

# East Africa: slave migrations

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East Africa and its Indian Ocean shore, comprising the region of present-day states of Kenya, Tanzania, southern Somalia, and Mozambique; the Lake Malawi region; the Great Lakes region (Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, eastern Congo [DRC]); and Comoros and Madagascar were the site of a large-scale slave trade from the 16th to early 20th century, effecting massive forced migration. Since earlier times people of these regions had interacted through voluntary human migration and trading networks. Among these interactions, slave routes had connected several of these areas from medieval times.

## Growth of the slave trade in the 19th century

During the 19th century, when international trade expanded considerably, the slave trade boomed, interconnecting the whole region, and became a major institution in many societies. The extensive expansion of slavery in African societies is a highly complex matter where simple models and explanations do not adequately explain the intricacies of the process. The expansion of long-distance trade and merchant capitalism were major factors, as was the intersection of the internal slave trade with the Middle East and with European colonies. However, the internal dynamics that expanded slave trade within African societies should never be minimized. In many regions of East Africa, as elsewhere in Africa, the slave trade grew rapidly because slavery was already well established. But this does not mean that the institution of slavery and dependence in general did not evolve because of the slave trade and international trade in general.

## historical evidence and diverse causes of East African slave trade

Today most scholars admit that the concepts of “African” slavery, as well as “Islamic” slavery, are not relevant, mostly because of the wide variety of circumstances constituting human bondage. The borders between freedom and slavery were rarely clear as a continuum usually existed between internal slavery and other forms of dependence. Thus, when examining slavery, ambiguity is typically the rule and research on slavery is generally a challenge for historians of Africa. This uncertainty is complicated all the more by the scarcity of the evidence, particularly for scholars of earlier time periods and those who study regions that are remote from the coast of the Indian Ocean. Slave migrations and servile populations are extremely difficult to evaluate precisely and figures often remain “guesstimates.” For instance movements of slaves could involve hundreds of people or only one or two kidnapped children, slaves could work alongside free laborers, and in some regions slavery was often only a transitory state. In Eastern Africa, slavery concerned a great number of societies, some Muslim and others Christian (the role of slavery in Ethiopia is currently being re-evaluated), and yet others following traditional religions. Some of these societies were highly centralized and based on powerful states, as in the Great Lakes, others were acephalous like the Mijikenda (Kenya), the Wagogo, or the Luguru (Tanzania). Some, like the Swahili or Malagasy societies, had used slaves for centuries, others, like the kingdoms of Rwanda and Burundi, experienced a significant growth of slavery and slave trade only in the 1890s.

In other words, if slavery was a widespread institution in East Africa, its causes, its consequences, and its limits, were highly diverse. The diversity of the experience of slavery reflects the diversity of the African societies as well as

the continuous transformations they underwent over time.

Evidence of the slave trade from the Swahili Coast to Arabia and the Persian Gulf are found to have existed since the 9th century. However, overall, the slave trade appears to have remained modest until the second half of the 16th century. The Arabic traveler Ibn Battuta mentions the presence of slaves in Kilwa, on the southeastern coast of Tanzania, around 1331 but detailed accounts come only with the Portuguese in the 16th century. Slaves in Swahili and Comorian communities could be used for various functions, such as concubines, servants, bodyguards, sailors, agricultural labor, and perhaps craft workers. Nevertheless Swahili city-states maintained close clientship relations with mainland communities, which furnished abundant labor and consequently servile labor was not in great demand. Besides, as in most African and Indian Ocean societies, control or ownership over free or unfree labor were major sources of wealth, prestige, and social status. Slaves were considered more as personal clients than chattels, the productivity of slaves being rarely more important than their number and fidelity. The unproductive functions of slaves remained central to society even during the boom of the plantation economy in the 19th century.

