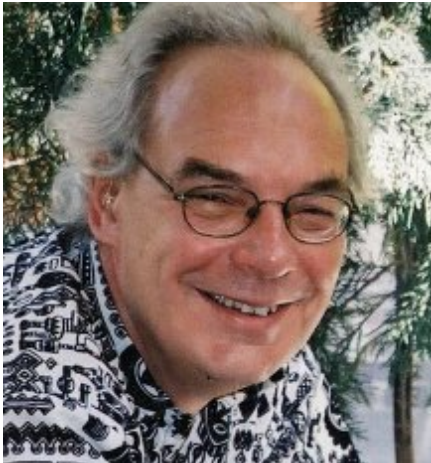


Shadows of Slavery

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in West Africa and Beyond. A Historical Anthropology (ERC GRANT 313737)



“Historical Research is Essential for Understanding Contemporary Issues of Slavery”

June 15th, 2015

Alice Bellagamba interviews Paul E. Lovejoy¹

Alice Bellagamba: *The study of slavery and the slave trade, and of their consequences has been your life long project. How did you start? Which were your initial sources of inspiration? Were you more interested in the economic or in the social and cultural aspects of African slavery and slave trade?*

Paul E. Lovejoy: I have been involved in the study of slavery since I was in graduate school at the University of Wisconsin studying with Philip Curtin and Jan Vansina. I had the good fortune to working with a cohort of graduate students who subsequently have made important contributions to African history and the study of slavery. One particularly valuable seminar was in the comparative history of slavery which involved five professors as well as graduate students who met every week. We discussed papers on slavery from Southeast Asia to many parts of Africa to the European colonies in the Americas. It was also at a time when Professor Curtin published two seminal works - the first being the pioneering collection of biographical accounts, *Africa Remembered* (1967), which was my

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first exposure to Gustavus Vassa, whose biography I am currently finishing, as well as other individuals. At the time because we were only interested in Vassa's account of his homeland in Africa when he was a child, we referred to him by his birth name, Olaudah Equiano, by which name he is generally and erroneously known today. The accounts in *Africa Remembered* and the methodology of biographical reconstruction have strongly influence my career. One of my current projects that involve a team of collaborating scholars is the collection and analysis of biographical accounts of individuals born in West Africa during the slavery era. The second seminal work of Curtin that was influential was *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (1969), which has changed the course of slave studies and provided the foundation for the on-line *Slave Voyage Database*. Moreover, my personal family history was an inspiration, since I am related to the American abolitionist Elijah Parrish Lovejoy, who was killed at Alton, Illinois in 1837 because of his efforts to publish an anti-slavery newspaper and his participation in helping people to escape slavery on the Underground Railroad.

Despite these influences, my Ph.D. research focused on the internal trade of West Africa in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and especially the links between the Hausa region and Borno and Asante in the middle Volta basin. My intention was NOT to study slavery and the slave trade but to focus on other commercial patterns that were not related to the trans-Atlantic slave trade and slavery. However, my research in Nigeria quickly established that the commercial networks that I was studying were very closely related to slavery and the slave trade, despite my intentions to the contrary. First of all, many of the merchants that I was studying and whose oral histories I was collecting were of slave descent themselves; and the same merchants not only bought and sold slaves but the wealthiest of these merchants amassed large numbers of slaves who were settled on plantations and farms near the major cities of the Sokoto Caliphate, after its establishment in jihad in 1804-1808. Hence my studies of the kola trade and then the salt trade were inevitably closely associated with the study of slavery. This realization led me to undertake a synthesis of what was known in the late 1970s and early 1980s about slavery in Africa, which led to the publication of a number of articles but most importantly to my book, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa*, which is now in its third edition and has also been published in Brazil in Portuguese. As any overview of my publications, I have been very interested in the social, political, cultural and economic dimensions of slavery. Indeed despite my conscious efforts to focus initially on slavery in continental Africa, I have long since also focused on slavery in the Americas and the Islamic world. Indeed my interest in biography reflects a global Africa approach.

