN 0850-3079)

## Slavery as a Human Institution<sup>1</sup>

John Edward Philips\*

### Abstract

Scholars of slavery have long been divided between those who define slaves primarily as human property and those who define slaves primarily as kinless outsiders. This article reconciles these competing definitions by using the new understanding of definitions popularized by George Lakoff in his book *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things*. The two formal definitions that have been offered are really two sides of the same coin. Slaves in Africa were property because they were kinless outsiders, while slaves in the United States were kinless outsiders because they were property. Slaves in other societies also had this dual character as both property and kinless outsiders. Slavery is a human institution that began in the psychological dependence caused by the shame of kinlessness experienced by isolated individuals. It was thus a mechanism for the incorporation of new members into a society. It spread and developed in human societies, coming to have various extensions in different societies, but always so recognizably similar that slaves could easily be transferred between cultures that had very different understandings of slavery.

### Résumé

Un clivage existe depuis longtemps chez les universitaires spécialisés dans l'étude de l'esclavage, entre ceux qui définissent fondamentalement l'esclave comme une propriété humaine et ceux qui le considèrent essentiellement comme un être sans attaches familiales. Cet article réconcilie ces deux définitions concurrentes en recourant à la nouvelle conception de définitions popularisée par George Lakoff dans son ouvrage *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things*. Ces deux définitions proposées sont comme bonnet blanc et blanc bonnet. En Afrique, les esclaves étaient considérés comme une propriété, parce qu'il s'agissait d'individus sans attaches familiales, tandis qu'aux Etats-Unis, les esclaves étaient des individus sans attaches familiales, justement parce qu'ils étaient la propriété d'autres personnes. De même, dans d'autres sociétés, les esclaves présentaient également cette double caractéristique d'être à la fois propriété et personnes sans

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\* Professor of History, Department of International Society, Hirosaki University, Japan.

attaches familiales. L'esclavage est une institution humaine née de la dépendance psychologique provenant du sentiment de honte d'être dépourvu d'attaches familiales, honte ressentie par certains individus. Il représentait ainsi un mécanisme d'intégration de nouveaux membres au sein de la société. Il s'est étendu et s'est développé au sein des sociétés humaines, à travers diverses ramifications, qui présentaient cependant de fortes similitudes, à tel point que les esclaves étaient aisément transférables d'une culture à l'autre, cultures qui présentaient pourtant des conceptions très différentes de l'esclavage.

### **Introduction: The Persistence of Slavery**

Although slavery has been universally outlawed only recently in historical terms, it is surprisingly persistent. Despite strong social disapprobation and stiff legal penalties, bonded labour, other forms of involuntary servitude, and even the outright sale of persons, persist into the twenty-first century on every inhabited continent. Shockingly, even some slaves who have been freed from bondage return voluntarily to slavery, or even attempt suicide because they do not know what else to do with themselves. Psychological dependence is not only possible, it is far more effective in ensuring control of slaves than is mere brute force.<sup>2</sup> Slavery is probably as irrational and stubbornly persistent among slave owners as among slaves themselves. The institution may be an economic one in that it involves economic relations between slaves and their owners, but it is not economically rational in the sense that it is an efficient way to organise human labour. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, slave societies have shown that they were simply not able to compete with free societies economically, yet slave owners almost everywhere have put up a very stubborn resistance to the emancipation of their slaves, despite evidence that the owners themselves would be among the beneficiaries of the abolition of slavery. Understanding slavery and the psychology of its stubborn persistence has been and still is one of the most important yet difficult tasks of historians and social scientists.

### **The Problem of Defining Slavery**

In an absolute sense there is no slavery, there have only been a finite number of persons held for a limited time (even if often to the end of their lives), in conditions considered by themselves or others to be slavery. Those conditions differed widely, not only from society to society but from time to time in the same society, and often even for the same slave at different times in his or her life. Historically speaking, there have only been those specific concrete instances of domination of one or more human beings by one or more other human beings. These specific instances can be broken down and deconstructed theoretically to arbitrarily prove that 'slavery' as a unified sys-

tem of human domination never really existed. Such deconstructionist theorising would be silly, perhaps dangerous, especially when one considers the tremendous amount of human suffering that has been caused, indeed is still being caused, by these various cases of slavery. But any human theorising about the abstract nature of those many, but still finite, instances is simply that: human theorising, which has no real, objective existence in the outside physical world.

Yet without this very theorising there is no slavery, even in the concrete historical instances of which I have spoken above. Slavery, like money, is an abstract, artificial, human-created institution. Again like money, it is, of course, very real and powerful, but it is still clearly theoretical and metaphorical in its inception. Paternity, or at least fatherhood, may also be a socially constructed category, but it is based on the biological fact of human reproduction. Slavery, however defined and conceived theoretically by whatever society practices or practised it, is not usually considered a natural category, at least today. The state of enslavement is only an artificial metaphor imposed by human theorising. No one is really born chattel, for no living, conscious human is actually an inert, manipulable object, unless he or she believes themselves so and submits, because 'every bondman in his own hand bears the power to cancel his captivity'.<sup>3</sup> Neither are humans naturally without kin, for all humans are necessarily born from a biological mother. Slaves are made by humans, not by nature. These are, in William Blake's famous phrase, 'mind forged manacles'.

Yet too few bondsmen have so cancelled their captivity, and the institution is still with us, laws to the contrary or no. It is not with any intent to trivialise the institution that we must consider its nature, but rather out of recognition of its great importance. We do not need to deconstruct it, to explain it away, or to cut it into pieces so we will live in less fear of it. We need to understand its great power and its persistence. How has its hold on human beings been so strong and lasted so long? How has it appeared and reappeared and lasted so long in so many societies, many with no relation to each other? How do we know that most of these legal and social institutions throughout history, each of these instances of domination, are recognisable as something called 'slavery' in other societies, to the extent that slavery, legal or not, has been a recurring factor in human history.

