"ASK THE DOG ABOUT THE COLD, ASK THE SLAVE ABOUT EARLY HOURS":

CONTOURS OF SLAVERY IN OVAMBOLAND DURING THE LATE 19TH CENTURY

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INTRODUCTION

Slavery in African societies has been a widely debated theme in the historiography of the continent.[1] Historians and anthropologists have argued about the nature of slavery in Africa, and numerous case studies about slavery in different historical and local settings have been presented during the last three decades by researchers. The underlying tone of the discussion has been that slavery in Africa was somehow different from the institution of slavery in the western world. The idea that, in Africa, slavery was a benign and mild institution can be traced to the era of European colonialism, when the colonial officials in several parts of the continent adopted the view that the ownership of slaves by Africans – usually local headmen – should not be tampered with. In seeking collaboration with African elites, the colonial state usually tolerated slavery and justified it by stating that it was not a harsh institution.[2] Moreover, the question of slavery is a highly sensitive issue. During the era of the Atlantic slave trade, approximately 12 million Africans were transported across the Atlantic to the New World, and several million more across the Sahara to the Mediterranean world and the Arabic

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[1] There is now a vast bulk of literature on this topic, and it would be impossible to present a comprehensive bibliography here. Good introductions on slavery in Africa can be found in Rodney 1966, Miers 1975, Kopytoff & Miers 1977, Harms 1978, Cooper 1979, Lovejoy 1981, Robertson & Klein 1983, Manning 1990, Kaese 1991, Meillassoux 1991, Thornton 1998 and Lovejoy 2000.

[2] On slavery and colonial rule in Africa, see Miers & Roberts 1988; Lovejoy & Hogendorn 1993; Klein 1998; Miers & Klein 1999.

peninsula.[3] Slaves were also widely transported to several other destinations in the Indian Ocean world, thus forming three distinct global African diasporas.[4] This trade, although harmful to the continent as a whole, could not have operated without the collaboration of African leaders, soldiers, and traders.

Early interpretations of the history of the Atlantic slave trade held that the slave trade was harmful to Africa, because the removal of population from Africa caused a major loss to the continent. Therefore, it has sometimes been concluded that the slave trade was forced on unwilling African participants. However, slavery in Africa did not originate in the establishment of commercial relations between Europeans and Africans. Slavery was widespread and indigenous in African societies, and it should not be seen as an impact brought from outside. According to John Thornton (1998: 74), slavery was widespread in Africa because slaves were the only form of private, revenue-producing property recognized in African law. Because of the corporate ownership of the land, slavery was deeply rooted in African societies:

> If Africans did not have private ownership of one factor of production (land), they could still own another, labor (the third factor, capital, was relatively unimportant before the Industrial Revolution). Private ownership of labor therefore provided the African entrepreneur with secure and reproducing wealth. (Thornton 1998: 85)

Slaves were usually acquisitioned in violent ways.[5] They were produced through warfare, raiding, and kidnapping. Environmental conditions, such as droughts and famines, sometimes drove people to voluntary slavery, and a well-known way to survive famine in many parts of Africa was to sell members of a community into slavery.[6] Pawnship was widespread across the continent, although it should not be confused with slavery *per se*.[7] In theory, most of the slaves were assimilated into the slave-holding communities. They could be seen working alongside their masters in the fields, or herding cattle with their owners. European observers of 19th century Africa often had difficulties in distinguishing the slaves from their masters, further reinforcing the image of benign slavery. Moreover, trusted male slaves could often rise to high positions in their communities, and slave soldiers were sometimes in a far better position than the ordinary free

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[3] Eltis et al. 1999; Lovejoy 2000.

[4] Properly, as Paul Zeleza (2005) has recently argued, the four dominant dimensions of the global African diasporas include the intra-Africa, Indian Ocean, Mediterranean, and Atlantic diasporas.

[5] According to Lovejoy (2000: 3), slavery in Africa was virtually always initiated through violence.

[6] See Dias 1981; Miller 1982.

[7] Falola & Lovejoy 2003.

citizens in the military states of the Sudanic savannah during the 19th century.[8] However, in practice, the slaves were usually the first ones who suffered in times of hardship, and they often lacked the social networks that free people sought to create to protect themselves from outside threats, such as environmental calamities. In communal life, slaves were depraved of the rights that other members of a community shared, and they were excluded from social and religious life because of their slave status.

