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Patterns in regulation and collaboration in the slave trade of West Africa

Paul E. Lovejoy

The transatlantic slave trade from West Africa involved the enforced migration of over 6.3 million people between the middle of the sixteenth century and the middle of the nineteenth century.¹ The involvement of Africans in this slave trade was complex. They were victims on the one hand, wrenched from their homes through violence and forcibly moved over great distances to uncertain destinations. Many enslaved Africans never left the continent – how many is not known. Besides them, millions were sent to the Americas or crossed the Sahara. On the other hand, Africans also enabled the slave trade. A highly sophisticated commercial network made the movement of population possible through trade. Without the activities of African merchants this trade could not have taken place. As agents of the slave trade, merchants were responsible for distributing the slaves that were produced by a political structure that was enslaving people. It is difficult to separate these various overlapping elements of the slave trade. However, there is no question that African agency was an essential component of the transatlantic trade.

The involvement of governments and commercial networks inevitably meant that the trade was regulated and resulted in government intervention in this enforced population displacement. How effective such intervention was can be gleaned by a comparison of two distinct and separate parts of Africa that fed significant numbers of enslaved Africans into the Atlantic trade. There was considerable variation in the organization and regulation of the migration of slaves and specifically the extent to which African governments and commercial enterprises facilitated migration or otherwise restricted or regulated the slave trade. The economics of supply and demand ultimately motivated this commercialized population displacement.

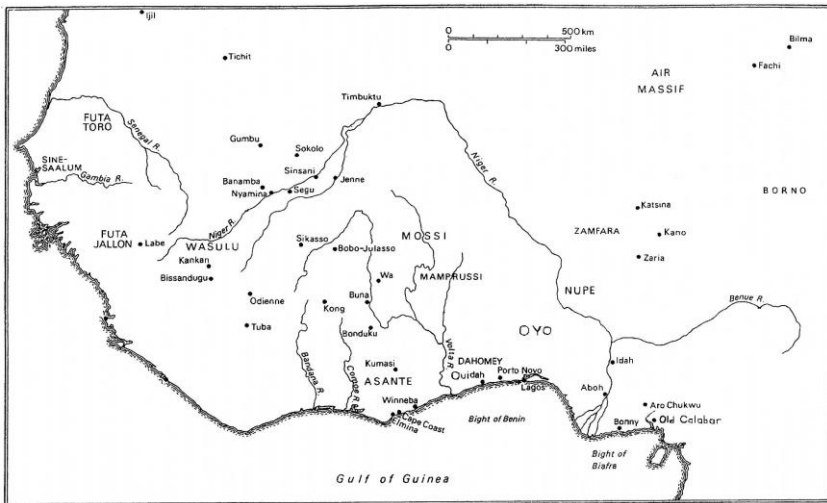
¹ The research on the Bight of Biafra has been done in collaboration with David Richardson, as revealed in the notes, but the comparisons made here are my own responsibility. The estimates of the transatlantic slave trade are derived from the expanded Voyage Database of David Eltis, Manolo Florentino, David Richardson, and Stephen Behrendt, Emory University. I am grateful for permission to cite the database.

The patterns in regulation and collaboration reveal the extent to which African governments and merchants responded to external, transatlantic, demand for captive labour. It is argued here that areas under Muslim influence attempted to restrict the flow of enslaved populations to the Atlantic coast for shipment to the Americas. These attempts were reflected in the prices paid for slaves, with Europeans apparently willing to pay relatively more for males on the coast than Muslim traders were willing to pay in the interior. The intention here is to examine the political and ideological factors that underpinned the price differential between the interior and the coast and the seeming unwillingness of Muslim merchants to sell slaves into the transatlantic trade. By contrast the states and societies along the West African coast, and especially in the Bight of Biafra, participated freely in the transatlantic slave trade and were centrally involved in the deportation of enslaved Africans. A comparison between areas of Muslim influence in the interior of West Africa with the Bight of Biafra highlights the contrasting efforts to regulate and thereby limit trade, on the one hand, with efforts at regulation that were intended to promote the slave trade, on the other hand. An examination of the Bight of Biafra and the Muslim interior emphasizes regional variations that have to be taken into consideration in studying the degree to which governments and merchant elites in West Africa responded to the incentives of transatlantic demand for enslaved labour.

