

## **Introduction**

### **Sources and methods**

#### **Writing about African slavery and the slave trade**

**Alice Bellagamba, Sandra E. Greene, Martin A. Klein**

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Research on African slavery is more than half a century old. Much has been accomplished in that time. Numerous studies have documented the history and character of slavery in particular locals during a range of eras. We now know where many of the slaves came from, who captured them and on which routes they traveled when sold from person to person. Once settled in their new locations within Africa, we know the circumstances that could influence the degree to which they were integrated into their new communities and how their relations with their masters might change over time. We also know that the terms "slave" and "slavery" – denoted in the many languages of Africa by a variety of forms not easily translated into English – ended very slowly indeed during the era of European colonization and that the legacies of slavery in Africa still shapes twenty-first-century societies on the continent. Our work has also shifted and changed over the decades. From an initial focus on West, Central and

coastal East Africa in the 1970s and 1980s, scholars have expanded to include the Great Lakes region, North and South Africa, Madagascar and the Indian Ocean.<sup>1</sup> The beginning of the twenty-first century saw scholarship on African slavery expand yet again. This time the focus has been on its transnational dimensions. Inspired by the work of Philip Curtin titled *Africa Remembered: Narratives by West Africans from the Era of the Slave Trade*, published in 1967, scholars have developed Curtin's initial interest in bringing out of the shadows the lives of captured and enslaved Africans (individuals such as Olaudah Equiano, James Albert Gronniosaw and Ottobah Cuguano, who were actively involved in the abolitionist movement in Europe and the Americas). This more recent work has focused on identifying and examining the lives of a wider range of individuals: those who moved not only across the Atlantic to the Americas and Europe but

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, H. Médard and S. Doyle (eds.), *Slavery in the Great Lakes Region of East Africa* (Athens and Oxford, 2007); J. O. Hunwick and E. Troutt Powell (eds.), *The African Diaspora in the Mediterranean Lands of Islam* (Princeton, NJ, 2001); D. Goodman, "Expediency, Ambivalence, and Inaction: The French Protectorate and Domestic Slavery in Morocco, 1912–1956," *Journal of Social History* 47:1 (2013), 101–131; N. Worden, *Slavery in Dutch South Africa* (Cambridge, 1985); R. C.-H. Shell, *Children of Bondage: A Social History of the Slave Society at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652–1838* (Hanover, NH, 1994); J. E. Mason, *Social Death and Resurrection: Slavery and Emancipation in South Africa* (Charlottesville and London, 2003); H. Médard (ed.), *Traites et esclavages en Afrique orientale et dans l'océan Indien* (Paris, 2013); E. A. Alpers, "Recollecting Africa: Diasporic Memory in the Indian Ocean world," *African Studies Review* 43:1 (2000), 83–99; G. Campbell, *Structure of Slavery in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia* (London and New York, 2004); H. P. Ray and E. A. Alpers (eds.), *Cross Currents and Community Networks: The History of the Indian Ocean World* (Oxford, 2007); W. G. Clarence-Smith, *The Economics of the Indian Ocean Slave Trade in the Nineteenth Century* (London and New York, 2013). In addition to this geographical expansion of slave studies within Africa, there were also a number of volumes published by Africanists interested in a comparative approach to slavery, exploring similarities and differences in African slave systems with those in Asia and the Americas. These volumes include Martin A. Klein, *Breaking the Chains: Slavery, Bondage and Emancipation in Modern Asia and Africa* (Madison, 1993) and the multivolume series by Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers and Joseph C. Miller (eds.), *Children in Slavery through the Ages* (Athens, 2009); *Child Slaves in the Modern World* (Athens, 2011); *Women and Slavery: Volume One, Africa, the Indian Ocean and the Medieval North Atlantic* (Athens, 2007); and *Women and Slavery: Volume Two, The Modern Atlantic* (Athens, 2008).

also those who crossed the Indian Ocean to South Asia and the Middle East, as well as the enslaved who crossed the political and cultural boundaries within Africa, itself.<sup>2</sup> As the geographical field of enquiry has expanded, so too has the sets of analytical questions that scholars seek to answer. Studies now exist that explore a range of heretofore unexamined topics: the relationship between slave self-emancipation and the massive migrations that were known to have taken place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in the western Sudan;<sup>3</sup> the effect slavery has had on African notions about race and race relations;<sup>4</sup> the impact of Islamic practices on the social mobility of freed slaves and their

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<sup>2</sup> Marcia Wright, *Strategies of Slaves and Women: Life-Stories from East/Central Africa* (New York, 1993); Robin Law and Paul E. Lovejoy (eds.), *The Biography of Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua* (Princeton, 2001); Walter Hawthorne, *From Africa to Brazil: Culture, Identity and an Atlantic Slave Trade, 1600–1830* (Cambridge, 2010); Sandra E. Greene, *West African Narratives of Slavery: Texts from Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Ghana* (Bloomington, 2011); James H. Sweet, *Domingos Alvares, African Healing and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill, 2011); Eve Troutt Powell, *Tell This in My Memory: Stories of Enslavement from Egypt, Sudan and the Ottoman Empire* (Stanford, 2012); see also select chapters in Paul E. Lovejoy (ed.) *Identity in the Shadow of Slavery* (London, 2000), and in Alice Bellagamba, Sandra E. Greene and Martin A. Klein (eds.), *African Voices on Slavery and the Slave Trade* (New York, 2013) as well as in Lisa A. Lindsay and John Wood Sweet, *Biography and the Black Atlantic* (Philadelphia, 2014). Scholars working on slavery and the slave trade in the Indian Ocean region are able to offer, so far, only limited sketches of individual slaves. Still, their efforts have yielded some intriguing portraits for this understudied region. See Megan Vaughn, *Creating the Creole Island* (Durham, 2005) and Clare Anderson, *Subaltern Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World* (Cambridge, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Martin A. Klein and Richard Roberts, "The Banamba Slave Exodus of 1905 and the Decline of Slavery in the Western Sudan," *Journal of African History* 21:3 (1980), 375–394; Martin A. Klein, *Slavery and Colonial Rule in French West Africa* (Cambridge, 1998); Richard Roberts, *Litigants and Households: African Disputes and Colonial Courts in the French Soudan, 1895–1912* (Portsmouth, 2005); Benedetta Rossi, "Migration and Emancipation in West Africa's Labour History: The Missing Link," *Slavery and Abolition* 31:1 (2014), 23–46.