Alice Bellagamba: *You just mentioned that some of the merchants you studied in Northern Nigeria were of slave descent. Could you expand on this a bit? Which was the role of slaves and people of slave ancestry in the economic networks of pre-colonial Africa? Was trade a path to social emancipation?*



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Paul E. Lovejoy: The merchants to whom I am referring were and indeed still are known in Hausa as Agalawa and Tokarawa and live mostly in Kano and Katsina emirates. Both groups are descended from people who were once slaves, although through trade many people who identify as Agalawa and Tokarawa became very wealthy, even owning slaves themselves, sometimes in considerable numbers. To understand their identity, it is essential to understand what is meant by "Hausa," which is sometimes referred to as an ethnicity but in fact is a language and a broader culture that is associated with Islam historically. Today, Hausa is also a lingua franca over a wide region as well, so that today not everyone who speaks Hausa is a Muslim. Within Hausa society, individuals are identified by their *asali*, i.e., their origins, which usually means where their parents and grandparents came from, whether a city and its environs, a geographical region, or some other designation. Historically, such designations of *asali* were reflected in facial and body scarifications. Hence for someone to identify as "Hausa" is only a first step in recognition that in most cases leads to clarification in terms of *asali* and in terms of what city or town a person is associated with. The ancestors of both Agalawa and Tokarawa were once slaves of the Tuareg and either were settled on agricultural estates or plantations in the savanna and sahel regions to the south of the Sahara, and especially in the Hausa region. Similar groups of servile populations were located elsewhere in West Africa and had other distinguishing names and identities. The Agalawa and Tokarawa became particularly wealthy because of their investment in the trade in kola nuts that were brought by donkey caravans from Asante in the middle Volta basin, in return for which they exported various kinds of salt, leather goods, textiles, spices, and some slaves. By the last decade of the nineteenth century, these same merchants were bringing kola from Lagos, first overland and then by railroad and finally trucks. Hence besides trade, they have always been involved in transport, and because of their wealthy they also invested in land and slaves. As with other Hausa, they are endogamous, which means they tend to marry within their own *asali* group or with related *asali* groups that are recognized as acceptable marriage partners. How could they become so prosperous as descendants of slaves? To answer this requires knowledge of slavery in Islamic societies, in which emancipation is often encouraged as a pious act on the part of masters and most especially, if masters trusted their enslaved dependents they could allow them to work on their own account, in return for a weekly, bi-weekly or monthly payments in money for the right to work on their own. The system was called *murgu* in Hausa, and many slave owners allowed their servile dependents to seek employment during the long dry season, which often led to employment of men as porters, house repair and construction, petty trade, the manufacture of corn-stalk beds, the carrying of manure and household sweepings to farms to be used as fertilizer, and for women the carding and spinning of cotton. This is how the Agalawa and Tokarawa got their start, and through group solidarity and cooperation they developed an economic niche in the trade in specific commodities that resulted in their success. I repeat, moreover, that both groups, while servile in origin, fully speak Hausa as a first language, live in the central Hausa emirates, are devote Muslims, and are not some distinct ethnicity. There are many other *asali* groups, including people of Borno origin who are known in



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Hausa as Beriberi or some variation thereof or of Fulbe origin who are known in Hausa as Fulani.

Alice Bellagamba: *You belong to a generation of scholars who had the opportunity to carry out fieldwork in the years immediately after African independences. How were the legacies of slavery shaping the socio-political development of Northern Nigeria at that time?*

Paul E. Lovejoy: My fieldwork in Nigeria began nine years after independence, not immediately after independence, but the topic of slavery was prominent. Both during my field work for my Ph.D. in 1969-1970, subsequent research on salt production in 1972, and then the two years that I taught at Ahmadu Bello University (1974-1976), it was possible to conduct interviews on the subject of slavery and related topics. I tape recorded a couple hundred hours of interviews and helped supervise undergraduates in the collection of materials. During those years and then even more intensely later, I also photocopied and then digitized enormous quantities of archival materials in Nigeria and elsewhere. This is important to emphasize because when I was in graduate school it was thought, erroneously, that the amount of information that existed was relatively limited, rather than being as extensive as is the case. The late 1960s and the 1970s were a vibrant period in Nigeria with many contradictions and enormous possibilities for dynamic research. On the one hand, there were scholars at the universities who denied that slavery had been important and that there was an ongoing legacy. Many insisted, often vehemently, that slavery in Africa, and specifically in northern Nigeria, was "different" from slavery in the Americas, which was the inevitable comparative framework. As it turned out, those who were insisting on this perspective actually knew almost nothing about slavery in the Americas or anywhere else; they did not have access to the literature and had read almost nothing. On the other hand, in the field there was no difficulty getting people to talk about slavery. It was a topic that did not involve shame or avoidance but was readily discussed. It was difficult to find individuals who would admit that they were of slave descent or had firsthand knowledge of slavery. Initially unknown to me, one of my research assistants was clearly of slave descent, which everyone knew except me, because of the scarification on his face that indicated that his family had been slaves to the emir of Kano, although since he was born in the 1950s, he was not technically a slave, despite the stigma of his markings. Needless to say, his assistance was enormously revealing in ways that I had never planned. The problems of the legacy of slavery were not a subject that I was interested in at the time. I was trying to find out about commercial patterns in the pre-British period before 1900 and then subsequently to slavery "in the past" without getting into the murky area of the continuation of slavery long into the colonial era and indeed beyond. Slavery and the legacy of slavery were dynamic forces in the Nigeria in which I was conducting my research, and for methodological reasons I largely avoided focusing on the implications in the present. The work that I ultimately did with Jan Hogendorn resulted in our book, *Slow Death for Slavery: The Course of Abolition in Northern Nigeria, 1897-1936*, whose title is