Origins of slaves in West Africa

The areas of West Africa from which the enslaved population came included the areas of Senegambia and the upper Guinea coast, north of present Liberia, where there were a great variety of languages spoken. There was a strong and increasingly stronger Islamic influence here, which reflected the long tradition of Islam in the interior, where the Songhay empire held sway until its collapse in the 1590s. Despite the resulting political upheaval, the Islamic tradition continued, and indeed expanded, through the operation of extensive commercial networks that stretched to the coast. By the eighteenth century, the Muslim presence was complicated by the development of a militant reform movement among Muslims that led to the outbreak of *jihad* in Futa Jallon, in the immediate interior of the upper Guinea coast and Sierra Leone. Another *jihad* erupted in the Senegal valley, first in Futa Bondu and then in Futa Toro. In the Americas, people

from this region can be identified quite early on. Material from the seventeenth century demonstrates a great variety of ethnic designations among slaves, many came from areas immediately on the coast itself but some people came from the interior including Muslims, who were usually referred to as Mandingo, in a variety of spellings.²



Map 1: West Africa in the 18th Century

A second area from where enslaved Africans came concerned the region of the Gold Coast and Bight of Benin, often referred to in Latin America as the Mina coast, originally derived from the Portuguese trading castle at Elmina ('the mine' from the Portuguese name Castelo de São Jorge da Mina). This reflected the importance of gold in trade, which came from alluvial deposits in the forest region inhabited by the Akan, who constituted

² Stephan Bühnen, 'Ethnic origins of Peruvian slaves (1548-1650). Figures for Upper Guinea,' *Paiduma* 39 (1993) 57-110; Paul E. Lovejoy and Renée Soulodre-La France, 'Nueces de Cola en Cartagena. Intercambios Transatlánticos en el siglo XVII' in: Claudia Mosquera, Mauricio Pardo and Odile Hoffmann eds, *Afrodescendientes en las América: Trayectorias sociales e identitarias* (Bogota) 195-212; Sylviane Diouf, 'Devils or sorcerers, Muslims or Studs. Manding in the Americas' in: Paul E. Lovejoy and David V. Trotman eds, *Trans-Atlantic dimensions of ethnicity in the African Diaspora* (London 2003) 139-57; and Gwendlyn Midlo Hall, *Databases for the study of Louisiana history and genealogy 1719-1820* (Baton Rouge 2000).

several small centralized states and who in the eighteenth century were largely consolidated into the kingdom of Asante. Although these states were decidedly not Muslim, there was nonetheless Muslim influence through trade with the interior and because of the presence of Muslims in Asante, especially in the northern provinces conquered in the middle of the eighteenth century. In the seventeenth century, this region was a net importer of enslaved people, some of whom were brought along the coast by European slavers, where slaves were sold for gold. The wars of the first half of the eighteenth century, which resulted in the consolidation of Asante, reversed this flow and in this period large numbers of enslaved people who were captured during the Akan wars were sent to the Americas.

Many of the enslaved people from the Mina coast came from the area east of the Volta River, the most important departure point being the beach at Ouidah, which witnessed the export of hundreds of thousands of people in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Ouidah was the most important port, first for the small kingdom of Huedah, whose capital was at Savi, a few kilometres inland. Thereafter it functioned as the principal port for the larger kingdom of Allada, centred to the west of Lake Nokoué, which was fed by the Weme River and flowed into the sea along the lagoons behind the beach, entering the sea at Lagos in the east and Grand Popo in the west. As Robin Law has demonstrated, this lagoon system explains the location of a series of departure points for slaves in the Bight of Benin, from Petite Popo through Ouidah, Porto Novo, Badagry and Lagos.³ The point in time at which each of these ports was important to the trade is explained by the political history of the region, specifically the rise and fall of Allada, Dahomey and Oyo. In the wars and campaigns that marked this political history, many people were enslaved and sent to the Americas, and the overwhelming majority of these people spoke one or more of the Gbe languages, including Ewe, Fon, Allada, and Mahi.⁴ It should be noted,

³ Robin Law, 'Between the sea and lagoons. The interaction of maritime and inland navigation on the pre-colonial slave coast', *Cahiers d'études africaines* 29 (1989) 209-237.

⁴ For a discussion of the changing meanings of 'Mina', see Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, 'African ethnicities and the meanings of "Mina"' in: Lovejoy and Trotman, *Trans-Atlantic dimensions*, 65-81; Paul E. Lovejoy, 'Ethnic designations of the slave trade and the reconstruction of the history of Trans-Atlantic slavery' in: Lovejoy and Trotman, *Trans-Atlantic dimensions*, 9-42; and Mary Karasch, 'Guiné, Mina, Angola, and Benguela. African and Crioulo nations in central Brazil, 1780-1820' in: José C. Curto and Paul E. Lovejoy eds, *Enslaving connections. Changing cultures of Africa and*

further, that wars in the Akan interior and in the Gbe region overlapped and effectively formed a continuous and contiguous power struggle, with the dominance of Asante in the west, Dahomey in the centre, and Oyo in the eastern portions of this broad region.