### **Expansion of East African slave trade in the early modern era**

During the early modern era, the Swahili and the Comorians of the Indian Ocean were widely involved in slave-trading networks. Until the 18th century, most slaves originated from central Madagascar and were imported from the port towns of northwestern Madagascar. The main networks linked Madagascar, the Comoros, the Lamu Archipelago and the Hadramawt (present-day Yemen). Around the year 1700 the slave trade from Kilwa and the Cape Delgado region grew significantly. Yao traders opened routes into the interior and the area between Kilwa and Lake Malawi became a major site of slave exportation – most slaves were captured around the shores of Lake

Malawi (Alpers 1975). Elsewhere the slave trade was nonexistent or extremely minimal. During its peak years in the 17th century, and later around 1770, approximately three to four thousand slaves were shipped each year by coastal and Arab traders, but it is impossible to estimate the proportion of those whose intended destination was the coastal settlements, as the great majority of captured Africans were sent to Arabia. However it is certain that coastal communities highly involved in the slave trade were also more engaged in slavery than others, particularly the Lamu Archipelago, Kilwa, Zanzibar after the 1740s, and the Comoros. The latter served as entrepôt for the Malagasy trade and the use of slaves seems to have been more widespread there than elsewhere (Vernet 2009).

### **Zanzibar and the regional expansion of the slave trade**

From the mid-18th century Zanzibar, settled by Omani merchants, began to monopolize the wealth and trade in the region. Slave routes were redirected on an axis of Kilwa–Zanzibar–Muscat, and the trade expanded, particularly to furnish the increasing French demand. Around 1776, some 40 percent of all laborers in Kilwa may have been servile. Interestingly, the concentration of slaves on Zanzibar lands preceded the growth of a plantation economy, which emerged after the late 1810s. As early as the 1770s, Omani Arabs and a few Swahili owners had large estates with numerous slaves, whose productivity was low and production not aimed for export. This apparent paradox can be explained by the social function of slaves and land estates. Slaves and land were cheap and plentiful in Zanzibar and members of the elite accumulated them more for prestige and leisure pursuits than for food production. On Pemba Island about 50 miles due north of Zanzibar, slavery grew in the late eighteenth century, particularly from the 1790s, developed by the Mazrui of Mombasa and Swahili and Omani planters. Yet in contrast to Zanzibar slave labor in Pemba was mainly utilized to produce grain for export.

Therefore we can see that the roots of plantation economy on the Swahili coast were older and more complex than usually thought. The Omani did not bring a whole new system of slavery. The larger dimension to slave ownership they initiated was based on several factors: a better environment for trade and access to wealth, a growing slave market to furnish the French and Muscat with slave labor, an increasing demand for grain, but also expressions of social competition quite common in both Arab and Swahili societies (Vernet 2012). This contradicts the idea that accumulation of slaves for production constituted mainly an alternative market for surplus slaves after the decline of French slave trading (Sheriff 1987).

In 1819 a reliable observer estimated some 15,000 slaves on Zanzibar Island alone. This number then rose dramatically with the growth of clove production, from trees introduced around 1812 (Cooper 1977; Vernet 2012). The clove tree requires a lot of labor and African slaves were put to work more intensively – while still considered as personal clients. Production boomed in the 1840s, and by 1850 Zanzibar largely dominated the world market and profits were very high until the early 1870s. This prosperity is reflected in the slave trade but it is very difficult to estimate slave migrations and the total slave population, as evidence and academic works disagree.

It is safe to say that between the 1830s and the 1870s the slave population on the island may have hovered between 70,000 and 100,000 persons. On the plantations, virtually all labor was servile. As mortality rates were high – around 15 percent to 20 percent a year – at least 9,000–12,000 slaves had to be imported each year to maintain the servile population. In the 1810s, Zanzibar imported around 8,000 slaves annually, increasing to 13,000 from the late 1830s to early 1840s. The slave trade to Zanzibar reached a peak from the late 1850s to the early 1870s when perhaps 15–20,000 slaves landed on the island each year. In the mid-1860s, it is estimated that the import of slaves to the island peaked. Approximately 25–33 percent of these slaves were re-exported from

Zanzibar to other coastal settlements of the Indian Ocean and to Arabia. On Zanzibar Island itself, the plantation economy was largely dominated by Omani planters. By 1845 clove production spread to Pemba, where grain production was also intensified. Planters were more diversified than in Zanzibar as local Swahili also invested heavily in the production alongside the Omani. On both islands, the biggest estates had between one and two thousand slaves, but the average size was about 30 slaves per plantation. On Pemba small plots cultivated by one or two slaves were common.

