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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/72k950pp>

Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 1(3)

ISSN

0041-5715

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Publication Date

1971

DOI

10.5070/F713016377

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NOTES ON SLAVE-TRADE HISTORIOGRAPHY

by

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One of the major features of Western historiography since 1945 has been the relative dearth of interpretation and broad analysis. Most historians have been content to stake out a tiny area or minute time period for intensive study. If they succeed in illuminating minor events or episodes, they nonetheless leave the peripheral areas and larger historical questions in darkness. They can tell us very much indeed about a specific incident or person; yet they contribute little towards a generalized theory or explanation of trends and/or processes. Thus, the relevance of history becomes dubious and it comes to deserve its reputation for dryness and fact-mongering. While this approach has been detrimental to historical studies generally, and partially accounts for the lack of interest and respect for the discipline, it has been especially unfortunate for African historiography.

African history has been until quite recently the purview of writers of colonialist mentality, therefore, coming to the world dripping with Western chauvinism. The defenders of African history have fought a valiant and continuing battle for academic legitimacy, recognizing an urgent need for scholarly synthesis with which to destroy old myths and racist obfuscations. Until African history is firmly established on a scientific basis in the popular consciousness, it is not enough for historians to retreat into the safe confines of the monograph. The question of the trans-Atlantic slave trade has especially suffered from this narrowly-defined, neo-empiricist approach.

Slave-trade historiography has unquestionably been bogged down in emotionalism, charges and counter-charges, grisly speculation regarding numbers, impact, etc. Although this approach is not surprising in view of the atrocity of a trade in humans, it has not often enough led to enlightenment. In one respect, then, the recent "revisionist" trend in history has helped go beyond the purely moralistic approach. Emphasis on social and economic structures of participating African states and groups has been valuable for de-mystifying certain aspects of this history. Yet, even here the monographic approach has been stultifying, for we are in danger of ignoring the forest for the trees. While the "trees" are indeed important, they cannot adequately be viewed from outside the historical "forest". That is to say, any national or territorial

history is meaningful both in its own right and in the context of international or world history.

An example of the emphasis on "trees" approach can be found in Robert July's recent *A History of the African People* (1970). While we laud July's attempt at synthesis and his willingness to tread where few dare, his parochial interpretation of the slave trade will not suffice. July finds that "despite unexampled individual misery, despite devastation and depopulation in certain areas, the slave trade had relatively little impact on West African society taken as a whole" (1970: 170). He allows that this much generalization is risky, but argues that the work of Dike, Jones, Davidson, and presumably Fage, whom he does not mention, makes this interpretation feasible. Yet, "West African society taken as a whole" is a rather monolithic and static concept which makes the millions who suffered and died seem to fade into the background. Are there sufficient grounds for July to assert that there was "relatively little impact"? We might ask, "relative" to what -- and isn't this a very comfortable supposition for a Westerner to make? Another missing factor here is the importance of the slave trade and institutionalized slavery to the European economy. What about the impact of African labor and African creativity in New World societies? Surely the proponents of black studies are correct in wanting these aspects of the trade emphasized. Equally demanding of attention should be the African role in the abolition movement. Malcolm X has argued that it is unreasonable to start Afro-American history "at the water's edge" -- and conversely, we might add that African history should not stop at the water's edge. It should in fact relate to all the areas to which Africans migrated in their great diaspora, and to all the world.

In this context, it is encouraging to find two African historians, J.B. Webster and A.A. Boahen, attempting a synthetic and universal interpretation of the trade and its abolition. In their *History of West Africa* (1970) they put forth some perceptive ideas on differences between African and American slavery and show how the former became harsher under the demands of the world palm-oil market. They speak of the indentured servants of North America as "debt-slaves", a term which might not endear itself to American historians, but nonetheless accurately signifies their relationship to the economy. Regarding abolition, Webster and Boahen borrow from Eric Williams' *Capitalism and Slavery* (1961) and explain that the British abolitionists were not really saints but representatives of an industrial class more interested in exploiting palm-oil than slaves. They take Williams' thesis even further; the need for oil helps account for the zeal of the British anti-

slavery patrols. The protection of the oil trade, they say, often took precedence over anti-slavery motives. British humanitarianism thus comes in for another flogging. On the African side, the authors point out that chiefs, when possible, made a successful transition to legitimate trade and that those who refused were often confined within the limitations of the local economies. It could be noted also that African kings had protested the slave trade earlier, but to no avail; Dom Affonso of Kongo was a case in point. This textbook-style history provides a good measure for understanding the issues of the trade, as well as presenting broader implications for Africans and non-Africans. There is only one sentence which I would question; the authors state:

While the slave trade of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was a crime committed by humanity against humanity, and abolition a beneficial reform of human society, to apportion blame or praise between European and African or between one nation and another is to deviate from the spirit and purpose of history (emphasis mine) (Webster and Boahen 1970: 83).