The final area of West Africa from where a sizeable number of people came was the Bight of Biafra and especially the ports of Elem Kalabari in the Niger delta and Old Calabar on the Cross River in the seventeenth century, and from Bonny in the Niger delta in the eighteenth century. All three ports had a common interior, connected by a river, which was settled principally by Igbo and Ibibio speaking peoples. While some people from this region were brought to Latin America in the seventeenth century, if not earlier still, most came in the eighteenth century, often indirectly in English ships via Jamaica or Barbados, and from there to Vera Cruz, Cartegena, Portobello and then onward. The region of the interior of the Bight of Biafra was different from the areas further west in two important respects. First, there was no Muslim presence, as far as known, and secondly, there were no major centralized states in the area. Trade and society were rather organized through male secret societies that provided a network connecting the major ports with the commercial network of the interior.⁵

For reasons that are not clear, large areas of West Africa remained beyond the pull of the transatlantic slave trade, a pattern that should not be overlooked in studying the movement of people across the Atlantic and the corresponding impact on West Africa. Hence the region between Oyo and the lower Niger River, including the Kingdom of Benin, was not heavily involved in the slave trade to the coast in the seventeenth or eighteenth century, although the presence of people identified as 'Caravali', 'Carabali' or 'Calabar' suggests that the region was at least marginally involved. The heartland of the Igbo and Ibibio region, however, were forcefully pulled

Brazil during the era of slavery (Amherst 2004) 163-186; Olabiyi Yai, 'Texts of enslavement. Fon and Yoruba vocabularies from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Brazil' in: Paul E. Lovejoy ed., *Identity in the shadow of slavery* (London 2000) 102-112.

⁵ Renée Soulodre-La France, "'I, Francisco Castañeda, Negro Esclavo Caravali.'" Caravali ethnicity in colonial New Granada' in: Lovejoy and Trotman, *Trans-Atlantic dimensions*, 96-114; Michael A. Gomez, 'The quality of anguish. The Igbo response to enslavement in the Americas' in: Lovejoy and Trotman, *Trans-Atlantic dimensions*, 82-95; and Rina Cáceres Gómez, *Negros, mulattos, esclavos y libertos en la Costa Rica del siglo XVII* (Mexico City 2000).

into the trade in the course of the eighteenth century. Similarly there were many areas near the coast, in what is now Liberia and Cote d'Ivoire, which remained largely outside the Atlantic slave trade and when involved at all the focus was on points near the mouths of rivers, and then only for relatively brief periods.

The slave trade and the Muslim interior

Muslim merchants dominated the trade routes of the interior of West Africa, while coastal middlemen controlled the port towns of the Atlantic coast. Everywhere in West Africa, government officials profited from the sale of enslaved people. Many of the enslaved were considered enemies of the state. There was a particularly striking contrast between the areas where Muslim merchants were involved and the activities of coastal traders in the Bight of Biafra and their links with the interior areas. Muslim trade in the interior of West Africa was centred on clerical and commercial towns of the western Sudan and the Hausa network in central Sudan. Muslim merchants traded with many parts of the coast. For example, the Hausa merchant, Pierre Tamata, having been educated in France, dominated trade at Porto Novo in the early 1790s through his links with the interior, serving as the agent for French slavers. There were prohibitions on trade with Christian Europeans, and hence to some extent limitations on the export of slaves via Muslim networks, where the slave trade was thriving. As a result, there were conscious attempts to restrict trade as well to promote it, as reflected in the limited trade down the Niger river before the nineteenth century. The slaves were channelled into Muslim regions, including by re-export across the Sahara, rather than towards the Atlantic coast.

There was considerable discussion of issues relating to slavery and enslavement within West Africa, particularly among Muslim intellectuals, over the significance of racial and ethnic categories as factors used to justify enslavement, and the importance of Islam in protecting freeborn individuals from enslavement. Some argued that Muslims should not be involved in the transatlantic slave trade on the basis of religion and the desire to avoid the sale of slaves to Christian Europeans. This internal discourse is revealed in the writings of Ahmad Bābā (1556-1627) of Timbuktu, whose treatise *Mi'raj al-su'ud* (*The ladder of ascent towards grasping the law concerning transported blacks*) was concerned with distinguishing among those people who were known in the Islamic world as 'Sudani' – blacks or people of the Sudan. He

specifically refuted arguments that black Africans could be enslaved on racial grounds. Only 'unbelief' was a legitimate reason for enslavement, for this reason his treatise was intended to be an 'Exposition and explanation concerning the varieties of transported blacks'. This establishes the ethnic and political basis of identification with religious belief and social status, and therefore expresses an indigenous, West African perception of community and collective consciousness that is essential in understanding conceptions of ethnicity and how these may or may not have changed through limited interaction with the transatlantic world. The strong Muslim presence in West Africa had an important influence on restricting the sale of slaves to Europeans on the coast. As demonstrated elsewhere, West Africa appears to have sent fewer slaves to the Americas because of this influence than otherwise might have been expected.⁶ This is not to suggest that Muslims were free from enslavement or that they did not engage with Christian Europeans for reasons of expediency. Indeed the presence of Muslims in the Americas from the earliest days of the transatlantic trade demonstrates the complexity of the situation in West Africa at a time when Spain and Portugal were consolidating their control of the Iberian peninsular and establishing empires beyond the shores of Europe. Moreover the shifting alliances among Muslims after the Ottoman conquest of much of North Africa sometimes pitted Muslims against Muslims and inevitably resulted in the enslavement of free individuals. A consequence of this political situation was an outpouring of legal opinion and debate on the legitimacy of enslavement and the proper relationship among Muslims, between Muslims and Christians, and indeed with others who were not Muslims.