While recognising the cross-cultural, near universal existence of the slave category we also must recognise that the borders of this category are fuzzy and fade into other categories of social and economic relations, such as peonage and serfdom. Those considered enslavable in one society may be considered immune to enslavement in another. Honoured labour in one soci-

ety may be considered fit only for slaves in another. Conceptions and definitions of slavery have been very different from society to society throughout history, yet there have been few attempts to deny the reality of the concept, and most investigators would find any such attempt dangerously absurd. The only argument has been about the definition of slavery, not its existence.

Academic attempts to construct universal theories of slavery have been almost as contentious as have the social and legal debates over definitions of slavery in various societies. The very nature of the institution has long been debated in terms that might make an outsider to the debate wonder whether the participants were discussing the same institution or not. Specifically, while many have theorised that the slave is essentially property, a human being owned by another human being, others have theorised that the slave is essentially a deracinated human, one who is considered so much an outsider to the society in which he or she lives that he or she is considered to have no kin.<sup>4</sup>

The two definitions are not, of course, incompatible. In actual historical instances of slavery they would seem, in fact, to be mutually reinforcing. In the antebellum United States slaves had no legal families, and were thus kinless, because of the legal fact that they were property. The Supreme Court even ruled, in *Dred Scott vs. Sanford*, that slaves had no rights that free persons were bound to respect, a rather extreme statement of theoretical slavery. Likewise, in societies where slaves were primarily thought of as kinless outsiders, such as Hausa and other African societies, where the opposite of 'slave' (Hausa 'bawa') was 'son' (Hausa 'd'a'),<sup>5</sup> this very status as expendable outsiders made slaves alienable, and therefore valuable property, that could even be traded as a kind of currency.<sup>6</sup> In Thai society slaves were considered property to the extent that anyone who helped a runaway slave was punished as a thief.<sup>7</sup> Yet even here slavery was the only rural institution not 'cast in the kinship idiom'.<sup>8</sup> Thus the two seemingly different and unrelated definitions obviously describe the same institution. Only the formal definition, the question of which characteristic of slavery defines the category and which is merely incidental, is controversial, not the reality of slaves as both kinless outsiders and property of others. This academic question of which definition to use certainly never hindered the trans-Atlantic, Indian Ocean, trans-Saharan or other inter-cultural slave trades, in which slaves were passed from one civilisation to another. And yet the slaves involved in these great forced migrations were passing from one concept of slavery to another, and others' understandings of their situation became different, even if their own did not change immediately. What was the essence of this slavery, or these slaveries, they found themselves in? Let us look at some of the more important recent academic definitions of slavery more closely to see what they tell us about the dispute, and about the nature of slavery itself.

In the introduction to their important collection of studies of African slave institutions, Igor Kopytoff and Suzanne Miers contrasted African concepts of slavery with western models, especially those influenced by New World plantation slavery in the era of the Atlantic slave trade and its aftermath.<sup>9</sup> They noted that the 'bundle of traits' forming the western concept of slavery did not necessarily coincide with African institutions that were analogous to slavery, and questioned the wisdom of using the term 'slavery' for these African institutions. Ultimately they chose to forego attempts either to compare and contrast 'African' slavery with western slavery, or to develop a universal definition, which they referred to as 'a fruitless exercise in semantics'. Rather they chose to present a series of case studies, and to provide a framework within which those institutions could be seen, and the range of possible human institutions that have been referred to as slavery could be better understood, a framework they referred to as 'rights-in-persons' especially in the context of kinship. Specifically, the slave is the marginal outsider, with no right of membership in the kinship group that defines the society in question. They posited a continuum between completely marginal outsiders (slaves) and fully incorporated lineage members who are free. Unfortunately, they neglected to define the difference between the status of slave outsiders with the status of a 'guest' or 'stranger' (concepts which are covered by the same semantic category in many African languages, as in the Hausa word 'bak'o').

In another important collection of studies of slavery, Paul Lovejoy defined slaves in terms of three characteristics: they were property, they were outsiders who shared no kinship ties to the society in which they lived, and their status was based on coercion, it was not a voluntarily chosen status. Thus the 'bundle of traits' to which Miers and Kopytoff pointed was simplified, and at least in non-Islamic areas the lack of kinship characteristic of slaves was considered decisive. 'Where kinship was the governing principle in societies, slaves were perceived as non-kin'. Slaves in such societies were property because they were kin-less, just as slaves in other societies were kin-less because they were property. More importantly, Lovejoy argued that the ideology of any society should not necessarily be taken at face value. The self-justifications of any society do not necessarily reflect the reality of that society, especially as experienced by those at the bottom of the social order. The ideology should not just be studied as an end in itself, but as a part of the very social structure it professes to describe, filling a function in that society which serves particular interests.<sup>10</sup>

Claude Meillassoux began the introduction to his important study of slavery by complaining about the very semantic dispute itself, observing that 'Current research seems to be concerned less with slavery as a social system

than with the definition of the slave'.<sup>11</sup> He took the position that the slave was basically property and that all other characteristics of the slave's condition grew from that. He criticised Miers and Kopytoff for not realising that their own definition in fact 'rests on the strict application of Western notions of law and liberal economics'.<sup>12</sup> He held that their assimilation of slavery to the rubric of kinship missed the real point, that slavery was the clear opposite of kinship. Although he claimed (p. 22) that the definition of slavery was the main object of his study, in his glossary (p. 343) he defined slavery as a 'social system based on the *exploitation* of a class of producers or persons performing services, renewed mainly through *acquisition* (used also, by extension, to mean enslavement)' (emphasis in original).

While this moderates the explicit Marxism of much of his argument by including services along with material goods, it also has two problems. For one it would exclude slavery in the United States on the eve of the Civil War from the definition, since the slave trade had been abolished fifty-three years before the war broke out, and the slave population was dramatically increasing. The same is true of other slaves who had been born, rather than taken, into slavery. Second, if intended only to apply to African societies, the topic of the book, it ignores the acquisition of slaves as prestige commodities, which in many African societies was important.