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intended to reveal the lengthy period of transition of slavery abolition during the colonial era but without extending beyond the formal declaration that all "slaves" were henceforth free in 1936. In the context of Northern Nigeria, slavery and its legacy were closely associated with the very nature of Muslim society, and hence strongly influenced the nature of socio-political development. It is a subject that requires full and detailed study. For myself, I will probably examine the colonial period before World War II in greater detail, *only* because of the extensive oral testimonies that I collected and the enormous amounts of archival documentation that I have also collected, and that has been collected by a number of my former Ph.D. students, which is on deposit at the Harriet Tubman Institute at York University.

Alice Bellagamba: *Could you tell a bit about your collaboration with Nigerian scholars and students?*

Paul E. Lovejoy: I have always collaborated with scholars in Nigeria and have trained a number of Nigerian Ph.D. students, and indeed students from other parts of Africa. My first book was published in Nigeria because I was committed to the dissemination of my research results in Nigeria. I have been very critical of a pattern in scholarly training and publication that has involved the "invasion" of countries, whether in Africa, the Caribbean or Latin America, by North Americans and indeed Europeans who ignore, deliberately or by omission, the scholarship of indigenes of the countries of research, when often local scholars have done much more research but inevitably lacked the resources to publish and even to gain access to the wider scholarly literature. This type of academic piracy was particularly strong twenty and thirty years ago but still exists, unfortunately. Indeed it has often been the case that if something is not published by a university press in North America or the UK, and in English, it is ignored. Fortunately, there has been a major upsurge in scholarship in Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America by scholars at universities in these regions. Any young scholar who ignores this development does so at his/her own risk of missing major contributions and thereby repeating, often in inadequate ways, *research* that has already been done. Hence my concern has been to work with scholars in Nigeria and to help train Ph.D. students from many different countries. I continue to be so involved, both in student training, publication and research endeavours. The Harriet Tubman Series on the African Diaspora which I edit for Africa World Press is a testimony to my efforts to promote the research of scholars from every part of Africa and the African diaspora.

Alice Bellagamba: *Your book 'Transformations in slavery' contains a thriving passage on freedom. If I understood, you see freedom as universal aspiration in the hearth and mind of each human being. Why have African History and African Studies focused so much on the meanings of slavery and left aside the historical study of freedom?*



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Paul E. Lovejoy: The initial focus and the ongoing fascination on slavery arises from the public distortion and common misconception that slavery has to do with the racialized societies of the America, especially the United States, and on the ongoing struggle against racism. An early problem in studying slavery in Africa arose from the denial of the existence of slavery in Africa and then the insistence that slavery was somehow different in Africa, and finally the concern with the false issue of why "Africans" would enslave other "Africans." It has really only been since the Durban convention of 2001 that declared slavery "a crime against humanity" and recognition that slavery is still a problem globally in the contemporary world that it has been possible to examine slavery in its racialized context and otherwise. The meaning of "slavery" has preoccupied scholars of African history and society since the 1970s, and indeed at the end of the 1960s when I was in graduate school, "comparative slavery" was a focus of discussion, seminars, and lectures. As with other scholars, I was strongly influenced by several different approaches that crystallized around three different foci. First, Igor Kopytoff, in collaboration with Suzanne Miers, developed a theory of slavery that emphasized institutionalized marginality that was strongly influenced by anthropological theories of society. This school of thought conceived of slavery in abstract terms of belonging - that is, the extent to which individuals belonged or did not belong to kinship groups, the ways individuals were marginalized and how individuals tried to reduce such marginalization and become more or less full members of society. A second school of thought emerged from Marxist theory about the nature of pre-capitalist social formations and was largely associated with French scholars, particularly Claude Meillassoux, Emmanuel Terray and others. The emphasis was on the concept of rights in individuals as a form of property that could be bought and sold. A third approach that was initially associated with John Ralph Willis recognized that slavery was a well-defined institution within Islam that required a careful reading of Muslim legal and religious texts. The focus on Islam corresponded with the recognition that large parts of Africa were more or less under the influence of Muslim intellectuals and governments. Subsequently, scholarship revealed increasingly complex dimensions to the study of unfreedom. My own work with respect to pawnship, undertaken principally with Toyin Falola and David Richardson, was one aspect of this trajectory.