This article is an examination of slavery in Ovamboland during the last decades of the 19th century. Ovamboland, located in the northernmost part of present-day Namibia and southern Angola, was penetrated by Europeans in the mid-19th century. The first recorded visit of Portuguese traders from the north occurred in 1849, and in 1851 Ovamboland was reached from the south by the Englishman Francis Galton and the Swede Charles John Andersson. In 1870, Finnish missionaries established mission stations in the kingdoms of Ondonga and Uukwambi.[9] In Ovamboland, the Finns encountered Portuguese slave traders, who procured slaves from Ovamboland to fuel the economic life of southern Angolan plantations and settlements.[10] This trade had grown steadily from 1850, and by the 1870s it started to have severe implications in the Ovambo communities, not only in the kingdoms that traded slaves with the Portuguese, but also in the communities that were crushed in slave raids by their more powerful neighbours.

Although the history of the slave trade in Ovamboland is now well known,[11] the extent and nature of slavery in the Ovambo communities themselves has not been fully clarified in previous research. Instead, several conflicting views seem to prevail in the literature on the history of the Ovambo. The nature of slavery in the Ovambo communities has been dealt with in studies by Peltola, Siiskonen, Eirola, and Hayes, and different views have transpired. Peltola and Siiskonen have argued that slaves (*aapika*, sg. *omupika*), who were usually procured by raiding and kidnapping, were well treated and an effort was made to assimilate them into the Ovambo communities.[12] For Eirola (1992: 40), however, the *aapika* were not slaves at all, and he has called them merely "staff". Hayes (1992: 41), on the contrary, has argued that slavery was an important institution in Ovamboland in the 1880s. My purpose is to clarify how the institution of slavery functioned in the Ovambo communities during the late 19th century. It is my contention that

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[8] Weiss 1997: 58–75, especially Graph 2 (p. 59).

[9] In the 19th century, Ovamboland was divided into several autonomous communities, most of which could be characterized as kingdoms, but among them were also some decentralized communities.

[10] Weiss 2000.

[11] Gustafsson 2004. For earlier formulations, see Clarence-Smith 1979; Siiskonen 1990.

[12] Peltola 1958: 20; Siiskonen 1990: 205.

slavery was widespread and common in Ovamboland, and violent mechanisms of enslavement ensured that there was a steady stream of captives going to the most powerful kingdoms, some of which were retained by the captors, and others that were sold as slaves in Angola. The evidence I shall present is gleaned from Finnish missionary archives, which are a rich source on the social, economic, and political life of the Ovambo. I shall argue that, although slavery in Ovamboland was certainly less harsh than its counterpart in the plantations of America, slaves were ill-treated in several instances, and that slaves were clearly discerned from the free members of the communities.

This article first introduces the general discussion on slavery in Africa by critically reviewing some of the key texts that have appeared during the last three decades. I will discuss the definition of slavery, because, as Suzanne Miers (2003: 1) has noted, it is arguably the most misused word in the English language. Proceeding from the general discussion I shall take slavery in Ovamboland as a case study, and discuss the contours of slave life, as they are treated in Finnish missionary correspondence and in oral literature, such as proverbs. Before its conclusion, the article also discusses how the existence of slaves in the Ovambo social structure enabled the kings to trade with the Portuguese slave traders.

THE PROBLEM OF DEFINING AFRICAN SLAVERY

A peculiar anxiety about the subject of slavery itself seems to have pervaded Africanist scholars, who generally have been eager to dissociate slavery in Africa from its bad image in the Americas. In western culture, slavery has always posed a moral problem. According to David Brion Davis (1966), the problem arises from a set of contradictions stemming from the duality of the slave as property and yet a person, as a living part of the society and yet an outsider. The definition of slavery has caused complex debates among scholars, who have disagreed on the attributes and purposes of slavery in different contexts. Thus, we have various terms to denote the continuum of slavery, such as the "classic" or "chattel" slave, the Marxian "wage slave", and the "sex slave". In the late 20th century discussion on human trafficking, we refer to the "contemporary slave". Not only scholars, but also government officials, colonial civil servants, missionaries, Human Rights activists, and United Nations anti-slavery committees, have all wrestled with the difficulty of giving a precise meaning to the term (Miers 2003: 1)

Essential to a definition of slavery is the property element (Finley 1968: 307). As property, slaves were chattel. They could be bought and sold. Slaves belonged to their masters, and they were not protected by religious institutions, kinship units, and other groups in the same society. They could be treated as commodities, although restrictions were often placed on the sale of slaves after some degree of

acculturation had taken place. According to Lovejoy (2000: 2), other restrictions on sale limited the ability of masters to sell the children of slaves, either because of religious sentiments, in the case of Islam, or because an acceptable kinship or ethnic status had been confirmed.