The legal opinions of Ahmad Bābā both reflected and helped to shape the attitudes of Muslim West Africans on the legitimacy of enslavement and the permissibility of trading in slaves. In his treatise, Ahmad Bābā noted 'that whoever now comes to you from the group called Mossi, or Gurma, or Busa or Borgu or Dagomba or Kotokoli or Yoruba or Tunbughu or Bubu [Bobo] or Karmu [?] – all of these are unbelievers, remaining in their unbelief until now', and hence their enslavement was legitimate. In one of his replies that elaborated on his treatise, Ahmad Bābā

⁶ Paul E. Lovejoy, 'Islam, slavery, and political transformation in West Africa. Constraints on the Trans-Atlantic slave trade', *Revue française d'histoire d'outre mer* 89 (2002) 247-282; Paul E. Lovejoy, 'The context of enslavement in West Africa. Ahmad Bābā and the ethics of slavery' in: Jane Landers ed., *Slaves, subjects, and subversives. Blacks in colonial Latin America* (Albuquerque 2006) 9-38.

identified those people whom he thought were undisputedly Muslims and those he considered non-Muslims, many of whom also had some Muslims resident among them. His list of Muslims included numerous, perhaps most, of the Mande patronymic clans, and hence his conception of ethnicity is also worthy of commentary.

While many of the terms that he used have not yet been identified, a few ethnic labels were also used in the Americas, thereby suggesting a link between the theoretical discussion within West Africa and the enslaved population in the Americas. The ethnic terms which were common included 'Bambara', 'Yoruba', 'Mandinke', 'Hausa', 'Fulbe/Fulani' and others as well, which were clearly carried over into the nomenclature of the transatlantic trade. The overlap with European terminology suggests an influence from this theoretical discussion whose significance has often been overlooked. Various studies in different parts of the Americas have identified the terms used for ethnic designations, but without noting the parallel between Muslim terminology in some cases and the lack of correspondence in others. The extent to which the enslaved carried these distinctions into the Diaspora is unclear, but there is considerable evidence that Muslims distinguished among themselves on the basis of ethnic categories that conformed to Ahmad Bābā's terminology.

During the height of the Atlantic slave trade in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Islamic schools across western Africa taught the legal principles of slavery that derived from Ahmad Bābā and earlier scholars. These principles emphasized religious belief and sometimes ethnicity as legitimizing slavery. The Qadiriyya brotherhood to which Ahmad Bābā belonged operated an educational system that drew on common texts, and hence there is no question that his influence was extensive.⁷ Later scholars and reformers, such as the Tuareg cleric, Jibrīl b. 'Umar, advocated holy war (*jihad*) to protect the free status of Muslims. 'Uthmān dan Fodio, Jibrīl's student, actually initiated a *jihad*, and one justification was complaints over wrongful enslavement. These reformers were not against slavery as such, but rather the enslavement of Muslims, and the influence of Ahmad Bābā is clear.⁸ Hence the majority of enslaved Africans from West Africa who

⁷ Ivor Wilks, 'The transmission of Islamic learning in the Western Sudan' in: J. Goody ed., *Literacy in traditional societies* (Cambridge 1968), 162-97.

⁸ The literature is extensive, but see 'Abdullah ibn Muhammad dan Fodio's *Diya' al-sultān wa ghayrihi min al-ikbān fī aḥamm ma yutlab 'ilmuhu fī umūr al-ẓamān* (see Muhammad Sani Zahradeen, 'Abd Allah ibn Fodio's contributions to the Fulani

reached the Americas in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were not from Muslim areas, despite the presence of Mandingo and others who can be identified as Muslims. The largest number of people came from areas very near the coast, or on the coast itself, in areas south of the Muslim savannah.