The most comprehensive and influential survey of slavery to date has been Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death*.<sup>13</sup> In it he tried to summarise the increasingly complex understanding of slavery with a 'preliminary definition of slavery on the level of personal relations: *slavery is the permanent, violent domination of natively alienated and generally dishonored persons*'<sup>14</sup> (emphasis in original). This extremely well and carefully thought out and argued definition is probably the most refined one that could be done without a new way of thinking about not only slavery but also the nature of semantic categories themselves, especially categories for social phenomena that transcend cultural and linguistic boundaries.

Despite the evolution and increasing sophistication of the debate about the nature of slavery the difference in definitions persists, remains an irritant and an annoyance to theoretical attempts to understand slavery, and still leads to misunderstandings.<sup>15</sup> We need a new way of thinking about the problem of slavery, a new understanding of the category of slave, to help us understand the reality of the institution. Fortunately cognitive science and linguistics have given us a new understanding of human-created semantic categories, and the words we use to manipulate these categories and understand the reality around us. It is time to use this new understanding of categories created by human minds, especially in the case of categories like slavery, that

do not exist in nature but which are human creations and which therefore have nothing but the human imagination behind their existence. Psychology has also given us a new understanding of human emotions, which may help us understand why the category of slave is so widespread and persistent.

### **What Is a Definition?**<sup>16</sup>

The old understanding of categories is that they were defined by shared characteristics or properties. All members of categories shared all those properties that were necessary to be members of such categories and therefore all such group members were assumed to be equally good examples of the category as a whole. Categories were thought to have clear boundaries set by their definitions ('define' is from the Latin word 'finis' meaning, among other things, 'border'), and it should therefore be a relatively simple matter to determine whether or not a particular person, place, thing, idea, event, action etc. was a member of a category or not. If it had the defined properties it was, otherwise not. This sort of category reduces semantics to a general problem of mathematical set theory. Thus, in this classical scheme of categories, once one has defined the characteristics of a 'slave' one can easily determine whether or not a particular existing human being is or was a slave. All slaves would be considered equally good examples of members of the category 'slave'.

Unfortunately the matter is not so simple. Semantic analysis of such terms as the English word 'game' has shown that there are no shared characteristics of all things recognised by English speakers as being 'games', although games are similar to each other in a wide variety of ways.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, such basic categories as colours have been shown, despite their wide variation from culture to culture, to have certain identifiable prototypes that are neurophysiological in origin. There is a universally recognised 'bluest blue' at least in those cultures that have a word for blue, and there are certain colours that can be learned more easily than others. This is called the prototype effect. It has been shown to be a general characteristic of categories as perceived and manipulated by humans.<sup>18</sup>

Legal categories and social science definitions of 'slave' have always assumed classical definitions of the type I have laid out above, yet the very existence of legal and social science arguments about the definition of slave, and about which persons fit into the category and which do not, points out that the boundaries are inherently fuzzy and need policing to be maintained. At what point does working one's way out of debt become peonage? How did Roman slavery evolve into medieval serfdom? What is 'white slavery' and is it really slavery? Is the buying and selling of baseball players a form of slavery? Was the obligation to work under Communism ('parasitism' was a

criminal offence) a form of slavery? Were vagrancy laws in American communities the same? Is a military draft a form of involuntary labour and therefore slavery? Were slave soldiers and officials, from the praetorian guard of the Byzantine Empire to the Janissaries of the Ottoman Empire to the Mamluke Dynasty of Egypt, really slaves, or something else? None of these cases fits the common western (or at least American) mental prototype (or idealised cognitive model—ICM—in Lakoff's terminology) of slavery, but they all fall within various formal definitions of slavery. Instead of fine-tuning the two main competing classical definitions we need to transcend the old dichotomy of definitions, and generate a new kind of definition of slavery.

The new concept of categories is that they are based on idealised cognitive models, which in turn produce prototype effects. In the case of a human-created institution like slavery this is obvious. We all have a mental image of an ideal or prototypical slave. Powerful members of slave societies projected these prototypes onto the world, creating slaves in the image and likeness of their prototype. That prototype is different from society to society, and even from individual to individual, of course, just as the exact nature of slavery is also different from society to society. But the fact that these idealised cognitive models organise and reproduce the institution of slavery seems irrefutable.

What kind of idealised cognitive model or models are involved in the creation and reproduction of slave relations? Some human idealised cognitive models, of course, do conform to the classical semantic model described above. These models are defined by necessary and sufficient conditions. They have clear boundaries that simply and adequately define whether a particular phenomenon is a member of the category or not. All members of the category are equally members of the category. Other cognitive models are graded or scalar. There are degrees of membership in them, but no clear boundaries (as with the category 'tall' for example) though some members of the group are obviously better examples of the category. Still other category models are radial. They are complex amalgams of several models arranged in a cluster, all of which link to a centre. The radial models are not predictable from the central model, but have connections to it which are not necessarily obvious from outside their conceptual universe, but which make clear sense from within it.

One such radial category is the universal category of 'mother', even more universal than the category 'slave'. The several models in this cluster include the birth model (a mother is one who gives birth), the genetic model (the one who furnishes the egg cell, whether or not she winds up giving birth, is the mother), the nurturance model (the mother is the female who raises the child), the marital model (the mother is the wife of the father), and the genealogical



model (the mother is the closest female relative). The term mother has even more common metaphoric extensions in English (mother tongue, mother country, etc.) and in Arabic (mother of battles etc.). While the further metaphoric extensions can easily be considered subordinate, which of the other meanings is primary is not so simple a matter, since in the ideal cognitive model they all coincide. Dr Johnson used the birth model to define mother in his dictionary, and many lexicographers have copied him. This has not been a universal choice, however. Funk and Wagnall's Standard Dictionary considered the nurturance model primary, and the American College Dictionary used the genealogical model.<sup>19</sup> The parallel with the problem of defining slavery should be obvious.

