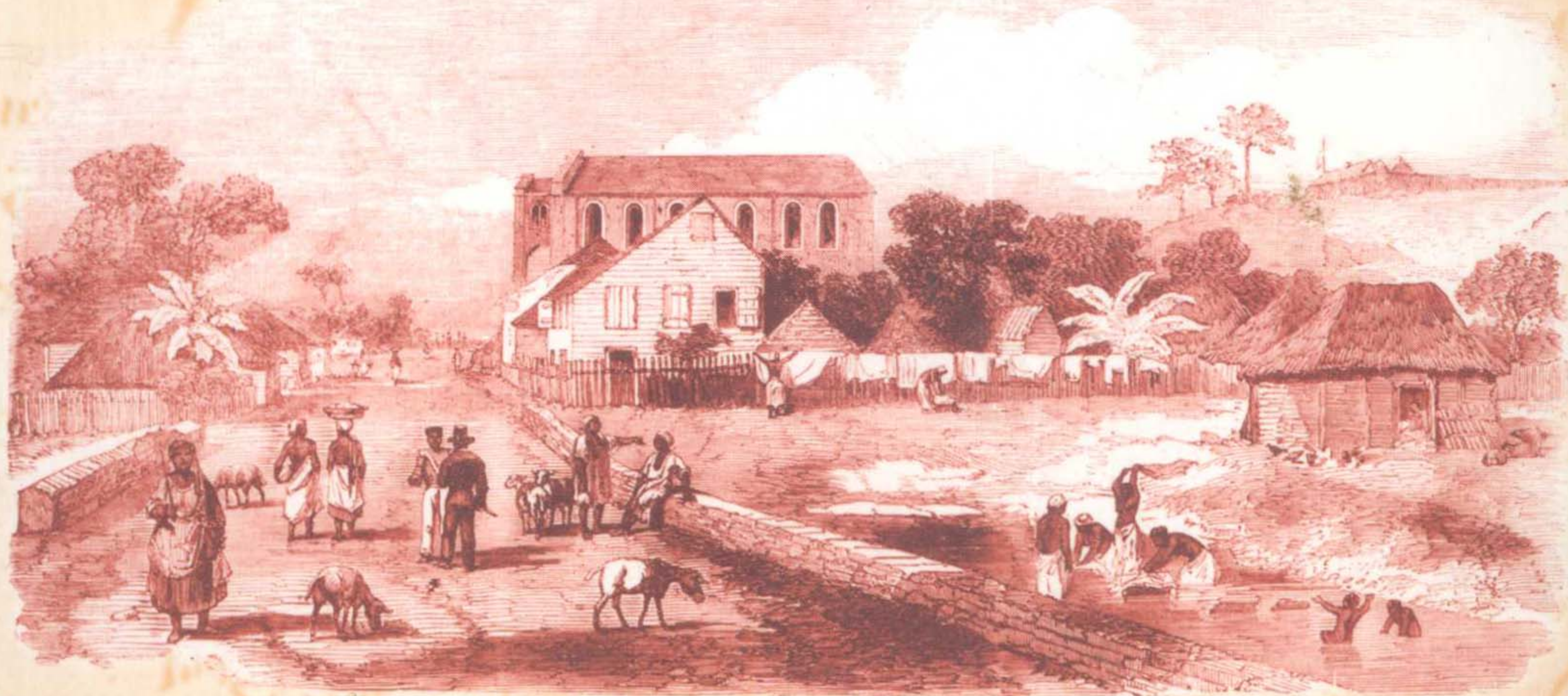


ABOLITIONISTS ABROAD



AMERICAN BLACKS AND THE MAKING OF MODERN WEST AFRICA

ETHIOPIAN

LAMIN SANNEH

Abolitionists Abroad

American Blacks and the Making
of Modern West Africa

Lamin Sanneh

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ABOLITIONISTS ABROAD

*To Kelefa and Sia,
in proud tribute
for dreams fulfilled
and hopes yet unrealized*

To accomplish this magnificent design [of the formation of a civilized society], in Africa, let us form agricultural colonies on its coast, which present a variety of situations, where we shall be little, or not at all, disturbed in our operations. Let us kindly mix with the inhabitants, and assist them in cultivating their fertile soil, with the view of inviting them to participate with us in it's [sic] inexhaustible stores, and in the concomitant blessings of improving reason with progressive civilization. Let us give them a manly and generous education, which will make them feel the nobility of their origin, and shew them of what great things they are capable—an education which will teach them no longer to suffer themselves to be dragged, or to conspire to drag others, from their simple, but improvable and beloved societies—which will teach them to avenge themselves on the blind and sordid men who purchase them, only by becoming more useful to them as freemen, than ever they have been, or can be, as slaves. Thus, on the wreck of tyranny, let us build altars to humanity, and prove to the negroes that the Europeans, become just from sound policy, and generous from a sense of their true interests, are at last disposed to make some atonement for the irreparable mischiefs their perverted system of commerce has occasioned in Africa.