The relative constraints placed on the transatlantic trade by Muslim interpretations of legitimacy seem to have become less effective in the eighteenth century. There are two signs of this shift. First, the greatly increased demand for slaves in the Americas encouraged those who did not share Muslim views of legitimacy, and consequently, it was more difficult for Muslim scholars and legal structures to influence the contours of trade. Second, the reaction against the perceived illegality of enslaving those who were Muslims prompted a militancy that erupted in *jihad*, initially in the Senegambia region, and eventually spreading to the central Sudan by the early nineteenth century. In this conflict, there was room for the enslavement of Muslims by those who opposed Muslim influence, since the non-Muslims involved in the slave trade were not interested in protecting the status of Muslims as free persons, and as in the period of Songhay, Muslims were enslaved if they opposed *jihad*. However, the great expansion in the numbers of enslaved Africans leaving West Africa, especially in the second half of the eighteenth century, was still largely confined to non-Muslims, including Igbo, Yoruba, Akan, and others.

However, cultural, political and above all religious factors explain the discrepancy in market forces and the relative degree to which merchants and officials in western Africa prevented slaves from Muslim areas from crossing the Atlantic. It was not because the North African, and even an expanding Saharan, market was relatively small by comparison with the

Jihad in nineteenth-century Hausaland' [Ph.D. diss., McGill University, 1976] 13-14); *Tazayin al-Waraqāt* (Ibadan 1963) and *Diya' al-Hukkām* (see Shehu Yamusa, 'The political ideas of the Jihad leaders. Being a translation, edition and analysis of (1) *Usul al-Siyasa* by Muhammad Bello and (2) *Diya' al-Hukkām* by Abdallah B. Fodio' [master's thesis, Bayero University Kano, 1975], 270-85); 'Uthman ibn Muhammad dan Fodio's *Al-ajwibah al-mubarrarah 'an al-as'ilah al-muqarrarah fi wathiqat al-shaykh al-hajj al-ma'ruf bi-laqabih Shisummas ibn Ahmad* (see Zahradeen, 'Abd Allah ibn Fodio's contributions', 20), *Nur al-albab*, *Ta'lim al-ikhwan bi-al-umūr allati kaffarna biha muluk al-sudan alladhina kanu min ahl badhib al-buldan*, *Siraj al-ikhwan fi abamm mā yubtaj ilayhi fi badha al-zaman*, *Kitāb al-farq*, *Wathiqat ahl al-sudan*, and *Tanbih al-ikhwan*; and Muhammad Bello's *Infāq al-maysūr fi ta'rikh bilād al-takrir* and *Miftāh al-sadād*. See also 'Abd al-Qādir b. al-Mustafā (d. 1864), *Radat al-aṣṣkar*.

transatlantic market for slaves, and therefore protected from European encroachment, but because the internal West African market in Muslim areas was so large. The explanation is to be found in changes in the social and political economy of the region, which promoted growth in commerce, more specifically, in the consolidation of Muslim states and commercial networks that restricted the sale of slaves to the coast for ideological and religious reasons. Rather than a division between Sahara and Atlantic, the dividing line, to the extent that there was one, was determined politically, separating the states of Muslim West Africa from the Atlantic.

Despite some variation over time, the gender composition of slave trading suggests that there was a Sahara/Atlantic divide that affected prices for males and females and determined gender ratios in the sale of males and females. In the transatlantic trade, males were valued as much as two to one, while females were in greater demand across the Sahara, the demand being each the inverse of the other.⁹ Because of the importance of slavery within the societies and economies of West Africa, especially in Muslim areas, the apparent differentials in prices between males and females may not have been significant, however. While the Atlantic trade paid more for men, the apparent differential is misleading, since males in the interior could also be ransomed, often at a price that was twice the market price. Hence the value of males in the interior was a combination of the recorded market prices and the money that could be raised through ransoming.¹⁰ When the ransom factor is taken into consideration, the price differential between the interior and the Atlantic coast and the pull of the Americas appears to have been much less than has sometimes been recognized.

Slavery was a major feature of economy and society in Muslim areas of West Africa. During the period of the transatlantic slave trade, many slaves were retained within West Africa, especially in Muslim areas, and this local demand limited the supply of enslaved individuals for the Atlantic trade. Constraints on the sale of slaves to the Atlantic coast were consistent with policies that attempted to prevent the sale of slaves to European and

⁹ See Paul E. Lovejoy, 'Internal markets or an Atlantic-Sahara divide? How women fit into the slave trade of West Africa' in: Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers and Joseph C. Miller eds, *Women and slavery* (Athens 2007).

¹⁰ The issue is discussed further in Jennifer Loftkranz, 'The ransoming of enslaved Muslims in the Western Sudan in the nineteenth century', unpublished paper presented at the conference, 'Slavery, Islam and Diaspora', York University, Toronto, October 2003.

Christian countries. The practice of ransoming freeborn Muslims and prohibiting the sale of slaves to non-Muslims helps to explain the apparent situation in which a high proportion of slaves were retained internally while relatively few were exported to the Atlantic coast. Certainly the practice of ransoming was a factor in determining the price of slaves. The price differential that placed a premium on females reveals that the pull of the transatlantic market was not sufficient to draw slaves to the ports of the Atlantic coast from Muslim regions in the interior of West Africa, even though in terms of demography and slave marketing, it would have been theoretically possible to draw on the enslaved populations of the interior.