Implicitly, all of this research focuses on the meaning of "freedom" in the African context, although the actual focus was on the absence of freedom and the loss of freedom. In my work on biography, I have emphasized this aspect of analysis in my discussion of what I have called "freedom narratives," as distinct from what are often referred to as "slave narratives" in the discussion of biography and autobiography, particularly in North America. The important contrast is between accounts about or by individuals who were enslaved in Africa, transferred into slavery and into diaspora where in most cases individuals eventually achieved emancipation, in contrast to the accounts of individuals who were born into slavery in diaspora. The area of research in Africa that has emphasized the concept of "freedom" most fully is in the study of slavery in Islamic contexts. The *jihad* movement that swept West Africa in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century was particularly concerned with the issue of the enslavement of freeborn Muslims and hence with the meaning of freedom in which the status of a child followed that of the father, not



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the mother, as was the case in the Americas most notably. The issue of "freedom" underlies much of Muslim jurisprudence and is clearly defined in theory if not always in practice. Who could be enslaved and under what circumstances were well discussed issues and the subject of judicial proceedings and legal debate. Following on an extensive scholarly literature, these issues are fundamental to my forthcoming book, *Jihad in West Africa in the Age of Revolutions, 1780-1850*. Similarly, "freedom" is well understood in the biographies of individuals who were enslaved in West Africa and who had to endure the Middle Passage of slavery. Gustavus Vassa, whose boyhood name was Olaudah Equiano, recounts the loss of freedom and his subsequent quest to attain emancipation and the rights of British citizenship, which forms the basis of my analysis of Vassa's life story. Similarly, Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua, whose biography has been annotated by Robin Law and myself, recounted in his life story of enslavement - twice - in West Africa, his transport to Brazil and his subsequent journey to New York City on his master's ship filled with coffee that the first word he learned in English was "F-R-E-E-D-O-M!" Clearly there is a lot to be learned by focusing on what is meant by the concept of "freedom" in different historical contexts which clearly has a lot to do with the possibility that an individual could be bought or sold, that is, treated as property. This possibility related to the extent to which an individual was perceived to belong to a kin group and a larger society and the circumstances that could undermine such a sense of belonging and whether such protection was codified in law, as in Islam, or not.

Alice Bellagamba: *Most of your efforts during the last twenty years have been directed to link the study of African slavery with the African diaspora, the Caribbean and Latin America. Which contribution can historians of Africa give to the understanding of slavery and the slave trade in contexts other than Africa? Do you think that there is potential for the development of African History in contemporary Latin America?*

Paul E. Lovejoy: The contribution of African historians to the study of slavery in the Caribbean, Latin America, North America, Europe and the Islamic world is their knowledge of African history. For some strange reason that is difficult to understand, historians of Africa and even the main events of African history are not generally known among non-specialists, even if people of African descent are the subjects of study. The enormous advances in the reconstruction of African history over the past several decades are well known in Africa, which now has several hundred universities, and is being taught at universities and schools in the Caribbean and elsewhere. The task of historians of Africa is to insist on the same methodological standards in understanding the African past as in understanding the European past. The problem is that the amount of scholarly and scientific knowledge has increased exponentially beyond the ability of individuals to keep abreast of developments. We know more and more and the problem of disseminating what we know has become a bigger and bigger problem. The internet has been a great tool in dissemination. Hence between publications and the internet there is no reason that historical knowledge cannot be better known, but it takes an effort and involves more than



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simply knowing the English language. The UNESCO "Slave Route" Project is an international effort with which I have been closely since its inception in Ouidah, Benin in 1994. On its twentieth anniversary, the United Nations declared the next ten years as the "Decade of People of African Descent" and at the same time UNESCO has undertaken an expansion of the General History of Africa to include three new volumes that deal specifically with Global Africa and the recognition that the African diaspora actually forms one of the regions of Africa. These initiatives all demonstrate that African history and African diaspora history are being *taken* seriously not only in Africa and the Caribbean but also in Latin America. The current president of the UNESCO Slave Route Project, Maria Elisa Velazquez, is a distinguished scholar from Mexico; there is a Chair in African and Caribbean Studies at the Universidad de Costa Rica, held by Dra. Rina Caceres; and the Brazilian government implemented a law ten years ago that required the teaching of African history at all levels of education. These are clear indications that the subject of slavery and more importantly the history of people of African descent are central to all parts of the Americas.