<sup>4</sup> C. Besteman, *Unraveling Somalia: Race, Class, and the Legacy of Slavery* (Philadelphia, 1999); Bruce S. Hall, *A History of Race in Muslim West Africa, 1600–1960* (Cambridge, 2011); Chouki El Hamel, *Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race and Islam* (Cambridge, 2013); Baz Lecocq, "The Bellah Question: Slave Emancipation, Race and Social Categories in Late Twentieth Century Northern Mali," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 39:1 (2005), 42–68.

descendants;<sup>5</sup> the role played by government-supported transatlantic slavery heritage tourism on the willingness of Africans to break their silences about slavery and the slave trade that existed within their own local Africa communities;<sup>6</sup> and the ways the legacy of slavery in Africa continues to shape twenty-first-century societies on the continent.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, for all this research, few scholars have addressed the question of which sources and methods are especially useful in studying African slavery, no matter the period or place. Those studying slavery in Africa have had to rely on more general discussions. How useful really are oral traditions and histories for understanding Africa's histories and cultures at a time when traditions are no longer passed from one generation to another as they were even twenty years ago; how do we use European and Arabic sources given the fact that they were written by individuals who had their own biases that could obscure as much as they reveal? What can historical linguistics and archeology reveal about Africa's past and present? These general methodological discussions have been quite useful for scholars working in Africa on a range of disciplines and topics; yet, the study of slavery offers particular challenges unaddressed in these studies. What

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<sup>5</sup> Mirjam de Bruijn and Lotte Pelckmans, "Facing Dilemmas: Former Slaves in Modern Mali," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 39:1 (2005), 69–95; Jeremy Raphael Berndt, *Closer than Your Jugular Vein: Muslim Intellectuals in a Malian Village, 1900 to the 1960s*. PhD Dissertation, Northwestern University, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> B. Holsey, *Routes of Remembrance: Refashioning the Slave Trade in Ghana* (Chicago, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> S. Hanretta, *Islam and Social Change in French West Africa: History of an Emancipatory Community* (Cambridge, 2009); J. Glassman, *War of Words, War of Stones: Racial Thought and Violence in Colonial Zanzibar* (Bloomington, 2011); E. McMahon, *Slavery and Emancipation in Islamic East Africa: From Honor to Respectability* (Cambridge, 2013). Alice Bellagamba, Sandra E. Greene and Martin A. Klein (eds.), *The Bitter Legacy: African Slavery Past and Present* (Princeton, 2013).

are the specific sources for African slavery? Scholars, of course, routinely list their sources in the bibliographies to their studies and comment on the documentary materials they have used. Rarely, however, do they engage in in-depth discussions about their use of these materials. From studies using colonial government records, for example, we know they outlawed slavery, but did little to abolish the institution as it operated on the ground. Their administrative records on this topic are, therefore, neither systematically collected nor necessarily well organized. Prior to the late eighteenth century, missionaries and European travelers rarely found slavery worth commenting on because they saw in slavery nothing very peculiar. With the rise of abolitionist thought in the late eighteenth century, missionaries still often had little to say about slavery until the nineteenth century. Their late eighteenth-century writings reflected instead their primary interests: converting Africans to Christianity. Arabic documentation in Africa is massive and contains much on slavery, but faced with such a plethora of materials, it is helpful to have some idea of where to look and for what, in order to maximize one's search results. Rarely are such sources as African ritual practices, African intellectuals' writings about slavery or their proverbs or songs even analyzed for what they say about African slavery and the slave trade.<sup>8</sup> Equally important, scholars have given very little attention to an analysis of the methods they employ when handling their sources: How should certain sources on African slavery be read? What are the opportunities and the

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<sup>8</sup> Exceptions to this general trend are cited in notes 29 and 30. On proverbs, see also Jean-Norbert Vignondé, "Slavery and Slavery in the Study of Fon Proverbs in Benin," in Doudou Diène (ed.) *From Chain to Bonds: The Slave Trade Revisited* (New York, 2001), 258–266.

difficulties associated with working with such sources? These are among the many questions that this volume answers.

Especially important is our interest in determining how our sources can be used to access African voices. Early studies on African slavery and the slave trade internal to Africa – those written in the 1960s and 1970s – relied largely on European accounts (colonial documents, missionary records, European traveler accounts), oral sources and participant observation of African societies in which anthropologists documented the ongoing social, economic and cultural legacies of slavery in the communities that they studied.<sup>9</sup> While these sources were and continue to be important for the study of slavery in Africa, scholarly efforts at the time, as mentioned, focused largely on analyzing these sources to understand the character and changing nature of slavery and the slave trade in Africa.