The slave trade of the Bight of Biafra

In areas beyond Muslim influence along the West African coast, the development of the slave trade depended upon a variety of credit arrangements between European slave traders and local merchants. Without protection for the credit that underpinned trade, European merchants would not have extended goods to African middlemen, and the volume of trade and the movement of slaves would have been correspondingly restricted. While the methods of securing credit varied considerably, the focus here is on the Bight of Biafra, whose involvement in the slave trade expanded greatly in the course of the eighteenth century.¹¹ The growth in trade was almost entirely in the hands of British merchants, especially those from Liverpool and to a lesser extent from Bristol, and in the Bight of Biafra, in the hands of merchants at two ports, Bonny in the Niger delta and Old Calabar on the Cross river. The contrast with the Muslim interior of West Africa is striking in other ways. Whereas the Muslim interior had a substantial slave population and was itself a major market for slaves and

¹¹ In Angola, the Portuguese established a colony centred at the coastal ports of Luanda and Benguela and hence making a distinction between their activities and those of 'African' states is not simple. In other places, notably on the Gold Coast (present Ghana) and also on the upper Guinea coast, European companies established 'factories' and forts that served as bulking points for slaves and warehouses for imported goods. The relationship between these enclaves and local states required some recognition of African sovereignty, with fortifications intended to protect such establishments from rival European adventurers more than to provide security from Africans.

therefore potentially could have supplied many more slaves to the Atlantic world than actually happened, the region of the Bight of Biafra responded directly to transatlantic market demand, without the inhibiting influence of Islamic policies and sentiments.

Four features stand out to explain why the Bight of Biafra became a major source of enslaved Africans in the eighteenth century. First, the local merchant elite at Bonny and Old Calabar was able to harness resources to dominate trade with the interior, and they did so without any European residents and without the emergence of a mulatto population, which was to be found in almost all other parts of the Atlantic coast of Africa. Second, the merchants at Bonny successfully subordinated their interests to central authority, which thereby enabled the necessary credit protection for commercial expansion. Third, the merchants at Old Calabar regulated trade through an association of adult males, known as *ekpe*, which technically was a graded and secret society associated with governance, and including the enforcement of debt payments. Merchants were able to secure debts through the adaptation of the local practice of pawning people, usually relatives, as the collateral for loans, which was also common elsewhere along the African coast.¹² Finally, the merchants of Bonny and Old Calabar were connected with the interior through their links with merchants from Aro Chukwu, whose network of markets and trading centres crisscrossed the Igbo and Ibibio regions of the interior. This Aro network, which expanded in the course of the eighteenth century, was responsible for the sale of the great majority of slaves who left the Bight of Biafra for the Americas.

The close association between the merchants of Old Calabar and Bonny with their British counterparts stands in stark contrast to the distance separating Muslim merchants from the Atlantic trade. The merchants of the Bight of Biafra visited Britain and in some cases were educated in Liverpool or Bristol. According to abolitionist Thomas Clarkson:

On those parts of the coast, which are the greatest markets for slaves, many Africans reside, who act as interpreters to the ships.

¹² On the use of pawnship as a credit security mechanism in other places, including the Gold Coast, Sierra Leone, the Windward Coast, Cameroon, Gabon, and the Loango Coast, see Paul E. Lovejoy and David Richardson, 'The business of slaving. Pawnship in Western Africa, c. 1600-1810', *Journal of African History* 42 (1999) 25-50.

These, by great industry and perseverance, have made themselves masters of two or three of the languages of the country, and of the language of those Europeans, with whom they are most connected in trade. This capacity of learning, and of conversing in other languages, is clearly a proof of the existence of reflection, of a nice discrimination, and of such other qualities and powers as are ascribable to human beings alone.¹³

Since the British dominated trade, Bonny merchants were fluent in English, or at least spoke pidgin¹⁴, a feature noted by Clarkson:

I must not forget here, that several of the African traders, or great men, are not unacquainted with letters. This is particularly the case at Bonny and Calabar, where they not only speak the English language with fluency, but write it. These traders send letters repeatedly to the merchants here [in Britain], stating the situation of the markets, the goods which they would wish to be sent out to them the next voyage, the number of slaves which they expect to receive by that time, and such other particulars, as might be expected from one merchant to another. These letters are always legible, void of ambiguity, and easy to be understood. They contain of course, sufficient arguments to shew, that they are as capable of conducting trade, and possess as good an understanding as those to whom they write.¹⁵

Clarkson was not willing to 'say that they exhibit marks of an equal erudition', but he suggested that if they were not equal that it was because of the slave trade.