As the international market for grain, spices, and oil expanded from the 1840s, the plantation economy spread on the coast to raise the demand for oil products from Europe to fuel the industrial revolution, and to Arabia and Zanzibar, where grain was in great need. The plantation sector developed most between Mombasa and the Lamu Archipelago. Coconut trees were being cultivated on a much larger scale for copra and plantations of sesame, millet, and sugar cane developed very quickly from the late 1850s. On the Kenyan coast, the peak of the plantation economy was reached in the ten years from 1875 to 1884, when around 45,000 slaves were reported to have populated the area. Slaves were estimated to represent about 44 percent of the total population of the region, and around 66 percent of those living on Pemba and Zanzibar islands. Malindi – located approximately 250 km north of Pemba – was a major center of production in Kenya. Its plantations averaged 10 to 20 slaves, and the largest had 250. In 1873 it was estimated that at least 600 new slaves were needed annually just to maintain a slave population of 6,000. In 1897, 9,624 slaves were counted on the mainland opposite Lamu Island. The plantation system also spread widely to the central and southern Tanzanian coast and north to the Shebelle region of southern Somalia. By the late 1860s, 5,500 slaves were re-exported from Zanzibar to Lamu, of which perhaps four thousand were then sent on to Somalia (Cooper 1977; Ylvisaker 1979; Sheriff 1987; Lovejoy 2000).

Although Omani farmers predominated, farmers also originated from various regions of

the Indian Ocean coast of Africa, mainly from local Swahili communities. The work demanded of the slaves varied according to location. Oppressive forms of labor developed in some areas on the African mainland, particularly Pangani, northwest of Zanzibar in the 1880s, but in other areas slaves had greater levels of autonomy, particularly when they were organized into slave villages (Glassman 1995). Some estates had 100 or 200 slaves, in others one or two slaves cultivated with their master. Thus, as the slaves were often autonomous and were still considered as personal followers, the slave mode of production developed unevenly on the Swahili Coast (Cooper 1977).

### **African slavery in Mozambique and major East African slave routes**

A slaving economy also grew on the coast of Mozambique run by Afro-Portuguese and local Swahili owners. On Mozambique Island, more than half of the population was comprised of slaves in 1875 and 12,000 slaves were registered on its mainland. In the hinterland, the *prazos* (substantial estates run by Portuguese and Afro-Portuguese, based largely on African modes of domination) had large slave armies which raided slaves for export and forced peasants to produce for the local and regional economy. A slave-based agriculture developed along the Zambezi River and south of Lake Malawi where local populations maintained slaves in villages to grow crops. In the Comoro islands, despite the French presence there, the slave trade remained quite profitable, whether operated illegally or as a disguised legal trade when slaves from Mozambique were sold as indentured laborers for the French or the Comorians. On the Comoro islands, slaves were not as productive as laborers, and were above all valued as symbols of status. The significance of slaves was so high in maintaining respectability and social status that it was estimated at least 40 percent of the Comorian population of 65,000 were unfree in the mid-1860s. In 1902 some 15,000 slaves lived on Ngazidja, the largest Comorian island, repre-

senting 25–33 percent of the total population (Shepherd 1980; Blanchy 2012).

