

Comparison of Slavery in East Africa and the Americas

The discussion of slavery is a daunting task but even more daunting is comparing slavery from one circumstance to another, especially when slavery and its legacy is not a distant memory in the American consciousness, and then judgment is an easy trap of conclusion. In the study of history, the objective is to understand and comprehend, not to judge. A historian is tasked to determine if something is different than initially perceived by the mainstream or scholarly opinion. Determining if something is better after a comparison is a job for philosophers and theologians. Slavery in the Americas and slavery in East Africa, shaped by their own respective cultures, people, and economies, developed with sharp differences and characteristics. Islam and Christianity laid the foundation of culture, the master-slave relationship, and the money machine driving the entire process contributed to the distinctions between the two systems of enslavement.

Starting with the most familiar, the culture of the Christian religion was at least a contributing factor in the control of enslaved populations of the Americas. The degree to which is the subject of debate because the Christian nations of Western Europe needed the help of class, race, and mercantilism to exert control.¹ Perhaps the most effective branch of Christianity used as a primary tool was Catholicism. Dogma, doctrine, and rhetoric were deployed less, or at least less effectively, than just the brand of Catholicism.² The brand of Catholicism frequently displayed the iconography and the bare minimum highlights as the means of control over their slaves. In some documented occasions in Latin America, the absence of a codified religion or

¹ Eugene D. Genovese, "Materialism and Idealism in the in the History of Negro Slavery in the Americas," *Slavery in the New World*. Edited by Laura Foner and Eugene D. Genovese. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), 241.

² *Ibid.*, 240.

tradition of the recently imported enslaved was forcibly replaced by their masters' version of Catholicism, which consisted of and perhaps only justified their enslavement, a similarity shared with their Omani-Arab counterparts. Christianity actually served a larger role in the global abolition of movement of the nineteenth century.³ Starting with an awakening movement in Great Britain before eventually spreading to the United States, abolitionism found a home in the restoration movement of Christianity. Advocating for a less institutionalized religion and a more textual approach, slavery quickly became a stain on the consciousness of this movement.

Moving to the more unfamiliar, the religion of East Africa, Islam, played a major role in the control of enslaved populations. Slaves and their masters were of the same religion automatically. In other words, in order for a Muslim man to purchase slaves, those slaves could not be Muslim. Immediately upon purchase, those slaves had to be converted to Islam; therefore, neither was slavery solely based on the religion of the captives nor was there any preferential treatment among slaves based on religion.⁴ Islam shaped the very essence of the relationships between the slaves, slave traders, and slaveowners. Arab-Omani traders originally gained control of the pagan, indigenous societies of the East African coast and later interior through the very existence of the printed Koran. These societies' original traditions were unwritten and absolutely by no stretch of the imagination canonized.⁵ Arabic traders and settlers eventually used this advantage to exert control over African slave traders and the newly enslaved. The Koran was the law in that society; therefore, it defined the social order. Slaves were definite subordinates to masters and could be bought and sold despite being converts, nothing could free them except for their master's expressed, written consent.⁶ Also because of Koranic law, Muslim male masters

³ Ibid., 247

⁴ Frederick Cooper. *Plantation Slavery on the East Coast of Africa*. (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1997), 23.

⁵ Ibid., 25.

⁶ Ibid, 25.

could take an unlimited number of concubines beyond the limit of three wives. The children produced because of these relationships gained freedom upon the masters' death. This is just one of differences between the Islamic traditions in East Africa and the Western, "Christian" traditions of the Americas. Islam defined the code of slavery but not any tensions between master and slave. In fact, it left room for other realms to do just this by making masters and slaves congruent in religion.

In the Americas, race defined enslavement. Race made a slave a slave, made a master a master, and therefore, defined the classes of society.⁷ Variation of course existed among the different spheres of influence in the Americas. In Portuguese-speaking Brazil, mobility existed within the society. The phrase "money whitens the skin"⁸ manifested frequently despite the existence of a racial hierarchy⁹ because of the lack of a sizable European-native population in Brazil after several generations.¹⁰ Conversely, their Iberian brothers perhaps had the strictest racial caste system in their colonies. The non-European races were not just enslaved but divided based on ancestry on a spectrum between African, indigenous, and European.¹¹ Anglo-Saxon nations were approximately between these two. Especially in the United States, slaves were allowed to become artisans and traders but still had to adhere to strict racial divisions. English-speaking nations did not have, however, a precedent of slave codes, allowing it easier to dehumanize and ruthlessly control their enslaved persons.¹²

⁷ Genovese, "Materialism and Idealism," 241.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 243.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 246.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 248.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 243.