The semantic category 'slave' is an example of such a complex, clustering model of a human social category. Slavery is a complex radial idealised cognitive model with different characteristics and extensions in different societies. This explains how most human societies can have a category that is understood as 'slave' in other societies, despite the fact that the actual legal definitions of slavery in the societies in question are very different, and some of each society's extensions of the concept of slavery are not recognised as slavery in some other societies. In American perception even today, the idealised cognitive model of a slave is necessarily black,<sup>20</sup> and therefore 'white slavery' is an oxymoron, an aberration to be condemned even by those who might otherwise approve of slavery as an institution, and slavery that does not necessarily involve blacks on plantations is often not even recognised as slavery. Thus the system of slave prostitution in Japan survived even the reforms of the American Occupation (1945-1952), but was only outlawed later, as a result of women's enfranchisement.<sup>21</sup> Despite these differences, there is a bundle of properties (dishonour, kinlessness, physical domination by another, lack of remuneration for services, inability to voluntarily leave one's occupation, ability to be sold, etc.), that together combine to explain what is a slave. These properties are sufficiently related to make slavery a cross-cultural category, a very human institution in that slaves were easily transferable between societies that might have had very different idealised cognitive models of slavery, even when the slave trade was legal. In this ease of cross-cultural transfer were born the great slave trades of the ancient world and especially the major slave trades out of Africa in the medieval and modern world. There is something terribly human, even (dread the thought!) natural, about slavery, despite its many forms and its differences from society to society. It may not be as universal as the institution of motherhood, but it is very widespread, and notoriously difficult to eradicate because, as Ehud Toledano recently pointed out, 'Something in human nature made slavery

possible everywhere, and it took major transformations in our thinking to get rid of it; and that barely a century and a half ago, an admittedly late stage in our history'.<sup>22</sup>

The various extensions of the basic prototypical characteristics of the category 'slave' are where the institution of slavery varies most in different societies. In the antebellum United States, even where slavery was legal, slave soldiers and officials were unimaginable. In other societies, especially but not exclusively Islamic societies, they were part of everyday life. Despite the existence of the term 'white slavery' in American English, it was legally impossible in every American state before the Civil War for a person defined legally as 'white' to be enslaved. (Racial categories, and their occasional relation to slavery, are also human-created and artificial.) This is not just a matter of the ways in which slaves were used in different societies. It is a matter of the way the category 'slave' was conceived. It is simply impossible, in every society, to conceive of using slaves in certain ways, even if slaves have been used in those ways in other societies.

## **The Appearance of Slavery**

### ***The Origin of Slavery in Human Society***

The question of the appearance of slavery in history must necessarily be connected with the question of why some people have slavery as an institution and others do not, or perhaps why slavery has been so central to some societies and so marginal in others.<sup>23</sup> Anthropologists have traditionally posed that question in terms of the relatively primitive (in terms of technology and subsistence) Native Americans of the northwestern United States and southwestern Canada who had elaborate institutions of an extreme form of slavery and even an extensive slave trade, while the agricultural Creek people of the southeastern United States never developed chattel slavery as a significant economic institution. This is particularly surprising because the Creek lived in a situation where land was not a scarce commodity but labour was. The usual explanation for the appearance of slavery in any agricultural society is that labour is scarce but land abundant. Therefore a market develops in private property in persons, rather than in land.<sup>24</sup> This incidentally also explains the prevalence of walled cities in Africa, and their complete absence in Japan. In Japan lords went to war to get land for their people, or at least for their clan. African kings went to war to get people for their land.

We can see from our new understanding of the nature of slavery that the question here has been posed wrongly. In the best theoretical explanation of the argument over the alleged non-existence of slavery in some societies it is in fact framed differently.<sup>25</sup> There are in fact 'many instances of *sporadic*

slavery among most primitive groups'.<sup>26</sup> This 'sporadic' slavery is not a major economic institution among hunter-gatherers, but the psychological dependency typical of humans in slavery, even in its surviving instances, is probably a human universal among those cut off from social networks.

Contrary to popular assumptions, slavery did not originally begin as an economic institution to exploit agricultural labour. It is, in origin, a relationship of psychological dependence induced by lack of connection to the surrounding society and resulting shame and loss of control. In societies throughout history this relation of dependence has served to integrate new members into a society. It is best for those of us in modern, individualistic Western society to remember how essentially social human beings are, as evidenced by our universal, constant use of languages to communicate and coordinate our activities. Just as bees could not exist without a hive, in which they communicate by dancing, so we humans cannot exist without a society, in which we communicate through language, including gesture. Isolated persons from more groupist, non-western societies, even if they are industrially developed and modernised, will attach themselves fervently to the first new groups they encounter, as did Japanese prisoners of the American military in the Second World War. From this natural human bonding came slavery, originally a means of incorporating isolated individuals into new groups.

This early, natural 'sporadic' slavery was extended for economic gain in most agricultural societies, and even in some of the more prosperous gathering societies. While still an institution for the incorporation of outsiders, slavery became more and more one of economic exploitation. It did not extend into economic exploitation in all agricultural societies, but even the Creeks had household slavery, although their captives were generally either executed immediately or integrated into their society as quickly as possible. In their case there was no economic incentive to extend the system of natural, sporadic slavery much beyond occasional household slavery of an integrative nature, since status in the matrilineal and matrilocal world of the Creek was not attained from individual or even clan wealth, but was ascribed for the clans and obtained by valour in battle by the men. When historians and anthropologists speak of the 'absence' of slavery among the Creek they simply refer to the failure of slavery to develop into agricultural chattel slavery of the type found in those states of the United States that displaced the Creek from their land.<sup>27</sup>

Other societies in which status was based on wealth did develop chattel slavery and even elaborate slave trades, despite being non-agricultural. For example, in the language of the Quinault of the Olympic Peninsula of Washington State the word 'ali's' meant 'rich man, chief, noble'.<sup>28</sup> This was

a stateless society and chiefs had no absolute, legal, coercive authority. They were forced to have their authority confirmed through their generosity in potlatch, which required wealth, obtained partly through the exploitation of slaves. Slaves could buy their freedom in this society, but the society was heavily stratified, with nobles, commoners and slaves said to be distinguished by 'blood'. Not only were slaves traded up and down the coast to similar groups, but in the nineteenth century they were sold to trading posts on the Columbia River for guns, powder, steel tools and trade blankets.