Elsewhere, however, during this same period, in the 1960s and 1970s, especially in North America, where the academic study of slavery was already well established, the focus had shifted away from documentation to more in-depth analyses of the experiences of the enslaved. Instead of trying to understand only how slavery operated as an institution in different places and times based on documents produced by slave masters, North American scholars began to

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<sup>9</sup> Some of the earliest studies include M. G. Smith, "Slavery and Emancipation in Two Societies," *Social and Economic Studies* 3 (1954), 239–290; G. A. Akinola, "Slavery and Slave Revolts in the Sultanate of Zanzibar in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 6 (1972), 215–228; Frederick Cooper, "The Treatment of Slaves on the Kenya East Coast in the Nineteenth Century," *Kenya Historical Review* 2 (1973), 87–107; P. A. Igbafe, "Slavery and Emancipation in Benin, 1897–1945," *Journal of African History* 16 (1975), 409–443; Claude Meillassoux, *L'esclavage en Afrique précoloniale* (Paris, 1975) and Frederick Cooper, *Plantation Slavery on the East Coast of Africa* (New Haven, 1977).

question the still prevalent notion that slavery in North America as a whole was a benign institution (a perspective championed by Ulrich Phillips in his 1929, *Life and Labor in the Old South*).<sup>10</sup> They did so by examining a body of primary materials that had previously been dismissed as biased: narratives written by the formerly enslaved about their experiences in bondage, and the many recorded accounts in which the formerly enslaved shared their recollections of their experiences with interviewers during the early twentieth century as part of the Federal Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration.<sup>11</sup>

In the 1980s and 1990s, Africanists, too, began to refocus their own efforts. Having by this time finally established the existence of multiple forms of slavery in Africa, and the forces that shaped the institution and its legacies, researchers sought to bring a more personal perspective to the study of slavery. Instead of assuming the existence of a single unified perspective on the part of either the enslaved or the enslavers, they sought to personalize, to humanize, the experience of slavery in Africa. And this, in turn, has stimulated scholars to

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<sup>10</sup> Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South* (Boston, 1929).

<sup>11</sup> Hirsch, Jerrold. *Portrait of America: A Cultural History of the Federal Writers' Project* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003). See also

YETMAN, Norman R. The background of the slave narrative collection. *American Quarterly*, 1967, 19, 3, 534-553

RAWICK, George P. (ed.). *The American Slave-A Composite Autobiography: Georgia Narratives*, Westport, Greenwood Publishing Group, 1972.

YETMAN, Norman R. Ex-slave interviews and the historiography of slavery. *American Quarterly*, 1984, 36, 2, 181-210.

SOAPES, Thomas F. The federal writers' project slave interviews: Useful data or misleading source. *Oral History Review*, 1977, 5.1: 33-38.

revisit their sources. To retrieve African voices, we must reexamine our written sources, and listen again to the oral accounts we recorded with a renewed focus on methodology. How do we look given the fact that African voices are often not so obviously present in the sources or they cannot be understood without noting the various influences that affected who said what, where and under what circumstances? What new sources might we explore that have the potential to reveal African perspectives on slavery that we didn't consider in the past when our primary concern was simply to understand the character of the institution? How should we now read our sources? It is this set of concerns, a desire to read our documents differently and to find additional sources so as to capture the range of conflicting and diverging experiences of Africans touched by the institution of slavery, that we have set as our goal. We do need to get at these voices. For only by doing so can we gain a more complete understanding of African slavery, the slave trade and its impact on Africa's peoples.

## **Assessments**

All scholars begin their research projects knowing that they will have to use certain methods to make sense of the sources they unearth. No text is perfectly transparent. Whether that text is an oral tradition or history, an Islamic document, a colonial court case or a ritual performance, we must employ certain ways of reading the texts to make sense of them. Scholarly reflections on method, however, almost always come after the work is completed. A certain distance is



required. We use a particular method; we publish the results. Only then are we able to step back to think about why certain methods were more useful than others. Methodological reflections, thus, tend to be “ultimate or penultimate thoughts” on work we have already done, and on what we would like to do next.<sup>12</sup> The contributions in this volume reflect this process. Each chapter is a retrospective on the sources and the methodological approaches that the contributors themselves have already used for analyzing the history of slavery, the slave trade and its contemporary legacies in Africa. Most focus largely on West Africa, but almost all contain comparative examples drawn from Central, Southern, East and North Africa.

Neither the sources nor the methods discussed in the contributions are unknown to the scholarly community. European colonial government documents, missionary records, court testimonies, Arabic documents, oral histories and traditions, proverbs, songs and ritual performances have long been sources of information about the history and culture of African peoples. And the methods for using these sources most effectively are also well known. Numerous scholars, especially those in the literary and linguistic fields, have discussed the importance of close reading, in which one is enjoined to be attentive to how a text is constructed, which words are used to convey a particular meaning and what voice is employed to convey distance or intimacy.<sup>13</sup> Historians and

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<sup>12</sup> G. Agamben, *The Signature of All Things: On Method* (New York, 2009), 7.