According to Miers (2003: 1–2), no definition of slavery can be separated from the definition of its antithesis, i.e. freedom, but again different societies have had different concepts of freedom at different times in their history. For example, the early Finnish missionaries thought that the Ovambo were particularly unfree because they were not Christians, referring to spiritual freedom. Although outside observers sometimes said they could not tell the slaves from the free, the distinction between slave and free was clear to both owners and slaves. Obviously, complete freedom exists only in theory, and the term is really relative. However, we can say that slaves are people who are particularly unfree. According to Miers (2003: 2–3), chattel slavery is usually seen as the antithesis of freedom. A chattel slave is a person who is under the complete domination of an owner who has powers of life and death over him or her, who can sell and transfer him at will and has full control over his daily and domestic life, including his progeny.

Slavery was a form of exploitation. As Lovejoy (2000: 2) has argued, slavery was fundamentally a means of denying outsiders the rights and privileges of a particular society so that they could be exploited for economic, political, and/or social purposes. So, the slave was an outsider. According to Finley (1968: 308), it was the slave's status as an outsider that permitted not only his uprooting but also his reduction from a person to a thing that can be owned. Kopytoff and Miers, who have approached slavery[13] in Africa from a functionalist conception of the social structure, have emphasized the role of enslavement in absorbing people into society, above all into kinship groups. They have treated African slavery as an institution of marginality, and argued that Westerners considering slavery in African societies must discard their own concepts of ownership, property, and the purchasing of people. An integral part of African systems of kinship and marriage are transactions in rights-in-persons. Kopytoff and Miers have argued that crucial to an understanding of rights-in-persons in Africa is an appreciation of the position of the individual in his kin group. In a sense, individuals belong in lineages as members of the group, but they also belong to kin groups as part of the wealth of this corporate group. Thus, according to Kopytoff and Miers (1977: 7–12), neither the criterion of property nor that of saleability can be useful in separating slavery from simple kinship in African societies, in which rights in wives, children, and kin-group members are usually acquired through transactions involving material

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[13] Unlike Kopytoff & Miers 1977, I see no reason to place the very word "slavery" when applied to Africa in quotation marks.

transfers, and in which kin groups "own" and may dispose of their blood members in ways that Westerners consider appropriate to "property".

The Kopytoff/Miers approach has been criticized, among others, by Frederick Cooper, who has claimed that they have jumped from the particular to the universal, making absorptiveness into a general characteristic of Africa. According to Cooper, Kopytoff and Miers fail to provide an adequate framework to analyse the fundamental differences in the ways labour was controlled and surplus value extracted, or to understand the consequences that the ability of particular groups to control and use slaves had for social organization, cultural values, and ideology. He also criticizes Africanists for their tendency to use terms such as "adopted dependant", "captive", or "serf" instead of the term "slave". According to Cooper (1979: 103–106), it is useful to speak of slavery, but it is not useful to speak of "African slavery".

The "slavery-kinship continuum" suggested by Kopytoff and Miers, and their theory of "the transfer of rights-in-persons", is also pondered on by Claude Meillassoux, who links slavery in African societies to the market. According to Meillassoux, the common state of slaves, as a social class, is defined through the market, to which individual African societies were linked, either directly or indirectly. Meillassoux agrees with Kopytoff and Miers in that kinship relations in African societies are constantly manipulated, but, according to him, it is not true that they are manipulated against currency through purchase. Meillassoux's argument is that "rights-in-persons" are not communicated to the slave system, but rather, the reverse is true: the saleability of slavery contaminates and reifies kinship relations.[14]

Comparative perspectives on Asian and African systems of slavery have brought up other lines of critique. James Watson's treatment of slavery as an institution differs from the Kopytoff/Miers approach, because Watson differentiates between open and closed systems. Although Watson admits that Kopytoff's and Miers' tendency to see African slavery as a process and not as a status, and their argument that slavery is an institution for the incorporation of outsiders into the dominant society, works for most parts of Africa, we have to be more careful in our definitions of slavery. Watson (1980: 5–9) sees two types of slavery that correspond roughly to the open or closed nature of kinship systems. The African systems discussed by Kopytoff and Miers are usually open, but they should not be dismissed as somehow weaker versions of slavery by virtue of their openness. Ambitiously – and succeedingly, I think – Watson also tries to set guidelines for a definition of the term "slave" that can be applied cross-culturally, irrespective of local variation and historical era:

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[14]   Meillassoux 1991: 11–13.

"Slaves" are acquired by purchase or capture, their labour is extracted through coercion and, as long as they remain slaves, they are never accepted into the kinship group of the master. "Slavery" is thus the institutionalisation of these relationships between slave and owner. (Watson 1980: 8)

For the study of slavery as part of historical processes, Cooper has stated that one should focus on the questions of who gained control over slaves, how they used slaves, and how they controlled slaves. In that way, it is possible to see how new ways of employing slaves could transform both the balance of political and economic power within a society and the ways people of all groups perceived and interacted with slaves. Most important, according to Cooper (1979: 104–105), is to see the forms of slavery not as fixed structures but as interactive processes shaped by slaves as well as by slaveholders. The absorptionist approach of Kopytoff and Miers is inadequate if one wants to see how the slaves suffered a devastating cultural subordination, i.e. their loss of ancestry. As Cooper (1979: 124) has mentioned, the destruction of the slaves as people was the other side of absorption.