Bonny achieved a dominant position in trade because slave ships could be loaded faster than elsewhere on the coast, and this quick turnaround time for ships more than compensated for its reputation. About three-quarters of the slaves leaving the Bight of Biafra were loaded at Bonny, located at the eastern mouth of the Rio Real in the mangrove swamps of the Niger delta and described as that 'horrid hole' because it was infested by mosquitoes and other disease-carrying insects, and frequently

¹³ Thomas Clarkson, *An essay on the slavery and commerce of the human species, & particularly the African* (1785; second edition, London 1788) 125.

¹⁴ Evidence of William James, in Sheila Lambert eds, *House of Commons Sessional Papers of the eighteenth century* (Wilmington 1975) LXIX, 69, 49.

¹⁵ Clarkson, *Essay on the Slavery and Commerce*, 125-126.

oppressively hot and humid.¹⁶ At Bonny, there was almost no land available for farming, although salt continued to be produced and fish was a staple of local consumption and export into the interior. The town, estimated to have 25,000 inhabitants, included dependent villages within a few miles radius of the principal settlement, and was entirely focused on trade. According to Thomas Clarkson, 'the regularity of the trade, and the small space of time in which a cargo may be completed, are considerations, which have made these places more resorted to than any other upon the coast.'¹⁷ In 1788, James Jones of Bristol claimed that ships trading to Bonny and nearby Elem Kalabari purchased slaves 'much quicker than at any other place.'¹⁸ Bonny achieved this advantage to load ships quickly and therefore reduce the time Liverpool and other ships spent on the African coast through the management of large canoes that ferried goods to and slaves from the inland fairs and markets dominated by their Aro partners.¹⁹

The *amanyanabo* (a military title) of Bonny regulated trade, which was one reason for the quick turn around time for ships that became a hallmark of the place. The family of Perekule (known to Europeans as 'Pepple') controlled the title, consolidating their position by acquiring great wealth through trade. As early as 1699, the Perekule had achieved political hegemony over the community and its trade with the interior, primarily as a result of the achievements of a man whom Barbot described as 'a sharp blade, and a mighty talking Black', 'a great war leader' who was able to confine succession to his family.²⁰ Concentration of authority was subsequently reinforced by controls over oracles and shrines, over the prohibition on sexual liaisons with strangers, and over other areas of social life. Tradition suggests, furthermore, that Perekule's accession triggered institutional changes that strengthened ideologically the power of the

¹⁶ R. M. Jackson, *Journal of a residence in Bonny river on board the ship Kingston during the months of January, February and March 1826* (Letchworth 1934) 133. Jackson was ship surgeon on the *Kingston*.

¹⁷ Clarkson, *Essay on the Slavery and Commerce*, 31.

¹⁸ British Library, Add. Mss. 38416, ff. 154-5. By this time, Jones' claim was echoed by others; 'Minutes of evidence to House of Lords on the state of the trade to Africa, 1793' in: F.W. Torrington ed., *House of Lords Sessional Papers 1792-1793*, Vol. I (New York 1975) 304.

¹⁹ For a description of the principal merchants of Bonny and its component principalities, see P.E.H. Hair, Adam Jones and Robin Law eds, *Barbot on Guinea. The writings of Jean Barbot on West Africa 1678-1712*, 2 vols (London 1992) II, 675.

²⁰ Alagoa and Tombo, *Chronicle*, 9-11.

amanyanabo, and thus the Perekule dynasty, while transforming the operation of lineage houses, shifting the basis of leadership from descent to military prowess and economic ability. The Perekule are alleged even to have sanctioned the right of slaves to become heads of houses, thereby establishing successful trading units in their own right and absorbing their less successful rivals.

British trade with Old Calabar involved the adaptation by British and Old Calabar merchants of the local institution of pawnship as a way of securing credit. Because power was diffused among the dominant families of the wards of the community, and as noted above, the *ekpe* society, served as the institution that transcended divisions, settled disputes, and imposed sanctions. *Ekpe* ensured a method of credit protection in international exchanges which rested on the appropriation and adaptation of local systems of credit protection rooted in pawnship. Under pawning arrangements, the collateral for credit was in the form of individuals, which usually required borrowers to lodge human pawns with shipmasters in exchange for trade goods provided on credit. Transactions were normally privately negotiated and enforced, though it was possible for *ekpe* to be invoked to protect the reputation of all traders from being damaged by default by a few. Redemption of pawns by traders was secured only on delivery within an agreed time of a specified number of slaves, but contested interpretations of contracts and fear of jeopardizing future relations by immediate foreclosure in the event of default could slow closure of transactions. Pawning subsequently became the principal element in credit protection arrangements at Cameroon and Gabon as Liverpool traders began to export slaves from these areas from the late 1750s.