We might well ask the historians what, then, is the "spirit and purpose" of history? Granted that there is little to be gained by damning Europe or by holding African participants blameless; but the system of mercantile capitalism, built upon the backs of slaves and semi-slaves, which provided wealth for the few and poverty and degradation for the majority, could certainly be condemned. We need not engage in beating a dead horse here; we need only portray this system from the viewpoint, not of the ruling classes, but from that of all the people who struggled under and against it and finally overthrew it.

Webster and Boahen write from an essentially bourgeois perspective. This is evident from their idealist analysis of the Islamic revolutions in West Africa. They sympathize with the ruination of the Sierra Leonean and Liberian middle classes as well, and thus stop short of a wholesale attack on mercantile capitalism. Yet their book is in many ways progressive and it transcends the limitations of traditional European historical writing. It bodes well for the continuing struggle against cultural imperialism in Africa.

Another aspect of the trade which Webster and Boahen touch upon only lightly is the need for the re-humanization of Africans and their descendants in the Americas. The "black cargoes" syndrome remains pervasive -- the image of poor, benighted blacks devoid of personality and creativity. This concept finds its most sophisticated formulation in the "Sambo" stereotype regrettably popularized by Stanley Elkins (1959).

It can be detected in many writers who pontificate upon the problems of the "backward" Africans, plagued as they seem to be by poverty, population explosion, etc. Recently, in fact, René Dumont (1969: 25) felt it necessary to re-affirm that there was no curse on the continent of Africa. To explode these myths and destroy the false image of depersonalization, historians must stress the creative and assertive aspects of African social development. An analysis has been made along these lines by the prominent West Indian scholar, C.L.R. James; his work merits the attention of all history students.

James found in his classic study of the Haitian Revolution (*The Black Jacobins: Toussaint Louverture and the San Domingo Revolution* [1938]), that no matter how harsh the condition of servitude, human beings would rebel repeatedly to gain freedom, that having once attained it, they would die rather than surrender. He wrote that the revolution in San Domingo, along with other slave revolts aboard ships and elsewhere in the Americas, sounded the death knell of slavery. The slaves did daily battle with the system that shackled them, and their resistance provided the firm core of the abolitionist movement which was to take shape in Europe. James also sees Afro-Americans in the vanguard of political action -- from the anti-slavery crusades down through the twentieth century -- and states that the struggles of the blacks have set the pattern for other progressive movements in the United States.

James also has interesting comments about Africa. Thirty years ago he wrote:

In the sixteenth century, Central Africa was a territory of peace and happy civilisation. Traders travelled thousands of miles from one side of the continent to another without molestation. The tribal wars from which the European pirates claimed to deliver the people were mere sham fights; it was a great battle when half-a-dozen men were killed. It was on a peasantry in many respects superior to the serfs in large areas of Europe that the slave trade fell. Tribal life was broken up and millions of detribalised Africans were let loose upon each other. The unceasing destruction of crops led to cannibalism; the captive women became concubines and degraded the status of the wife. Tribes had to supply slaves or be sold as slaves themselves. Violence and ferocity became the necessities for survival. The stockades of grinning skulls, the human sacrifices, the selling of their own children as slaves, these horrors were the product of an intolerable pressure on the African peoples, which became fiercer through the centuries as the demands of industry increased and the methods of coercion were perfected... (James, 1969: 120-121).

While James is conversant with recent research in pre-colonial history, he holds to his original interpretation and finds that later studies have in fact verified his thesis. He agrees substantially with what Dr. W.E.B. DuBois wrote decades ago, that the slave trade had "killed the Sudanese empires, brought anarchy to the valley of the Nile, decimated the thick populations of East and Central Africa, and pressed the culture of West Africa beneath the ruthless heel of the rising European culture..." (DuBois 1965: 45).

Summing up the historical debate, it seems that the two groups -- the revisionists upon whom July draws and the DuBois-James "radical" school -- have come to a rather abrupt parting of the ways. Webster and Boahen's approach incorporates elements of both interpretations; yet we are faced with a polarization in which the two sides will not be easily reconciled. While it is desirable to focus upon African initiatives *vis-a-vis* the trade and to demonstrate how and why African institutions and cultures managed to survive, we should not lose sight of the magnitude of this genocidal onslaught. It was, after all, unprecedented in human history. To see the slave trade as just another episode in African history, and to pretend it really was not so bad, contributes to the position of the neo-colonialists. Historians would do well to work along the lines suggested by DuBois and James; in this way they will not only illuminate the complexities of African cultural history, but will be able to incorporate them into a more comprehensive and humanistic framework. This alone can provide understanding.

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