¹² *Ibid.*, 245.

Meanwhile in East Africa, intra-racial enslavement was a critical component of the East African slave trade. Trade between the interior and the coast existed for centuries before the arrival of the Arabs and even the Omanis, but they exploited it to gain more slaves, especially after the British abolitionist efforts in the 1870s. Conflicts, caravans, and slave traders among the indigenous African societies created slaves prior to Arab arrival. After they arrived, they bought slaves from these slavers, trafficked them to the coast, and traded them to other traders or Africans who could afford them, or kept them in their own households in Mombasa, Malindi, and Zanzibar.¹³ Throughout the following generations the Arabs, and specifically later the Omani, and the Swahili, a group of mixed ancestry, had firm control over the wealthy coast plantations by 1890.¹⁴ The Swahili had gained such a firm control, that poorer, non-Swahili Africans migrated from the interior to find wealth farming on the coast, some eventually purchasing slaves. Race divisions were not as crucial to social order, despite the Koranic master-subordinate relationship. Accounts tell of masters who frequently worked alongside their slaves on plantations and other workplaces in both Malindi¹⁵ and Mombasa.¹⁶ This was allowed by the ethnic diversity and meshing among planters, especially in Malindi, but conflict was rare. Order among these groups was determined by the number of loyal slaves,¹⁷ and intermarriage between Arab-Omani and African-Swahili prevented political divisions along ancestral lines.¹⁸ These ties within the city-states banded together to push deeper into interior to find slaves as a result of the policies Omani Sultan Seyyid Said now seated on the throne of Zanzibar and to compete with neighboring city-states¹⁹ Intra-racial enslavement and interconnectedness prevented tensions

¹³Cooper, *Plantation Slavery on the East Coast of Africa*, 83.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 94-95.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 104-5.

along racial and ancestral lines, and contributed to an environment of collaboration for prosperity.

The economy of mercantilism in the New World required the slave labor it enlisted. Economics proved to be a lesser definition than class and race as slavery progressed through time²⁰, yet still drove economic engine of New World's "uncontrolled capitalism."²¹ A majority, wealthier white population determining slavery economically did not exist outside of the United States.²² In East Africa's economy, conversely, heavily depended on slavery. This became obvious when the freest source of labor began to be restricted by British abolitionist forces in Zanzibar. Mobility within slave society resulted in high turnover and demanded diversified sources, especially more than in the Americas.²³ Previously supported large slave society and economy of trade and agriculture by mixture of external and internal sources but primarily imported from Arabia and Persia,²⁴ plantations had to procure labor in more illegal ways through smuggling from foreign and mainland sources following the 1873 ban of all slave trading through the hub of Zanzibar by the British.²⁵ The Clove plantation industry never seemed to suffer during this early period of abolition. In fact, it flourished because of the transfer of clove plantations to nearby Pemba, uncontrolled by the British in 1872.²⁶ Abolitionist regulation increased, slave smuggling increased, and treatment sharply declined.

Through this comparison, concluding that one was better than the other does extreme disservice to all parties involved. Religion, interpersonal relationships, and the economies of the

²⁰ Genovese, "Materialism and Idealism," 241.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 247.

²² *Ibid.*, 248.

²³ Cooper, *Plantation Slavery on the East Coast of Africa*, 114.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 115.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 122.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 130.

realms had a combined effort in uniquely shaping each version of enslavement. Slavery in East Africa was more institutionalized than in the Americas but less divided along racial and ancestral lines. Slavery in the Americas strictly adhered to racial boundaries but was less codified early on in religion and government, both eventually contributing to its abolition. The economy of the Americas shaped the society of slavery, while slavery in East Africa shaped their economy, especially in Zanzibar.

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