The institutional adjustment in commercial and credit relations at Bonny and Old Calabar set the economic and political parameters of trade.²¹ As previously demonstrated, British and Old Calabar merchants mixed personal and commercial relations but nonetheless relied on 'commercial hostages' as a means of alleviating the risks of advancing credit that allowed merchants at Old Calabar to send goods to interior markets.

²¹ Paul E. Lovejoy and David Richardson, 'Trust, pawnship, and Atlantic history. The institutional foundations of the Old Calabar slave trade', *American Historical Review* 104 (1999) 333-55; and Paul E. Lovejoy, 'From slaves to palm oil. Afro-European commercial relations in the Bight of Biafra, 1741-1841' in: David Killingray, Margarette Lincoln and Nigel Rigby eds, *Maritime Empires* (Manchester 2004) 13-29.

While not unique to Old Calabar, pawnship thus underpinned and promoted the expansion of slave exports there. Those pawned included relatives of local traders and, for this reason, shipmasters were sometimes reluctant to foreclose on debts, preferring to adjust holdings of pawns among themselves rather than sailing away with them. Nevertheless, ships occasionally took away pawns as slaves when local dealers failed to meet their obligations within an agreed time, some dealers acknowledged their right to do so. In this respect, credit arrangements at Old Calabar were based on privately ordered, self-regulating contracts that had mutually accepted and recognized mechanisms of debt clearing that could involve enslavement of those held as security.

The mechanisms for regulating credit arrangements at both Bonny and Old Calabar facilitated trade and the willingness of British merchants to extend trade under two quite different credit protection regimes reveals the extent to which British merchants had to adjust to local conditions of trade. Both Bonny and Old Calabar promoted the slave trade and actively collaborated in its operation, but the forms of regulation set limits on the extent of involvement. Bonny emerged as more efficient in terms of rates of loading ships with slaves brought from the interior, which required extensive credit and mechanisms to assure that debts were honoured. Implicit in this ordering was a determination of who could trade in the interior and who could not. Europeans were not allowed beyond the port, and no mulatto population developed. At Old Calabar, the senior council of the *ekpe* society managed credit protection and safeguarded pawns held as collateral, but this mechanism of regulation was open to conflict, as revealed most clearly in the ‘massacre’ of the merchants of one ward (Old Town) at Old Calabar in 1767, and the inability to keep tolls and duties competitive with those at Bonny. Despite this assessment of relative success in participating in the slave trade, the contrast with the Muslim interior of West Africa is clear. Whereas the Muslim interior evinced a reluctance to engage with European trade in slaves, the flexibility in devising mechanisms for ordering trade in the Bight of Biafra, as elsewhere along the African coast, reveals a willingness to adapt local institutions to promote trade.

Conclusion

The slave trade by its nature involved regulation. Enslaved individuals did not willingly travel or board ships. They had to be confined and guarded,

which required organization and inevitably collaboration among merchants and officials involved in the trade. Slavery was a very specific social aspect of migration that highlights the choices and possibilities of individual migrants – or the lack of such choice on the part of the migrant. In the contrasting cases discussed here, the enslaved migrant population eventually adjusted to the final place of settlement, but where that was varied and was determined by others. Muslims could pursue policies that concentrated slaves in their own societies, governed by Islamic law and in accordance with Muslim views of slavery and assimilation. How the process of assimilation played itself out varied, but slaves largely ended up becoming Muslims. By contrast, slaves leaving the Bight of Biafra were consciously funnelled to the coast from a tight commercial network that developed specifically for the purpose of supplying the Atlantic slave trade. Inevitably, the fact that the migration was through coercion and slavery influenced whether or not individuals were assimilated and therefore the impact of immigration on the societies concerned.

Enforced migration, as in the case of the slave trade, required specific structures of migration that were always heavily regulated, as has been demonstrated in the contrast between Muslim and non-Muslim areas of West Africa. Governments and enterprises regularly facilitated or restricted enforced migration by organising and regulating the sale of slaves. The explanations for governmental and entrepreneurial intervention were related to the desire to profit from the trade. In the case of the Muslim interior of West Africa, however, attitudes about the nature of Islamic society and the role of government in the enforcement of Islamic law mitigated against the sale of slaves to the Atlantic coast. Although not always effective, Muslim governments and Muslim commercial networks inhibited the sale of slaves to the coast. To some extent, therefore, it can be said that there were policies of restriction that impeded population relocation. These policies suggest an attempt at ‘social engineering’, in which deportation of enslaved populations was discouraged and the settlement of slaves in areas controlled by Muslims encouraged instead. Muslim governments and merchants were attempting to deploy human resources for economic purposes, albeit using slavery to do so, which inevitably was achieved through the suppression of dissent and the subjugation of dissident populations. By contrast, merchants at Bonny and Old Calabar openly participated in the expansion of the slave trade, which required self-regulating mechanisms to maximize access to credit, which was obtained from British merchants.