Domestic slavery has also been common in other societies where a labour shortage never tempted masters to turn it into a system for the accumulation of wealth in agriculture. In India and Nepal slaves were used mostly as servants, and therefore could not be from the lower castes, since contact with them would have been polluting for their masters. The lack of a need to recruit more labour into one's group also meant that slavery in these systems was less likely to be ended by eventual emancipation and assimilation into the host society, although in African societies that was often a process that took generations.<sup>29</sup>

In Asian societies where chattel slavery, not just household slavery, was a major economic institution, there was a more open system that allowed for former slaves and their descendants to be reintegrated with free society. Slavery in Thailand seems originally to have involved the capture and sale of persons from surrounding societies. As time went on, more and more Thais were reduced to slavery, either for inability to pay debts, as punishment for crimes, or because their parents had sold them into slavery. A business of abducting free people into slavery grew up, and a substantial proportion of the capital at Ayudhya was enslaved. By 1397 there was even an Officer of Slave Affairs in the government whose primary responsibility was hunting runaway slaves.<sup>30</sup>

### **Frontiers of Slavery (Extensions and Borders)**

As a fuzzy category, slavery has never had clearly defined borders, although there are clearly instances of slavery that make better examples of the institution, although which examples are best may be seen differently by different societies. Rather than indulge in hair-splitting about which are the best examples of slavery, or semantic border patrolling to determine which cases are 'really' slavery and which are something else, let us look at how some of these more dubious instances of shame augmented physical domination relate to the more general category of slavery, to show how the institution can arise and prosper around the human inhabited parts of the planet.

Among the Ecuadorean highland Quechua the institution of 'concertaje' was only abolished in 1918. Grants to Spanish conquistadores had included

rights to the services of Native Americans in return for ‘protection, indoctrination in Catholicism’ and other alleged services. The indigenous people of the area were obliged to render a certain number of days of unremunerated labour, perform other services and hand over a portion of the produce of their meagre landholding. This institution did recognise the rights of the native people to their small plots of land, but their accumulated debts left them unable to leave the lord’s estate in a situation often referred to as peonage, and which extended to their descendants.<sup>31</sup> Such an institution is clearly on the edges of slavery, although both its victims and its beneficiaries could also have seen it as being significantly different from slavery.

### ***Shame and Elite Slaves***

‘Elite slavery’ is even more clearly and universally recognised as an oxymoron than the term ‘white slavery’. Since shame is one of the most painful affects to experience, and since the various definitive characteristics of slavery are not generally considered desirable, the idea of elite slavery is difficult to reconcile with most idealised cognitive models of slavery. Many commentators on slavery reject the idea that elite slaves are in fact slaves, using a classical definition that includes characteristics that exclude any elites from the definition. Yet if we conceive of elite slaves as an extension of the basic concept of slave it becomes more understandable. If we combine our new understanding of definitions with our new understanding of the relation between slavery and shame we may be able to come up with a new understanding of the origins of elite slavery in the late Roman Empire.

Rome was one of the great slave-holding societies of history, but Roman slavery, though often brutal and exploitative, was also very largely a means of incorporating new persons into the society. Roman law favoured emancipation, and Roman masters often gave pay and bonuses to their slaves. This pay in turn, could be saved and used by the slaves to buy their freedom. Slave descendants of the third generation were indistinguishable from other Roman citizens. Even many slaves were respected craftsmen and professionals. So many slaves were employed as teachers of the Roman gentry’s children that Latin had a word, ‘paedagogus’, which meant slave teacher. ‘With few exceptions, slavery in Rome was neither eternal nor, while it lasted, intolerable’.<sup>32</sup>

Gradually Roman slaves came to be used in more and more responsible positions. Wealthy Romans kept slaves to guard their (other) property from fire.<sup>33</sup> In the imperial period slaves came to fill more and more important positions.

Up to the time of Claudius the imperial ‘cabinet’ was composed almost exclusively of slaves. They received the petitions of the empire, issued in-

structions both to provincial governors and to the magistrates of Rome, and elaborated jurisprudence of all the tribunals including the highest senatorial court.<sup>34</sup>

From Claudius to Trajan free citizens were used for these tasks, but the move to slave officials seems to have been irresistible. Other elite Romans imitated the emperors and more and more of the official business of Roman public and commercial life came to be transacted by slaves, a fact which proved demoralising for the free poor.<sup>35</sup> Eventually

their slaves and freedmen—the ‘Caesaris servi’ and the ‘liberti Augusti’—formed a kind of new aristocracy as rich as the freeborn senatorial and municipal bourgeoisie, and certainly not less influential in the management of state affairs.<sup>36</sup>

This system of elite slaves continued into the Byzantine Empire and was picked up by the Abbasid Caliphate. It spread nearly everywhere in the Muslim world, although it may have been invented independently in West Africa. With this system slavery was extended to the point that it nearly turned back on itself, and became something else entirely.<sup>37</sup> Yet the argument over whether slave soldiers and officials are really ‘slaves’ or not is based on the old form of definition that we have here rejected. The slave soldier and official systems were natural extensions of chattel slavery, just as chattel slavery itself was an extension of household slavery and household slavery was itself an extension of the original, sporadic slavery. They cannot be meaningfully understood and discussed in isolation from each other, since they are organically linked. The shame that was attached to slavery was attached to military slaves as much as to any others, if their attempts to win honour for themselves by means of military prowess and administrative authority made slave status more appealing for them than for most others in different situations of slavery.

## Transitions

### *Disappearances: Serfdom*<sup>38</sup>

Slavery not only disappeared for individual slaves, it sometimes disappeared for whole groups of them, if not necessarily as an institution. The most famous example is the gradual evolution of Roman slavery into medieval serfdom. Unfortunately it is one of the least studied and least understood aspects of the history of slavery. It is one of the most interesting cases not only because it was so huge, but more importantly because it only applied to some of the slaves of Europe. It is not often realised that there were still large numbers of slaves in medieval western Europe, for while serfs were tied to

the land and had certain rights, slaves were more mobile and served as the medieval equivalent of modern hired hands.<sup>39</sup>

The main reason serfs won increased rights over the slaves of the preceding Roman Empire was the difficulty of increasing their numbers.<sup>40</sup> Kin-less people do not reproduce as well as those in recognised families, which has been a problem for so many slave societies, that the alleged inability of slave populations to reproduce themselves has sometimes been treated as the equivalent of a natural law. Giving the serf an interest in the land also tended to reduce management costs, in addition to giving the serf an interest in upkeep of land and capital equipment. Thus Roman slavery slowly evolved into something not unlike the sharecropping of the post-bellum American South.