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of close reading, and the way literary scholars have continually rethought this method, see Marlies K. Danziger and Wendell Stacy Johnson, *The Critical Reader: Analyzing and Judging Literature* (New York, 1965); and Frank Lentriccia and Andrew Du Bois (eds.), *Close Reading: The Reader* (Durham, 2003).

anthropologists have written extensively on the art and science of interviewing, the importance of considering the ways in which the social political, economic, religious, ritual and cultural contexts, as well as one's own identity and the technological devices we use, influence the contents of the oral testimonies we record.<sup>14</sup> When working with archival materials, scholars have been enjoined to be attentive to who penned the documents they are using, and to ask what has been archived and what has been deemed less important. In using these pre-organized materials, researchers are encouraged to be aware of the extent to which they may be privileging certain topics, while ignoring others because of the nature of the archival records.<sup>15</sup> Those who work on memory are also encouraged to think about what is remembered, what is forgotten, what has been invented, by whom and for what reason.<sup>16</sup> Instead of rehearsing these different methodological approaches to the many source materials discussed in this volume, our contributors apply this knowledge to the specific study of African

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<sup>14</sup> For an overview of this interdisciplinary literature as it pertains to Africa, see Barbara M. Cooper, "Oral Sources and the Challenge of African History," in John Edward Philips (ed.), *Writing African History* (Rochester: Rochester University Press, 2005), 191–215. See also some of the many journals on oral history and oral tradition: *Oral History* (Colchester, England), *International Journal of Oral History* (Connecticut), *The Oral History Review* (Texas), *Oral Tradition* (Indiana) and *the Journal of Narrative and Life History* (New Jersey).

<sup>15</sup> For a most recent discussion of the constraints and possibilities of archival work, see Jennifer Howard, "When the Archive Won't Yield Its Secrets," *Chronicle of Higher Education* LX:14 (2014), A8.

<sup>16</sup> On memory, see such classic works as Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980) and Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989) as well as Patrick H. Hutton, *History and the Art of Memory* (Hanover, New Hampshire, 1993). On memories of the slave trade and slavery, see Rosalind Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade: Ritual and the Historical Imagination in Sierra Leone* (Chicago, 2002). On individual remembering and forgetting by those enslaved in Africa, see Sandra E. Greene, *West African Narratives of Slavery: Texts from Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Ghana* (Bloomington, 2011).

slavery and the slave trade. We discuss best practices, how to most effectively interpret our sources – many of which were not written by Africans – so that we can understand how Africans themselves understood and talked about slavery and the slave trade.

The chapters are organized roughly chronologically. We begin with Ghislaine Lydon and Bruce Hall's contribution on Arabic sources because they discuss the earliest known West African Arabic language texts that discuss slavery, in this case, a treatise on the wrongful enslavement of Muslims written by 'Abd al-Karim al Maghili in 1498. The contributions that follow, Greene's discussion of missionary records and Valsecchi's discussion of early modern European-language sources, begins in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, respectively. These, in turn, are followed by studies that examine colonial archives, the writings of African intellectuals, colonial court records, ritual practices and oral accounts, all of which examine sources produced in the nineteenth through the twenty-first century. This chronological ordering, however, should not obscure the fact that many of the contributions overlap in time. Documents produced in the nineteenth century loom especially large in many of the articles. Lydon and Hall discuss the 1498 document mentioned above in terms of its significance for Muslim debates about who can be legally enslaved, but their analysis focuses largely on nineteenth-century Arabic-language sources. Greene begins her contribution with a discussion of sixteenth-century missionary records, but continues her exploration of the missionary records produced throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth and early

twentieth centuries. In examining the writings of African intellectuals who were quite vocal in expressing their thoughts about slavery and the slave trade, Greene and Oduntan discuss two eighteenth-century individuals, but end by examining the ideas of a far more numerous group who lived in the nineteenth century. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century documents are also the focus in the contributions of Klein, and Mann and Roberts, who examine source materials found in French colonial archival records, and in French and British colonial as well as *qadi* courts, respectively. This significant overlap reinforces the fact that these were important times in the history of slavery, the slave trade and its abolition in Africa. The nineteenth century opened with the British Parliament abolition of the Atlantic slave trade in 1807, but it took a long time for this provision to be effective. Meanwhile political and religious turmoil throughout the continent produced new generation of captives that were traded across the Sahara, the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, while others were incorporated into local communities that were in need of additional workforce as Africans made the transition to commercial agriculture. By the 1880s and 1890s, Europe had colonized much of the continent. This was followed by the colonial abolition of slavery and the internal slave trade, which in turn produced yet another set of developments as the enslaved, the formerly enslaved, slave owners and slave traders all sought to manage their lives in the wake of these events. Documents from this period are abundant. The issues were of such universal concern that many different individuals produced a wealth of documentation, some of which has suffered the ravages of time, but enough of which has survived to provide

scholars with a window onto the world of slavery and slave trading in Africa during the nineteenth century. And even as legal slavery and the slave trade came to an end in most areas of the continent between the two World Wars, both practices have continued well into the twentieth century, influencing Africa's present-day social, cultural, economic, political and cultural institutions. It is this legacy – the continued existence of the past in the present as found in the ritual practices and oral sources of twentieth- and twenty-first-century West African communities – that Brivio and Bellagamba explore in their contributions.

The chronological overlap between these last two contributions and the overlap that occurs among the others in this volume reveal much about the nature of the documentation – its quantity, its accessibility, its usefulness and the potential for further work – when researching slavery and the slave trade in Africa.

Our collective efforts to find African voices reveal yet another important point about our sources. No matter their origin – whether produced by Africans or non-African outsiders – African opinions, insights and observations about slavery and the slave trade in Africa exist in all our sources. In some instances, they are unacknowledged or hidden; in other instances, they are clearly present, but entangled with the opinions, observations and insights of others. Early modern European-language accounts, for example, were produced by European travelers. Some were complete novices in terms of what they understood about African cultural practices; others were more long-term residents. In any case, they often relied on local informants and oral histories.