C. B. Wadström, *An Essay on Colonization* (1794)

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I first worked on a history of the antislavery movement as my senior history essay in college, and then promptly abandoned the subject until now. The responsibility for returning to it in the present form is my own, but the credit for it in part belongs to my publisher, in particular, to Peg Fulton, who over several years gently goaded me into attempting a book-length study of the topic and with forbearance endured my procrastination. I am deeply indebted to her.

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Feast of the First Martyrs at Rome

L. S.

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Introduction

Slavery was a widespread practice dating back to antiquity. In Africa, the origins of slavery are hidden in the mists of time, before there were any written records. The records we do have tell the story of slavery as a practice already well established in African societies. Over twelve hundred years ago, for example, Arabic chronicles described how Arab traders from the north came to Africa south of the Sahara bringing salt to exchange for gold and slaves. These trans-Saharan routes carried caravans that returned laden with slaves from black Africa. Slaves were also obtained from military raids, such as those on the black populations of Nubia, in the Sudan, and on places as far south as Borno. The slaves were taken to Cairo and other Arab centers, there sold, and then dispersed throughout the Arab world. It was a community of such slaves, called the Zanj, who led a major revolt in the salt mines of Iraq in the ninth century of our era.¹

The Arab writer Ibn Khaldūn says in his “Prolegomena to World History,” written in 1377 C.E., that God made Africa a natural source of slaves, for “the Negro nations are, as a rule, submissive to slavery, because [Negroes] have little [that is essentially] human and have attributes that are quite similar to those of dumb animals.”² The ruler of Borno thought differently. In 1391–92 he wrote a letter to the sultan of Egypt, complaining about slave raids into his territory by Arabs from the north, this in spite of the fact that he and his people were free and Muslim. These Arab raiders, he lamented, “have devastated all our land, all the land of Bornu . . . They took free people among us captive, of our kin among Muslims . . . They have taken our people as merchandise.” The

Borno ruler asked the sultan to search out these unfortunate blacks scattered among the various slave markets and restore them to freedom and Islam, a plea that went unheeded.³

Africa continued to supply slaves for the Arab world well into the twentieth century, when French and British colonial policy intervened to try to ban slavery, often with little practical result. Domestic slavery had by then become an entrenched social institution, as the Baba of Karo, a Hausa woman of northern Nigeria, describes in her memoirs.⁴ It enabled indigenous communities to differentiate themselves between slave and free. In that differentiation slaves had no honor and were valued simply as chattel.

The Transatlantic Corridor

Transatlantic slavery, which began in earnest in the sixteenth century from West Africa, accelerated the process of slave exploitation that the trans-Saharan trade propagated in tropical Africa. The Portuguese had established a slave market at Arguin in northern Africa in 1448 shortly after they rounded the bulge of Cape Verde, and it is possible that Arguin supplied the first black slaves taken to Europe and America. In any case, on Cape Verde itself the Portuguese founded San Iago, a slave market, from where slaves were taken to Lisbon and Spain. Portugal also had a slave base in the Kongo kingdom under Afonso I, who converted to Christianity after becoming king in 1506.⁵ Thus between 1513 and 1516 just under 3,000 slaves were transported to Lisbon and over 370 to Spanish ports.⁶ The impact of the voyages of Columbus on the slave trade was considerable. On his third voyage of 1498 to the Caribbean, for example, Columbus spoke of the economic value of introducing African slaves to replace Indian labor, saying it could all be done in the name of Christianity. He affirmed: "From here in the name of the Holy Trinity one could send as many slaves as one could sell, and also from Brazil . . . It is the custom to employ many black slaves in Castile and Aragon, and I think that a great many of them come from Guinea [West Africa]; now one of these Indians is worth three blacks . . . From these two commodities it seems to me that one could gain 40 million, if there were enough ships to bring them here."⁷

With the incentive and justification thus provided, Europeans brought all the skills of credit, organization, and efficiency to bear on slave pro-

duction in Africa, measuring the risks involved against the high volume needed to ensure a high return on investment. Thus disease and death would be offset by factors such as the relative youth of the slaves, the size of the haul, and the conditions of travel on the high seas. A high-density formula was devised on the basis of which captains of tightly packed slave ships would determine how much cruelty they should inflict to deter the mutinous spirit and the general insolence that congestion tended to provoke without risking loss of a valuable investment.