Because this was a gradual evolution the term 'serf' is in fact derived from the most common Latin word for slave, 'servus'. When slavery and serfdom came to be distinguished a new term was used for slave, derived from the ethnonym 'Slav'. Eastern Europeans were in fact the major source of slaves in Europe at this time.<sup>41</sup> Thus those with a semi-free status, the serfs, came to see themselves as not only socially but (at least at first) as ethnically superior to the slaves. They had been successfully integrated into their societies. The slaves, like all slaves, had not. Where this distinction was not found, or where slaves were not readily available, the conditions of serfs tended to deteriorate to those of true slaves, until there were even cases of them being bought and sold in the markets.<sup>42</sup> Divide and rule policies of the elite were as important in defining slaves and serfs in medieval Europe as they were in the American South.

### ***Abolition, Slavery and Caste***

The coincidence of slavery with a colour caste system is not only a uniquely modern system of slavery, it is a specifically Anglophone, New World development. While slavery has been common throughout human history, and other societies, most famously India, have had colour caste systems,<sup>43</sup> the combining of slavery with a hereditary colour caste system, especially to the extent that a new idealised cognitive model of slavery was created, has been unique to the English-speaking New World, especially the United States of America and its British colonial antecedents. The origins of this slave/caste system in the late seventeenth century Chesapeake have been much debated, and it is not my intention here to resurrect the old debate about which came first, racism or slavery. After all, both came first. The questions should be how and why they were combined, for their combination is not natural. The question to be considered here is rather how it is that abolitionism appeared for the first time in human history in the British North American colonies approxi-

mately a generation after the combination of slavery and colour caste. Before this time slavery had often been a temporary situation, lasting at most a few generations. If one could not work oneself out of slavery, at least one could hope that one's children or grandchildren would be integrated into the host society as regular members. Likewise persons of caste, whether in India, West Africa or elsewhere, had autonomous family lives and were not liable to being sold. They may have been inferior, even despised, members of society, but they were not chattel slaves. Previous studies of the origins of abolitionism have focussed either on the rise of mercantile and industrial capital, or on the British humanitarian tradition, especially the Friends (Quakers) in Pennsylvania, the first state in the world to abolish slavery, but it might be better to look at the peculiar institution in the antebellum United States as a peculiar combination of slavery with racial colour caste which necessitated a number of other unique characteristics of American slavery.

The necessity of combining slavery with caste led to such unique features of slavery in the United States as the laws against teaching slaves to read and write. Frederick Douglass wrote that this was the single fact about slavery that first caused him to think that something might be wrong with the institution.<sup>44</sup> The contrast with the Roman slave Terence, one of the most famous authors of Latin literature, is great. Terence, a slave from Africa, was not only taught to write, he earned his freedom as a reward for his great contributions to Roman theatre. So many Greek slaves were school teachers in Roman times that the Roman poet Horace made a famous pun about how Greek slaves enslaved the Romans, or how taken Greece took her wild conqueror, however one translates it.<sup>45</sup> The great West African Islamic reformer Usman Danfodiyo criticised the scholars of his time for not educating their slaves, although it was their religious duty to do so.<sup>46</sup> Both the necessity of keeping Douglass a slave for life, and keeping him in an inferior caste, meant that he could not be allowed to better himself, and both the lifetime nature of the slavery and the inability to better himself were a cause of his discontent as a slave and his conversion into one of the most eloquent abolitionists of his age, something that Terence probably never considered. Of course the ban on teaching slaves to read and write was sometimes controversial among slave owners themselves, as shown by the experience of future General William Tecumseh Sherman in advocating it in Louisiana just before the outbreak of the US Civil War,<sup>47</sup> but no slave state in the United States ever legalised the education of slaves, and even after the abolition of slavery the education of former slaves continued to arouse much opposition. The education of America's subordinate colour caste, now politely referred to as 'African Americans', together with the dominant white caste, is still not completely accepted



by all, even at the present time, and was one of the United States' most explosive domestic political issues throughout the last half of the twentieth century. 'These two words, Negro and Slave [are] by custom grown Homogenous and Convertible'.<sup>48</sup> It was only because blacks in the US were a slave caste, who could never become free, that they were to be denied education, and otherwise prohibited from entering fully into the life of their host society.

The debate about the causes of the rise and spread of abolition in the modern world are usually framed in terms of ideological causes versus economic causes. Was this a story of the ultimate triumph of high-minded principle, or was it rather a story of the triumph of industrial capitalism over a previously dominant form of economic exploitation?<sup>49</sup> In the light of the new understanding of slavery advanced here I would like to propose a social explanation. Slavery as a human institution became untenable when it was combined with a permanent colour caste system in British America at the end of the seventeenth century.<sup>50</sup> While slavery heretofore had been either a marginal household slavery, or even if sometimes brutal economic exploitation as chattel slavery, it had also been a means of assimilating people into the larger society, as in ancient Rome. The dangerous combination of slavery with colour caste proved to be an unstable mix that eventually brought down the whole edifice of legal slavery with it.