At the same time the oral sources that are recited by local Africans about the histories and cultures of their communities are also known to include materials originally penned by outside observers. Whether hidden or entangled, it is clear that there is no sharp distinction between African voices and non-African ones in the documentary materials discussed in this volume. And even when it would appear that an African voice is obviously present and unentangled with non-African voices, they were still very much influenced by the linguistic demands of the systems in which they were produced. Colonial prosecutors and attorneys, interpreters and scribes filtered the testimonies that were ultimately recorded as part of the colonial court documents. Maliki law – with its origins in eighth-century Arabia – formed the foundation for how West African Muslims handled manumission, inheritance and the commercial activities of slaves, even as new legal opinions were crafted locally to answer new questions that arose because of changing times. African intellectuals' ideas, too, were deeply affected by both their Western education and their own experiences with slavery and the slave trade. In all of these cases, African voices existed in the sources, but they were neither unfiltered nor unaffected by the contexts in which they were recorded.

## Why these sources

### Arabic-language sources

In recent years, scholars have been able to increase dramatically their use of sources in Arabic or African languages using Arabic scripts. This is a result of the discovery of a large number of documents dating back to the late fifteenth century that are housed in private family archives. It is also the result of recent political events in the world that have heightened both interest in and financial support for scholars working in Muslim societies. Access to Arabic-language documents in Africa, however, can be challenging. Conflicts in the Sahara threaten some of these collections; accessing family archives can require the establishment of mutual trust and respect between the researcher and family members. Success in navigating these obstacles, however, can yield a wealth of information about slavery and the slave trade. In analyzing a range of Islamic legal opinions (*fatawa*), wills, contract and manumission certificates, Ghislaine Lydon and Bruce Hall have been able to document, in detail, how slaves were used not only as domestic workers, concubines, wet nurses and field hands but also as commercial agents, managing the businesses of their owners while also making new contacts and deploying knowledge not even available to their owners. They have been able to document the rights and responsibilities of Muslim slave owners with regard to religious instruction and sexual access to female slaves. They offer a survey of Islamic law dealing with slavery, a

discussion of the types of documentation available to scholars working on this topic and an assessment that the kind and quantity of Arabic-language documentation available to scholars of Africa is sufficient to write a social history of slavery in much of Muslim West Africa that can become a basis for a more expansive comparative study of slavery.

## **Missionary sources**

Missionaries often had a close relationship with Africans, and they often stayed in the same place for long periods of time. As part of their commitment to convert others to Christianity and, in so doing, alter the cultures of the African communities where they worked, they frequently left detailed records about African religious, political, economic and social life, including information about slavery and the slave trade. From the late eighteenth century, the views of missionaries toward slavery began changing as a reflection of changing European attitudes. By the second half of the nineteenth century, the struggle against both the continuing slave trade and African forms of slavery became a major focus of the mission enterprise. Despite these shifts many missions continued to purchase slave children to create a Christian community. And as they did so, they continued to write, as did their earlier counterparts, descriptions of slaves and slaving. The missionaries in the later period, however, expanded upon their observations to include a much more varied set of materials. They recorded life histories and collected proverbs, they took



photographs and wrote detailed ethnographic materials, all of which have proven to be invaluable in both understanding and contextualizing how Africans thought and talked about slavery. As with other materials, Sandra Greene notes one must be careful in working with them. Some life histories were fictions written to help raise money; descriptions were often strongly shaped by their Christian and European biases. Still, they can provide an often more intimate picture of slavery and the internal slave trade.

## **Early modern European travelers' accounts**

Early modern European-language accounts are one of the traditional sources for the historian of Africa. At about the same time that Portuguese navigators were exploring along African Atlantic coast, Johannes Gutenberg provided the means – with the invention of the movable type printing press – for their accounts to be made available to the reading public in Europe. In time, with the growth of literacy, that European public developed an insatiable interest in peoples different from themselves. European mercantile expansion – especially in the seventeenth century when British, French, Dutch, Danish and Brandenburg businesses broke the almost 200-year-old monopoly the Portuguese had on European contact with West Africa – generated even greater interest among Europeans in the exotic societies and cultures visited by ship captains, merchants, adventurers and even ordinary sailors. Many wrote descriptions of the places they visited, and gradually developed what postcolonial scholar

Valentine Y. Mudimbe has called a “colonial library”: a centuries-long accumulation of descriptions of African customs and lifestyles that continues to shape African perceptions of themselves and their history. Inevitably, these accounts are external, partial and sketchy.<sup>17</sup> Yet, as noted by Pierluigi Valsecchi, they are invaluable as sources of information about slavery and the slave trade. They provide an unprecedented picture of social relations, trade and ritual behavior in Africa in the period well before colonization. Like other sources, they have their silences. At times, the authors simply don’t see; at other times, the writers engage in self-censorship. Yet they are critical for providing some of the earliest accounts of slavery in Africa when the transatlantic slave trade was just beginning to reach its peak.

## **African intellectual ideas on slavery and the slave trade**

The writings of African intellectuals are yet another invaluable source for the study of African slavery and the internal slave trade. Yet these are perhaps among the least explored of the sources discussed in this volume. During the nineteenth century, a class of educated Africans was created, most of them men who served early colonial regimes, Christian missions and European commerce.<sup>18</sup> They were particularly important in West Africa, where a large number of slaves freed by the British Navy were educated. Though often seen primarily as agents

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<sup>17</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa* (Bloomington, 1994); G. Desai, *Subject to Colonialism: African Self-fashioning and the Colonial Library* (Durham and London, 2001).