During the 19th century the hinterland of Kilwa and the Lake Malawi region continued to export the great majority of the slaves for the coast. Thousands of slaves were shipped annually from Kilwa: in the 1860s, 85 percent of the slaves imported in Zanzibar came from it. In a register of 1,600 slaves living in Zanzibar in 1860 and 1861, 68 percent originated from present-day Malawi, southern Tanzania, and northern Mozambique; 18 percent from elsewhere, and only 14 percent were born on the island. Three mainland routes connected the interior with the coast. The first slave route was from Kilwa and Mozambique to Lake Malawi, which remained by far the main purveyor of slaves. The second route emerged in the 18th century, developed by the Nyamwezi, leading from the central coast of Tanzania (around Bagamoyo and Mbwanjini) to Unyamwezi (east-central Tanzania) and then divided into two directions: towards Lake Victoria, and towards Lake Tanganyika and the Congo River basin (reached by Muslim traders in the 1860s). The third one led from Mombasa to western Kenya but never brought significant numbers of slaves. It is important to notice that the initiative came from African traders, particularly Yao and Nyamwezi, who engaged in the ivory and slave trades and pioneered the caravan trade. Muslim traders followed them: around 1820–30 the Swahili had reached Lake Tanganyika, which they soon crossed. They founded the trading towns of Tabora in Unyamwezi and Ujiji on Lake Tanganyika. In the north the kingdom of Buganda (in present-day Uganda) was reached as soon as the 1840s. Although the importance of Muslim traders progressively surpassed that of traders from the interior, these networks of slave and ivory trade cannot be simply labeled as “Swahili” or “Arab” since they involved a whole set of intermediaries, partners, porters, and the often active participation of local chiefs and headmen – though not always. Moreover identities were changing and many Muslims were converts from the interior (Alpers 1975; Cooper 1977;

Sheriff 1987; Lovejoy 2000; Zimba et al. 2005; Deutsch 2006).

### **Slave trade expansion and growth in the East African interior**

In the interior, the growth of the trade to furnish the coast had enormous impact on local societies, bringing radical changes in social interactions, insecurity, and a generalization of slavery. However in some areas the growth of slavery preceded long-distance trade, particularly on the western shore of Lake Victoria, notably in Buganda, where slavery was ancient and began to increase in the 18th century, without contacts with the coast and probably because of internal evolution. Thus in the 19th century long-distance slave trade could expand because slavery was already common, but at the same time it tended to corrupt and transform local kinship and dependence by favoring the concentration of power and violence. Most slaves captured around lakes Victoria and Tanganyika never reached the coast and were kept for local consumption. Swahili settlements such as Tabora and Ujiji used a lot of slaves. In the Congo basin Muslim and Nyamwezi traders, such as the famous Tippu Tip, plundered weak communities and created their own territories based on slavery and forced labor. Men were enrolled as soldiers and raids were conducted against neighboring societies for slaves and ivory. Mortality rates were very high and instances of flight common. In the 1880s around 15,000 people were enslaved annually in the Congo basin, but only two thousand reached Ujiji and almost none the coast. Some kingdoms like Buganda and Bunyoro protected themselves but at the same time became highly predatory, extracting ivory and slaves from their neighbors and sometimes plundering and enslaving their own subjects. The spread of firearms was central in the increase of warfare and violence, as well as in the rise of powerful centralized states.

The intensification of slavery had many causes. Some regions were destabilized by

chaos, civil war, or famine, which always led to a rise in slaving practices. The origins of such destabilization could come from afar. The rise of the militarized Zulu kingdom in Natal (South Africa) deeply influenced southeastern Africa from the 1810s on. Bands of armed men started to move, trying to escape danger, or were motivated by plunder. Among them the powerful Ngoni crossed the Zambezi River in 1835 and then settled kingdoms between Malawi, western Zambia, and southern Tanzania as far as the Tabora region. The conquerors incorporated local people; young boys were taken as soldiers, women as servants or concubines. Besides, as they met the local slave routes, their predatory practices were redirected towards, and fed into, the long-distance slave trade. Local populations tended to react by adopting their war methods and by themselves furnishing the slave trade with new victims.