The first stirrings of the anti-slavery movement seem to have objected to the idea that black colour was an excuse for slavery.<sup>51</sup> After several scholars had objected in theory to the idea that blacks were necessarily to be slaves, the Quaker George Fox travelled to Barbados to argue that African slaves should be treated mildly and freed after a term of years. He had an effect on his fellow Quakers, but the upshot was that a law was passed against them bringing their slaves into their meeting houses. Eventually all of them were pressured or compelled to leave the island. Other Quakers became active in writing and speaking against slavery in the eighteenth century, and thus the movement began to spread.<sup>52</sup> Fox's ideas eventually took root among the much more numerically significant community of Quakers in Pennsylvania, where, despite the not insignificant numbers of slaves in the colony, they began to spread and eventually became dominant in the second half of the eighteenth century.<sup>53</sup> Anti-slavery sentiment spread as more and more people in Britain and America began to see black slaves not so much as heathen savages but rather as English-speaking people who happened to be black.<sup>54</sup> If the individual slave who had successfully adapted to the host society could not be taken in as a citizen, as had been the case in ancient Rome and so

many other slave societies throughout history, the whole body of slaves would eventually have to be taken in at once, as was the case in the United States.

The economic triumph of free society helped the spread of the emancipation movement as slavery was exposed as an irrational economic institution. Despite their great importance in Thai society, slavery and compulsory labour by peasants were abolished in the late nineteenth century and the latter was replaced by wage labour in order to increase economic efficiency and the amount of rice available for export.<sup>55</sup> Slavery is today universally outlawed not only because it developed into an inhumane institution but also because it is simply not an efficient method of organising human labour. Only if civilisation collapsed and had to be rebuilt from scratch can one imagine slavery again becoming more than a marginal institution in any human society.

### Notes

1. A previous version of this paper was presented to the conference ‘Slavery, Islam and Diaspora’ at York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada on 23 October, 2003. I am grateful to the participants for their comments and encouragement. I also wish to thank the staff of the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka, Japan, for the use of their library, especially the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF) which were invaluable for comparative work.
2. Kevin Bales, ‘The Social Psychology of Modern Slavery’, *Scientific American*, April 2002 (dated 24 April 2002 from the Website <http://www.sciam.com>). Cf. David Labrador, ‘Mental Bonds’ (11 March 2002) and The Editors (sic) ‘The Peculiar Institution’ (30 April 2002) also from the *Scientific American* website. For additional information about contemporary slavery contact Antislavery International at <http://www.antislavery.org/> or at Thomas Clarkson House, The Stableyard, Broomgrove Road, London SW9 9TL, United Kingdom.
3. Casca in William Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, Act I, Scene 3.
4. Moses Finley, ‘Slavery’, *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, New York & London, 1968, pp. 307-313. For other examples see Paul Lovejoy, ‘Slavery in the Context of Ideology’, in Paul Lovejoy (ed.), *The Ideology of Slavery in Africa*, Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1981, pp. 7-38.
5. ‘In Hausa thought the slave (bawa) is often contrasted with the son (d’a), as in the proverb ‘Bawa ba ya gasa da d’a’ (A slave doesn’t compete with a son). Freedom, the opposite of slavery, is ‘yanci’, literally ‘son-ship’, a term which can also be translated as citizenship, or, if applied to a country, as independence. Here the contrast with English notions of freedom and slavery appears most strongly. ‘Freedom’ implies a state of being unattached (‘the bolt worked itself free’), even alienated (care-free, free to go, etc.). The slave, in English, is the one who is attached, who belongs, as the property of another, bound in some fashion to the will of someone else. In Hausa thought it is the free person who

belongs, who is where he is supposed to be ('where he belongs', in English). The slave is the alienated, uprooted, unattached person who can be removed most easily.' John Philips, 'Ribats in the Sokoto Caliphate: Selected studies 1804-1903', Ph.D. Dissertation, History, University of California, Los Angeles, 1992, p. 426.

6. 'Slaves are used in the country for two distinct purposes; first as currency whenever any large amount is involved, and secondly as carriers,' Charles H. Robinson, 'The Hausa Territories', *The Geographical Journal*, vol. VIII, no. 3, September, 1896, p. 208.
7. A. B. Griswold and Prasert na Nagara, 'On Kingship and Society at Sukhodhaya', in G. William Skinner and A. Thomas Kirsch, (eds.), *Change and Persistence in Thai Society*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975, pp. 77-8.
8. Steven Piker, 'The Post Peasant Village in Central Plain Thai Society', in Skinner and Kirsch, (eds.), *Change and Persistence*, p. 302.
9. Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff, 'African Slavery as an Institution of Marginality', in Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff (eds.), *Slavery in Africa*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977.
10. Lovejoy, 'Slavery in the Context of Ideology'.
11. 'Introduction' to *The Anthropology of Slavery*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991, *Translation of Anthropologie de l'esclavage: le ventre de fer et d'argent*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1986.
12. Meillassoux, p. 13.
13. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982.
14. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, p. 13.
15. Sean Stilwell, for example, in 'Power, Honour and Shame: the ideology of royal slavery in the Sokoto Caliphate', *Africa*, vol. 70, no. 3, 2000, pp. 394-421, misunderstood my then current belief that kinlessness was the essential aspect defining slavery for a denial of the fact that the property aspect played any role at all.
16. The argument in this section of the paper is largely taken from George Lakoff, *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things*, 1987: University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
17. Lakoff, p. 16.
18. Lakoff, pp. 24-30.
19. Lakoff, pp. 74-5.
20. Bernard Lewis moved from discussing the legacy of slavery to discussing the question of race in Islamic civilisation without even stopping to change topics, or even noticing that he had changed topics, in 'The Roots of Muslim Rage', *The Atlantic Monthly*, September, 1990, online at <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/90sep/rage2.htm> (paragraphs 3 and 4).
21. Because sale of persons was technically illegal in Japan, legal Japanese brothel slavery was disguised as indentured servitude for terms of ten or twenty years, with accumulated 'debts' at the end so that women were effectively trapped. Thus it involved the sale of women away from their natal home into a job they

couldn't quit, meeting both social science definitions as well as the popular definition of slavery as a job which one cannot leave voluntarily. Despite passage of an 'Anti-slave Trade Act' ('Jinshin Baibai Kinshi Rei') by the Meiji Government in 1872, the system continued with few restraints through the American Occupation (1945-52) and only ended in 1957-8 as a result of a law passed in 1956 in response to pressure from newly enfranchised women voters, cf. Kazuro Takenaka, 'Prostitution', and Toshio Sawanobori, 'Prostitution Prevention Law', *Kodansha Encyclopaedia of Japan*, vol. 6, Tokyo: Kodansha, 1983, pp. 256-7 and 257 respectively. The former notes that 'some prostitution is still more or less involuntary'.