<sup>18</sup> P. Zachernuk, *Colonial Subjects: An African Intelligentsia and Atlantic Ideas* (Charlottesville, VA, 2000).

of Westernization, Sandra Greene and Oluwatoyin Oduntan argue that they were shaped by both European and African cultural influences. While most shared the missionaries' hostility to slavery, they were reluctant to write about their own experience of slavery and their views about it. Some owned slaves and most differentiated between the evils of the slave trade and what they saw as a more benign domestic slavery. There is, however, substantial documentation by and about this group, much of it in reports and correspondence of mission organizations and in poorly distributed local publications. The potential for further research especially on African intellectuals is great. Their views – especially those expressed in the nineteenth century – impacted policies not only in Africa but also in the larger Atlantic world, yet their opinions and actions are rarely discussed outside their equally vocal support for early forms of African nationalism. The writings by and about African intellectuals, as indicated by Greene and Oduntan, are ripe for further research and analysis.

## **Colonial archival sources**

As Martin Klein makes clear, there is a great deal of documentation on African slavery and the internal slave trade available in colonial archival holdings. But the information found in the archives can be quite episodic. When crises erupted involving slavery and the slave trade, there was a surge in documentation, resulting in a great deal of information. At other times, slavery virtually

disappears in the colonial record.<sup>19</sup> As a result, archival research demands a great deal of persistence. Those who dig usually find something of value. Specific references to slavery and the slave trade are abundant immediately before and after the colonial conquest. They become scanty as soon as the administration became routinized and colonial regimes were able to convince their metropolitan superiors that the problem of slavery was solved. Equally important, their content reflects the biases of the colonial administrators who penned them. Many saw Africans as either children who needed to be guided by “obviously more advanced” Europeans or as savages to be controlled by the whip. Others, however, were more receptive, and came to rely on their African informants about local customs and politics, especially when that information was crucial for them to carry out their duties as colonial officers. What they wrote about slavery depended on a number of factors: whether or not they thought the institution was benign or not; and how they chose to handle the contradiction of being the agents of an antislavery colonial government while having to work with local African chiefs and elders, usually the largest slave holders, on whom they depended for administrative support in managing the territories under the authority. Keeping these and other considerations in mind, as discussed in greater detail by Klein, will allow the researcher to take maximum advantage of the materials in the colonial archival and provide them with the methodological tools to access and analyze the archival holdings of other colonial powers.

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<sup>19</sup> For an example of what can be found in the archives, see A. Sehou, “Some Facets of Slavery in the *Lamidats* of Adamawa in North Cameroon in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” in Bellagambia, Greene and Klein, *African Voices*, 182–190.

## African colonial court records

Court cases provide perhaps one of the best sources for slavery within Africa. They are particularly useful for recovering the voices of the many ordinary people, both the enslaved and slave owners, whose testimony is recorded, if only briefly, in the records. The types of courts in which one can find material are impressive. Cases involving slavery were heard in vice admiralty and mixed commission courts, in colonial civil and criminal law courts, and in village, provincial and district tribunals. Judgments can be found in judges' notebooks, in the records of district and supreme courts and in the *qadi* courts for Muslims. As is the case with any source, they have their limitations. At times, the information is so cursory as to be difficult to use. And because of the wide variation in the procedures and jurisdictions of the courts in which plural legal systems were the norm, any researcher working with these materials needs to understand the political and legal histories of the places where the courts operated, as well as their organization, composition and procedures. Evidence offered in support of a plaintiff or defendant is frequently filtered through an interpreter and or a magistrate. Many reports are simply too cursory to be useful. As noted by Trevor Getz, court cases are also influenced by the fact that every actor in a court case has interests and goals. Witnesses are coached to achieve a desired end.<sup>20</sup> And yet, as Richard Roberts and Kristin Mann make clear, slavery

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<sup>20</sup> T. Getz, "Interpreting Gold Coast Supreme Court Records, SCT 5/4/19: Regina (Queen) vs. Quamina Eddoo," in Bellagamba, Greene and Klein, *African Voices*, 360–377. In *African Voices*, there are five other documents based on court cases: Bellagamba, Greene and Klein, *African Voices*, 333–414. See also T. Getz and L. Clarke, *Abina and the Important Men. A Graphic History*

is present not only in cases of slave trading and slave “theft” but in cases of divorce, child custody, debt, access to land and inheritance. It is because these court documents include such a range of daily life issues that they give us perhaps the best access to African voices about slavery and the slave trade, and to the reactions of both slaves and slave owners to the legal abolition of slavery.

## Ritual practices

Historians of Africa have used the present as a historical source since the early days of the discipline, in the 1950s and 1960s. Historical linguistic techniques have helped them to analyze contemporary languages for traces of the past. They have collected contemporary oral traditions and people’s recollections and analyzed them as possible windows on the history of particular peoples and cultures. In her contribution on possession rituals, Alessandra Brivio employs this same approach by analyzing a contemporary practice, specifically spirit possession rituals. She explores these rituals for what they can tell us about how slavery and the slave trade have been remembered in contemporary Africa, and how that past continues to influence the present. She offers a detailed illustration of her own extensive research on Tchamba, a *vodun* religious order in Togo and Benin, in which the descendants of slave owners are possessed by the spirits of those they enslaved, but she also explores, for comparative purposes, the connection to slavery in a number of other religious orders in Africa: Gnawa in

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(Oxford, 2011); R. Roberts, *Litigants and Households: African Disputes and Colonial Courts in the French Soudan, 1895–1912* (Portsmouth, NH, 2005).

Morocco, Bori in Niger, Stambali in Tunisia, Tumbura in Sudan and the Yoruba Egungun cult in Benin and Nigeria. All have embedded in their ritual practices, memories of slavery, whether through their dress, their dances, the ritual objects found in their shrines and sanctuaries or in the oral sources about the origins of their practices. Reading these ritual practices and connecting them to the history of slavery and the slave trade, however, can be quite challenging. Nothing about these rituals is transparent. Brivio analyzes the many pitfalls in attempting to use ritual possession as a source for understanding slavery and the slave trade, but she also emphasizes that the study of possession rituals offers an unprecedented opportunity to “reveal neglected and obscure forms of memory.” That spirit possession is one of the few ways in which the voices of those who were and continue to be marginalized, the enslaved and their descendants, can be heard above the din made by more dominant discourses about slavery and the slave trade in Africa is another important insight in this contribution. Brivio’s analysis is especially welcome, as it highlights one of the most recent approaches for understanding how Africans think about and remember their past.