Alice Bellagamba: *There is an open debate on Boko Haram on the resurgence of slavery and slave trade Northern Nigeria. Which is your perspective as an historian of African slavery and slave trade?*

Paul E. Lovejoy: Boko Haram is the latest manifestation of *jihad* as a form of violent protest against injustice and revolutionary action that is intended to overthrow established governments and institute a new regime based on the implementation of the Shari'a. A strict interpretation of how to implement jihad involves recognition that the enemies of jihad can be subjected to execution or enslavement. In this regard, Boko Haram follows a long tradition of jihad that has been particularly prominent in West Africa, as is demonstrated in my forthcoming book, *Jihad in West Africa in the Age of Revolutions*. There has been a continuous wave of *jihad* in West Africa since the late seventeenth century, initially in the Senegal River valley, spreading to Fuuta Jalon and Fuuta Toro in the eighteenth century and consolidated through the formation of the Sokoto Caliphate in the first decade of the nineteenth century. Thereafter, the *jihad* of the Tijaniyya and then the Mahdiyya completed the revolutionary movement, in the first case in the region between the Senegal and Niger Rivers, and in the second case in the Nilotic Sudan and then in areas as far west as Lake Chad. That movement of *jihad* was curtailed by European colonial occupation after the 1890s, but the *jihad* movement itself continued in the uprising at Satiru, near Sokoto, which was crushed in 1906 by French and British troops, and the ongoing depredations of Mahdism in the border regions of Cameroon and Nigeria, precisely where Boko Haram has emerged. The Maitastine movement in the early 1980s was a precursor to Boko Haram, so that the idea of *jihad* has never disappeared and has coalesced in the last decade in response to extensive corruption in Nigeria, massive unemployment and underemployment as a result of poor planning, and ineffective government and dysfunctional military.



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As in other uprisings in Africa in recent years, enslavement is form of recruitment and a weapon of war. Children are pressed into service as child soldiers, "mules" to carry bombs, and as conjugal slaves. I am involved in a project under the direction of Professor Annie Bunting at the Tubman Institute, and funded by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada that is conducting research on conjugal slavery in wartime in eight African countries, and I am heading a team of researchers in Nigeria, Cameroon and Niger, as well as Canada and the United States, that focuses specifically on Boko Haram. Finally, the Alliance Against Modern Slavery, which is an NGO that was founded by members of the Tubman Institute, focuses specifically on contemporary slavery issues. Since the Durban conference and the recognition that slavery is a "crime against humanity," it is impossible to ignore the links between historical slavery and the continuation of slavery in modern times.

Alice Bellagamba: *My last question. Do you think that historical research can help bridge the gap between the knowledge on African slave-systems and their abolition and the debates on contemporary slavery? Which paths of investigations would you suggest?*

Paul E. Lovejoy: Historical research is essential for understanding contemporary issues of slavery. In the first instance, it is not possible to understand in isolation the current Islamist campaigns and the intentions of Muslim activists to establish Caliphal governments that are proclaimed to be in the Muslim tradition of *jihad*. The issues are questions of legitimacy and the commitment to ethical standards that are used to justify extreme and violent courses of action. Historical research clearly shows that the debates over the nature of government and the form of society are not necessarily destined to be violent and confrontational. Muslims have lived at peace with each other, despite doctrinal differences, and with non-Muslims in multi-cultural environments that are based on tolerance and respect. There is nothing inherently in opposition to progressive review of the law and the behaviour of communities that would prevent multi-cultural and diverse interaction that transcends religious belief. Governing bodies have to be fair, honest and transparent, and abuse of individuals and groups of people has to be identified and rectified. Educational curricula and community services have to mobilize knowledge in ways that allow autonomy and increase awareness of legitimate differences of opinion and behaviour, as long as such differences do not infringe on the rights of others. At the same time, vigilance and investigative reporting have to be maintained in a conscious manner that recognizes that efforts to promote special interests both openly and clandestinely are inevitable but do not necessarily result in confrontation or imposition. From a research perspective, we need to know more about why some people are convinced that enslavement for any reason can be achieved and presumably justified.



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