22. 'Keynote address', Conference on Slavery, Islam and Diaspora, Harriet Tubman Resource Centre on the African Diaspora, History Department, York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 24-26 October, 2003.
23. Goody, 'Slavery in Time and Space', argued that slavery was not found in Australia, was on the Pacific Coast of North America as far south as Oregon, scattered in Central and South America, rare in Oceania except Tahiti and New Zealand, and rare in Central Asia and Siberia. It was frequent in an arc running from Malaysia and Indonesia through India and the Middle East into Africa. As a statistical summary he noted that it was found in three per cent of hunting societies, almost half of societies with intensive or extensive agriculture but only seventeen per cent of those with 'incipient agriculture', about a third of fishing societies and almost three-fourths of pastoral societies, pp. 25-26. This of course raises the question of how the ethnographers whose findings were summarised in Goody's source, Murdock's *Ethnographic Atlas*, defined slavery, but we can assume that many of them missed slavery that was not the sort of chattel slavery for economic exploitation that they were used to from the western example, most prominently in ancient Rome and modern North America.
24. Jack Goody in *Technology, Tradition and the State in Africa*, Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1971, noted that 'chiefship tended to be over people rather than over land', p. 30.
25. Bernard J. Siegel, 'Some Methodological Considerations for a Comparative History of Slavery', *American Anthropologist* 47 (3) 1945, 357-392.
26. Siegel, 'Methodological Considerations', 364n (emphasis in original).
27. For more information about slavery and its near absence among the Creek see J.R. Swanton 'Social Organization and Social Usages of the Indians of the Creek Confederacy': *Forty-Second Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology*. 1924-25. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1928, pp. 79, 167.
28. 'Guide to file NR17' in *Electronic Human Relations Area Files (HRAF) CD-ROMs*.
29. J.L. Watson, 'Slavery as an Institution: Open and Closed Systems', in James L. Watson, ed., *Asian and African Systems of Slavery*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980, pp. 9-12.

30. Griswold and Nagara, 'Kingship and Society', pp. 35, 48-9, 58, 72, 77-8.
31. J.B. Casagrande, 'The Indian and Ecuadorean Society', in Peter T. Furst and Karen B. Reed (eds.), *The Condor and the Bull: Tradition and Change in Andean Indian Culture*, Los Angeles; Peace Corps, 1971, 375, 385.
32. Jérôme Carcopino, *Daily Life in Ancient Rome*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975, pp. 56-9.
33. Carcopino, p. 33.
34. Carcopino, p. 62.
35. Carcopino, pp. 62-64.
36. M. Rostovtzeff, *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926, p. 100.
37. The best survey of slave soldiers in history is still Daniel Pipes's *Slave Soldiers and Islam*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981. For more recent perspectives see Toru Miura and John Philips (eds.), *Slave Elites in the Middle East and Africa*, London: Kegan Paul International, 2000.
38. This section is taken from chapter 20, 'Freedom and Servitude in the Middle Ages', in Orlando Patterson's *Freedom: Freedom in the Making of Western Culture*, New York: 1991, Basic Books.
39. Patterson's Freedom, p. 350.
40. Patterson's Freedom, p. 354.
41. Patterson's Freedom, p. 357.
42. Patterson's Freedom, p. 361.
43. The extent to which the caste system of India was based on actual colour of skin has been disputed. S.V. Ketkar, Ketkar, in *The History of Caste in India* (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 1979 [1909]), while noting the presence of two castes in the United States, denied that Indian caste had anything to do with colour or race, or the conquest of Dravidians by Aryans (pp. 4, 79-82, 170). On the other hand, G.S. Ghurye in *Race and Caste in India*, 5th edition (Bombay; Popular Prakashan, 1979) claims that "'Varna" [caste] means "colour" and it was in this sense that the word seems to have been employed in contrasting the Arya and the Dasa', p. 46. Nripendra Kumar Dutt in *Origin and Growth of Caste in India*, vol. 1, 2nd edition (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1968) also argues that the colours of Hindu caste refer to colours of skin, but notes that the Brahmins were white, the warrior Kshatriya caste just under them were red and the Vaisya caste below them were yellow. Given the common associations of red, blood and warfare there would seem to be more than a little symbolism in the colours, since in a purely racial hierarchy one would expect yellow to rank above red, (pp. 4, 18-19). He also notes that slavery in ancient India was a temporary status and that sons of slaves became free. There was no slave caste in India.
44. Chapter 10, 'Learning to Read', in *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, New York: Macmillan, 1962 [1892].
45. 'Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit', *Epistles* ii, No. i, l., 156.

46. For example in his book Nur al-Albab translated by Wali Yusuf in *Kano Studies, New Series*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1980, pp. 10-36.
47. Stanley P. Hirshson, *The White Tecumseh*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1997, p. 66.
48. Morgan Godwyn, 1680, quoted in Betty Wood, *The Origins of American Slavery*, New York: Hill & Wang, 1997, p. 5.
49. Howard Temperley, 'The Ideology of Antislavery', chapter 2 in *The Abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade*, edited by David Eltis and James Walvin, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982.
50. The standard history of the development of chattel slavery based on colour caste in the future United States is still Winthrop Jordan's *White over Black*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1968.
51. Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade by the British Parliament*, London; 1808, 1968, vol. 1, pp. 48-9.
52. Clarkson, History, pp. 110-11, 134-5, 146-64.
53. Wood, *Origins of American Slavery*, pp. 116-17.
54. James Walvin, 'The Public Campaign in England against Slavery', in Eltis and Walvin, *Abolition*, p. 73.
55. Steven Piker, 'The Post Peasant Village in Central Plain Thai Society', in Skinner and Kirsch, (eds.), *Change and Persistence in Thai Society*, p. 302.