## **Oral sources**

Oral sources lay at the core of African history, and the methodologies developed by historians of Africa have greatly influenced historians of other world areas and other disciplines. The publication of Jan Vansina’s pathbreaking book *La Tradition orale* (1961), and its translation in English, was followed by numerous

other studies and as well as the development of journals dedicated solely to the study of oral sources. Scholars have examined the benefits and challenges associated with the collection and analysis of both. And they have emphasized how valuable they can be in grounding our historical reconstructions in African conceptions of history, time and agency. Oral sources and traditions also humanize. They give voice to the ordinary women and men who experienced the changes discussed in our studies.<sup>21</sup> Despite this, researchers still tend to overlook this kind of material when written evidence is available. Finding those who are knowledgeable about the events one is studying, and; winning their confidence so that they will share that knowledge, can be difficult. This is especially the case when it comes to sensitive topics like slavery and its contemporary legacies. When scholars first began conducting research on slavery in the 1960s and 1970s, the descendants of slave owners were often more than willing to boast of the wealth they once had in people, but efforts to find the slaves voices were frequently disappointing, for reasons that Bellagamba illustrates. With time, patience and persistence, however, success is possible. When researching Ga women, Claire Robertson discovered only after many interviews that one of her

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<sup>21</sup>S. Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals: Anthropology and History in Tanzania* (Madison, 1990); C. Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty: The Powers of Shaka Zulu and the Limits of Historical Invention* (Cambridge, MA, 1998); L. White, S. F. Miescher and D. W. Cohen (eds.), *African Words, African Voices: Critical Practices in Oral History* (Bloomington, 2001); J. L. Giblin and B. K. Giblin, *A History of the Excluded: Making Family a Refuge from State in Twentieth-Century Tanzania* (Oxford, 2005); J. Vansina, *Being Colonized: The Kuba Experience in Rural Congo, 1880–1960* (Madison, 2010); B. J. Peterson, *Islamization from Below: The Making of Muslim Communities in Rural French Sudan, 1880–1960* (New Haven, 2011); E. L. Osborn, *Our New Husbands Are Here: Households, Gender, and Politics in a West African State from the Slave Trade to Colonial Rule* (Athens, OH, 2011).



informants was a slave descendant and willing to talk about it.<sup>22</sup> Felicitas Becker conducted research in a former slave village in Tanzania, where people were reluctant to talk about slavery, but she discovered that the history of slavery was pervasive in the narratives she collected about earlier times.<sup>23</sup> In reviewing the work that has been done on African oral sources, Bellagamba invites scholars to comb the existing archives and compilations in search of clues about slavery and the slave trade that can be hidden in narratives apparently focused on other topics. She stresses the ambiguity of oral knowledge, its changeability and its expression of power relations that can also shift and change, the multiple versions of history that can exist in the same community, the importance of context for understanding the oral information obtained and, as mentioned, the extent to which time is needed to cultivate the relationships that are critical for collecting oral sources.<sup>24</sup> The challenges are many; however, the rewards from collecting and working with oral sources are even greater.

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In presenting these different contributions on Arabic-language sources, missionary records, early modern European travelers' accounts, African

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<sup>22</sup> C. Robertson, "Post-Proclamation Slavery in Accra: A Female Affair?," in C. Robertson and M. Klein (eds.), *Women and Slavery in Africa* (Madison WI, 1983), 220–242.

<sup>23</sup> F. Becker, "Common Themes, Individual Voices: Memories of Slavery around a Former Slave Plantation in Mingoyo, Tanzania," in Bellagamba, Greene and Klein (eds.), *African Voices*, 71–87; F. Becker, *Becoming Muslim in Mainland Tanzania, 1890–2000* (Oxford, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> For an early presentation of her work, see A. Bellagamba, *Ethnographie, histoire et colonialism en Gambie* (Paris, 2002). On an effort to tap a griot informant, see A. Bellagamba, "'The Little Things that Would Please Your Heart ... ': Enslavement and Slavery in the Narrative of Al Hajji Bakoyo Suso (The Gambia) in Bellagamba, Greene and Klein, *African Voices*, 29–48.

intellectual writings, European colonial archives, colonial court records, ritual practices and oral sources, we do not wish to suggest that this is an exhaustive presentation of all the sources and methods that are available for the study of African slavery and the slave trade. In fact, we are aware that many others await exploration, some of which have already yielded important insights, and others that are yet to be investigated. Among this group are archeological studies. In 2001, Christopher DeCorse published *West Africa during the Atlantic Slave Trade*, which for the first time explored the material legacy of Africa's relations with Europe during the era of the Atlantic slave trade and the impact of slaving within Africa on local settlement patterns. This work marked a major departure from earlier archeological studies that had focused on earlier time periods. Much additional research followed DeCorse's publications. Some scholars have conducted archeological research in areas that were more closely tied to the trans-Saharan trade. Others explored the history of warfare and the defensive fortifications that may or may not have been erected in response to local slave raiding. Still others excavated sites where slave markets were held and where enslaved individuals lived. None of this archeological work is discussed in this volume, although this type of research has made major contributions to the study of slavery in Africa.<sup>25</sup> Our volume does contain a chapter on memories of the past