Nevertheless, considerations of profit were not enough to prevent abuse. First, to ensure low prices, slave traders would buy slaves in bulk and store them in stockaded factories on the African coast or on offshore islands to await shipment. As a result, the African coast became what Sir Richard Burton termed “a broken line of broker settlements,” and allowed the traders to buy when the market was buoyant and prices were low, and to ship when they gauged conditions favorable for the seller and prices high. The slaves so shipped would consequently not represent a high risk to investment, while the fortified stockades could be replenished when supplies were high.⁸ Captains were thus able to afford a certain level of cruelty as a check or reprisal for slave insurrection. Second, slaves needed breaking in. As Orlando Patterson has argued, slavery meant total domination,⁹ using violence and dishonor, though writers like Ibn Khaldūn preferred to believe that slavery was the natural condition of blacks. (It is beyond the scope of this book to determine the extent to which coastal slave factories affected economic and political relations in hinterland Africa by regulating the market for slaves, but the reader can imagine the close link with local political institutions and structures.)¹⁰

Antislavery

In the course of time, the vested slave interests of Europeans, Africans, and Arabs came under direct challenge from the organized efforts of those opposed to the slave trade and slavery. One potent antislavery force emerged when Africans who were enslaved and taken to Europe or America gained, or agitated for, their freedom and led efforts to abolish the trade in slaves. They looked to European and American philanthropists, the human rights activists of their era, who shared their abhorrence of slavery, and together they organized a campaign to win wider support

in government and society at large. However, the antislavery campaign in Europe and America was only half the story. It dealt with demand, not with supply, for which the strategy would have to shift to Africa.

Freetown in Sierra Leone fits into this scheme. Leaders of the Western antislavery movement were convinced that as long as Africans were willing to sell fellow Africans, there would always be people equally willing to buy them, with supply and demand becoming with time a chicken-and-egg question. Therefore, it was necessary to attack the problem at its source and to establish a colony that would be a haven for ex-slaves and an example to the rest of Africa. People were not sure precisely how such a colony would work, who would govern it, how it would be defended, who would pay for it, and, most crucial of all, if the Africans living in it would set a good enough example to uphold antislavery. Such was the lucrative draw of the slave trade that a colony of Africans without a viable alternative means of livelihood would likely revert to the trade or else perish. Not only coastal but hinterland Africa as well was littered with slave settlements, called in the Fula language *rimá'ibé* (singular: *roundé*). In these settlements the normal rules of humanity were suspended, with whole populations held in absolute servitude. Slavery was taken as a normal state of affairs, and one that would last into the indefinite future. In time scale, scope, focus, and intensity, slavery, both domestic and transatlantic, belonged with the most obdurate of human rights abuses. What would it take for Africans themselves to resist slavery of such magnitude?

Without answers to all the important questions connected with the project of a free settlement, the antislavery leaders in Europe and America decided to go ahead with plans and to meet whatever problems might arise as a consequence. In 1787 Freetown was established under the authority of the Sierra Leone Company as a free colony, a reversal of the *roundé*.

Even before knowing what the outcome would be, the advocates of antislavery had to confront certain issues. One of the most perplexing was whether a viable settlement could be established on the so-called Dark Continent, "dark," that is, in the double entendre of the absence of the light of knowledge and physical impenetrability. People in Europe and America realized that ignorance of Africa's peoples and geography had to be overcome before antislavery could make any progress there.

A second issue was the likely disposition of neighboring chiefs and

tribes toward a free colony. Would a settlement created to oppose slavery and the slave trade, and set to bring about the remission of the malignant *roundé*, earn the abiding enmity of chiefs and thus pose too great a security burden for officials? Perhaps gifts and tributes, offered with lavish official blandishments, would allow chiefs' hearts to be knit in the cause of antislavery. Perhaps, too, a modest show of force, coupled with conciliatory gestures—what Theodore Roosevelt called carrying the big stick and speaking softly, borrowing the idea itself from Africa—might be all it would take to avoid costly entanglements with chiefs and offer the fledgling settlement a chance. There was no knowing, except that walking makes the road.

This issue of chiefly and tribal hostility was a major one. It would not be enough merely to restrain these chiefs and their subjects. On the contrary, they would have to have positive inducement to comply with the terms of a settlement otherwise so opposed to their interests, to be shown in effect how they stood to gain more from antislavery than from slavery. Thus legitimate trade as a source of wealth might succeed and reconcile the chiefs.

Legitimate trade required open competition, however, and that in turn required abandoning the monopoly and protectionism that favored the chiefs. If pursued single-mindedly, legitimate trade would produce a new middle class whose members would see that they owed their status to their own efforts rather than to chiefs' patronage. Such a middle class would soon come to regard the chiefs as at best irrelevant to their prosperity and well-being. The question remained why chiefs should embrace antislavery when it was grafted to legitimate trade and threatened their interests so directly.

One answer to this obstacle was to do away altogether with chiefs in the new society to be fostered in a free colony, though such a course would still leave the colony vulnerable to chiefs' reprisals. It was a difficult historical choice. Local rulers were too wedded to slavery and the slave trade, they were too entrenched as "courtyard chiefs" of slavery, to become natural allies of abolition. Yet they were too important, too embedded in the social structure, to be ignored by a foreign cause like antislavery. It would be unthinkable to trust the chiefs, yet impossible, too, to avoid them entirely. Concessions might incite the less scrupulous chiefs to blackmail, while opposition might antagonize potential allies.

That impasse led to the conclusion that antislavery must cease simply