In many areas, harsher, commercial forms of slavery developed, while traditional forms of dependence like adoption, pawning, or clientship, were transformed into chattel slavery. Slaves became a medium of exchange, for instance to obtain ivory. More generally, social interactions became increasingly mediated through market relations, a process called commodification (Glassman 1995). Vulnerable people such as the poor, orphans, isolated people, servants, and so on, could be enslaved. Women and children were the main victims but where adult young men were often freed, the status of women often changed during their life. It is extremely difficult to evaluate the percentage of slaves in the total population; rare estimations show that it seems to have risen from very few to about 10 or 15 percent but sometimes much more. The coastal slave trade for the coast did not have the same rhythm as that in the interior. From the early 1870s onwards the slave trade based on Zanzibar began to decline progressively because of greater pressure from the British (a treaty signed in 1873 banned all slave trade by sea) and a decline in the clove trade. Nonetheless the slave trade in the interior, which had accelerated in the mid-19th century, kept on



growing. It accelerated drastically in the 1880s and peaked in the 1890s, particularly in the Great Lakes region (Lovejoy 2000; Glassman 1995; Deutsch 2006; Médard & Doyle 2007; Médard et al. 2012).

The case of Unyamwezi is now well-known and enlightening in many ways. The region became a major slave market in Tanzania, perhaps bigger than Zanzibar. It may explain why, unlike Kilwa, the central route brought few slaves to the coast: instead they were kept for internal consumption. Swahili settlements like Tabora imported slaves but the Nyamwezi themselves were the main users of slave labor. Around 1885–90 German travelers noted that about 70 percent of the population in the Tabora region were slaves. Although probably inflated, these figures are impressive for a region where the slave trade had expanded only 40 years before. The Nyamwezi were extremely active in the caravan trade, which they had initiated. Increasingly they were engaged as free porters in long-distance trading: by the 1890s this represented a third of the adult male population. As more and more young Nyamwezi men engaged in wage labor, manpower began to be scarce for food production and slavery rose as slaves were imported to replace them. In the meantime the demand for food increased to supply the caravans and the newly founded towns. By the late 1830s a few Nyamwezi notables already owned several hundred slaves and slaveholding increased throughout the century. In addition the decline of the slave trade for the coast boosted the one in the interior.

As elsewhere, slaves increasingly became the medium of exchange and the slave, arms, and ivory trades fed on each other in a widening cycle of violence. Political authority, public morality, and social interaction changed. Power became centralized in the hands of a few chiefs – whose office was weaker or non-existent before. Their authority was based more and more on wealth and the number of followers, who were often slaves or ex-slaves. Thus commercial expansion and the development of militarized chiefdoms depended on the importation and social control of slaves. Most

slaves came from large-scale slave-raiding operations and opportunistic kidnapping activities in neighboring regions. Raiders themselves were largely slaves themselves, as they belonged to the armies built up by the chiefs. These young men regarded themselves as personal followers of the chief, having been bought as children, and were rewarded with part of the loot they collected, and in particular with slaves. Slave traders also participated in local wars outside Unyamwezi. As elsewhere in mainland East Africa, judicial process, debt, and pawnship also produced slaves. In Unyamwezi the majority of slaves were women as they were valued as agricultural laborers, sexual partners, and potential mothers. Slaves were close to their masters and women frequently became part their owner's family. Male slaves could have important responsibilities in trade or administration (Deutsch 2006; Médard & Doyle 2007).

### **Growth of slave trade on Madagascar in the 19th century**

During the 19th century a striking rise in slavery occurred on Madagascar Island, based on long-established practices of forced labor and the century-old exportation of slaves, but also on the expansion of a centralized and modernizing state. For centuries the island had been the main exporter of slaves in East Africa, mostly captured in its highlands, but within a few decades it became a major importer of slaves, above all from the ports of present-day Mozambique. The main actor of these mutations was the kingdom of Imerina which emerged from the late 1770s. Its founder, King Andrianampoinimerina (c.1780–1809) built up a powerful state by unifying the central highlands. He founded the kingdom on a promise to protect his subjects against slavery, but in the meantime he monopolized the supply of slaves and established himself as the intermediary for any slave trader who wished to export from the coast, mainly the French from the Mascarenes. Regions outside his control were raided for slaves, while debt and tribute also produced many slaves.