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<sup>25</sup> See Christopher DeCorse, *West Africa during the Atlantic Slave Trade: Archaeological Perspectives* (Leicester, 2001). See also Natalie Swanpoel, "Different Conversations about the Same Thing? Source Materials in the Recreation of a Nineteenth-Century Slave-Raiding Landscape, Northern Ghana," which contains an exceptionally informative overview of the complementary, but different, issues that archeologists and historians can address given their sources. This article and other equally interesting ones appear in Paul J. Lane and Kevin C. MacDonald (eds.), *Slavery in Africa: Archaeology and Memory* (Oxford, 2011). Much impressive work has been done in Ghana

that can be found in contemporary possession rituals and modern oral sources. It does not explore, however, those memories that also exist in songs and dances. Perhaps the earliest and most well-known analyses of songs for what they could tell us about the African past were published by Leroy Vail and Landeg White in 1991.<sup>26</sup> These authors examined a number of Mozambican songs that revealed African perspectives on Portuguese colonial practices. Since that time, scholars have analyzed other song texts as well as different dances for the memories of slavery they contain. Nicolas Argenti, for example, has written about the connection between slavery memories and dance rituals in Cameroon.<sup>27</sup> Emmanuel Saboro has analyzed the songs of the Balsa, for what they tell us about their memories of being defeated in the nineteenth century by the slave raider Babatu and his Zaberima followers.<sup>28</sup> Akosua Perbi and Kwabena Nketia include in their studies, the texts of songs that were composed by the enslaved

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recently. See Yaw Bredwa-Mensah, "Archaeology of Slavery in West Africa," *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*, New Series, 3 (1999), 27–45. See also J. Alexander, "Islam, Archaeology and Slavery in Africa," *World Archaeology* 33:1 (2001), 44–60 for a more skeptical view of what we can learn about slavery in Africa from archeological work.

<sup>26</sup> Leroy Vail and Landeg White, *Power and the Praise Poem: Southern African Voices in History* (Charlottesville, 1991); Another interesting example is D. B. Coplan, *In the Time of Cannibals: The Word Music of South Africa's Basotho Migrants* (Chicago, 1998).

<sup>27</sup> N. Argenti, *The Intestines of the State: Youth, Violence, and Belated Histories in the Cameroon Grassfields* (Chicago, 2007), [Chs. 7 and 8](#).

<sup>28</sup> E. Saboro, "Songs of Sorrow, Songs of Triumph: Memories of the Slave Trade among the Busla of Ghana," in Alice Bellagamba, S. E. Greene and M. A. Klein (eds.), *The Bitter Legacy: African Slavery Past and Present* (Princeton NJ, 2013), 133–148. For other uses of songs as sources on slavery, see F. Declich, "Singing Songs and Performing Dances with Embedded Historical Meanings in Somalia," in Bellagamba, Greene and Klein, *African Voices*, 121–128 and J. M. Toungara, "Song Lyrics as Pathways to Historical Interpretation in Northwestern Côte d'Ivoire: The Case of Kabarasana," in Bellagamba, Greene and Klein, *African Voices*, 120–136; On the use of dirges as a source, see E. S. D. Fomin, "Slave Voices from the Cameroon Grassfields: Prayers, Dirges, and a Nuptial Chant," in Bellagamba, Greene and Klein, *African Voices*, 137–148.

musicians attached to the Asantehene, the king of the Asante state.<sup>29</sup> In these songs, the singers criticize the king for the death and destruction associated with the Asante's wars while also lamenting their own capture and enslavement. Praise poems and drum names are another valuable source of information as are festivals. Olatunji Ojo and Sandra Greene have written about present and past performances, respectively, in which mock battles reenact triumphs and defeats, enslavement and death.<sup>30</sup> Children's stories are yet another source that has been underutilized in analyzing how Africans remember slavery and the slave trade. Only Nicholas Argenti has written so far about children's stories, in which there exist allusions to the fears generated by the trade in slaves.<sup>31</sup> The study of religious beliefs and institutions also often gives us insights into the way the violent experience of the slave trade shaped African culture and, like much of the research cited above, tells us a lot about how Africans experienced slavery and still experience its aftereffects. Robert Baum has written about the ways Diola shrines facilitated the slave trade.<sup>32</sup> Rosalind Shaw has seen in witchcraft belief the fears and insecurities engendered by slave-raiding and slave-trading.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Kwabena Nketia, *Drumming in Akan Communities* (Edinburgh, 1963), 134–135; Akosua Perbi, *A History of Indigenous Slavery in Ghana From the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup> Century* (Legon-Accra, 2011), 65–66.

<sup>30</sup> Greene, *West African Narratives*, 38–39. Olatunji Ojo describes the reenactment of events from the slave trade in an unpublished paper, "Performing Trauma: Ghosts of Slavery in Yoruba Ritual Music and Dance."

<sup>31</sup> N. Argenti, "Things that Don't Come by the Road: Folktales, Fosterage and Memories of Slavery in the Cameroons Grassfields," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 52 (2010), 224–254.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Baum, *Shrines of the Slave Trade: Diola Religion and Society in Precolonial Senegambia* (New York, 1999).

<sup>33</sup> Rosalind Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade: Rituals and Historical Imagination in Sierra Leone* (Chicago, 2002).

Scholars working in the Americas, especially in the southern hemisphere, have identified sources that may contain information about Africans' experiences of slavery in Africa before they were shipped to the Americas. None of the contributors to this volume address these additional sources. Yet by mentioning them – along with the sources and methods we do discuss extensively here – we hope to encourage further research and the identification of even more sources for the study of slavery and the slave trade in Africa.

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