King Radama (1809–1828) established a strong relationship with the British and, strengthened by this alliance, began to conquer the whole island. These wars generated many slaves and slavery increased in the highlands, all the more when bans on the exportation of slaves signed with the British in 1822 reinforced the local use of slaves. The newly created state was intended to be modern and innovative, based on European models, though this was never fully achieved. Attempts to develop industrial production and rice cultivation were based on servile labor. Most of all, the state reinforced a local oligarchy whose rise was largely founded on forced labor and slavery. Forced labor, whether imposed on free or unfree individuals, was not new but it now reached huge dimensions.

By 1817 slaves formed approximately one-third of the population of Imerina. Demand for unfree labor so exceeded local supply that, by the mid-1820s, Imerina was importing growing numbers of African slaves. Most were kept in Madagascar and between a quarter and a third were sold to the French on the east or the west coast. Economic prosperity, particularly in the 1860s and 1870s, led to an expansion in wealth and consequently in slave ownership. By 1824 Imerina was importing two to three thousand slaves annually. Later bans, emancipation laws promulgated by the kingdom (1877), and the spread of missionary activity and Christianity did not stop the flows: an average of about 10,000 slaves reached the island each year. By the late 19th century 40 to 50 percent of Imerina residents were considered household slaves, perhaps 300,000 of them in central Imerina alone. Around Antananarivo two out of every three people were slaves. Debates occur over the total number of African slaves imported in Madagascar but the figures are amazing: between 400,000 and 700,000 slaves would have landed between 1821 and 1895. E. A. Alpers (2005), discussing G. Campbell's estimations, gives the minimum estimate of about 650,000 enslaved East Africans who were imported at Madagascar, not counting mortality during the voyage (20–30% were re-exported). On this basis the trade

from East Africa to Madagascar alone would exceed the combined trades from Mozambique to the Mascarenes and the Americas (Larson 2000; Campbell 2005; Randrianja & Ellis 2009).

### **Abolition of East African slave trade and slavery**

A substantial time-lag occurred between the time when legal bans on slave trade and slavery were declared and the actual end of the slave trade. The maritime slave trade was the first to end, but terrestrial slave trading ended only in the early 20th century well after the start of the colonization process. The island of Mayotte was the first location in East Africa where slavery was officially abolished, in 1847. In Mozambique slavery was abolished in 1878, only to be renewed in 1910. Slavery was abolished several times in Uganda (between 1889 and 1900), and in 1897 in Zanzibar. Colonial authorities in Kenya abolished slavery in 1907 and those of Tanganyika only in 1922. Official bans had limited impact and effective colonial policies to ensure that slavery was ended were slow in coming. Colonial rulers tried to avoid the collapse of plantation economies and social disruption; local elites who had many slaves were to be preserved. Forced labor was often promoted to replace slavery. In German East Africa colonial authorities abolished the slave trade but kept slavery, which they choose to control openly: slavery became legal and master–slave relations were regulated. However slaves rejected this system and resistance was massive: the number of African slaves in German East Africa diminished from about 500,000 in 1890 to about 160,000 in 1914.

Legal abolition itself was not so efficient in bringing about the end of slavery as the combination of various other factors. Slavery as a practice mostly stopped due to the flight and escape of slaves themselves, and the abolition of the slave trade prevented owners from replacing these slaves. High colonial tax levies and the rise of compulsory or wage labor also contributed to slavery's demise in East Africa and the Indian Ocean. Generally slavery ended one generation after formal abolition in East

Africa and Madagascar, in the period from about 1900 to 1930.

SEE ALSO: African slave trade and maritime transportation; East Africa: migration 1960s to present; Emancipation from slavery, modern era; Indian Ocean transoceanic migration, 16th–19th century; Transatlantic slave trade

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