I want to conclude this introductory discussion on the problem of defining slavery in Africa by emphasizing that it is not useful to speak of "African slavery" because the continent as a whole encompasses so many different cultural and social practices that have affected the ways that slaves have been treated in different points in time. An in-depth comparative analysis would certainly show similar traits of slavery across Africa, but as Kopytoff and Miers (1977: 12) have pointed out, the position of the slave must be examined in the context of the society to which he or she belongs. Altogether, the existence of slavery implies incipient stratification, because it involves the presence, within the society, of a radically different type of social relationship and category of social person. The nature of slavery is rightly put by Goody (1980: 26), who has argued that the acquisition of a human being, by outright purchase or directly by capture, involves the most extreme exploitation of human potential, the height of domination, and the depth of subordination.

SLAVERY IN THE OVAMBO COMMUNITIES

Most scholars who have written about slavery in Ovamboland have merely noted its presence in the contemporary sources, but they have not discussed its implications any further. In his history of Finnish missionary work in Ovamboland, Peltola deemed it necessary to mention slavery in his examination of social phenomena. According to Peltola (1958: 20), slavery in Ovamboland – "as usual in African societies" – was "comparatively mild domestic slavery". He continues that slaves were usually acquired in war, and their position was like that of any other family member's. Siiskonen is along the same lines, and he explains that

primarily young men and women were taken prisoners. After a raid, however, the prisoners' relatives had a chance to negotiate a ransom, and if the ransom was paid, the prisoner was freed. If the relatives did not pay the ransom, he or she became a slave (*omupika*). However, according to Siiskonen, "the word 'slave' does not suitably describe the status of the prisoner of war among the Ovambo", because the captives were well treated, and an effort was made to assimilate them into the community. Furthermore, because child captives could later rise to the positions of royal counsellor, war commander or district headman, Siiskonen argues that juridically their status could be even better than that of the other members of the community.[15] Following Peltola and Siiskonen, we could make the illogical conclusion that slavery as an institution existed in Ovamboland, but that the slaves were not really slaves.

It is far simpler to deny the existence of slavery altogether, as Eirola (1992: 40) has done. According to him, the *aapika*, captives of war, were merely staff employed by a household. In a footnote, Eirola explains that although the *aapika* were often called slaves by the missionaries, we cannot speak of slavery because the relatives had a right to ransom them. Thus, it is more appropriate to speak of "a kind of captivity or holding of hostages".[16] However, as I will show below, the captives who were not ransomed by their relatives – and they were many – underwent a ritual that enforced their new status as an *omupika*, and if we want to employ the terms used by Eirola, we would have to speak of permanent hostages, or simply staff.

A totally different viewpoint emerges in Patricia Hayes's dissertation on the history of the Ovambo. According to Hayes, slavery was an important institution in Ovamboland in the 1880s – as her evidence shows – although she is uncertain how long slavery had been a feature of Ovambo societies before that.[17] Hayes has argued that slavery "was a significant indicator of socio-economic differentiation between and within households". Because slavery was not so harshly exploitative, it was not always obvious to outsiders, and it could almost be called a low-profile institution. Hayes (1992: 41–42) also discusses mechanisms of absorption and shows how the incorporation of a war-captive-turned slave into the captor's clan was effectively a demarginalization that established kinship-like relations and used kinship metaphors. However, as Meillassoux (1991: 108) has argued, these fictitious relations of filiation implied only the obligation to obey, and in reality, the creation of these new kinship ties had no positive effects on the state of the

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[15] Siiskonen 1990: 205. It is not at all surprising that individuals of captive origin rose to such positions of prominence. They were highly valued by rulers all over Africa, because they were kinless outsiders, i.e. slaves, who were loyal only to their master.

[16] Eirola 1992: 70, note 70.

[17] On the origins of slavery in western central Africa, see Miller 1981.

slaves. Because they were seen as having no real maternal or paternal lineage, they were not persons. Rather, the kinship code was used as an ideological means of alienation, domination, repression and control.

How can we explain that these scholars have had such differing viewpoints on slavery in Ovamboland? An obvious point to raise would be the one of source materials and source criticism. Unlike the Finnish scholars, Hayes has not consulted Finnish missionary sources. Siiskonen and Eirola have to a large extent relied on the same archival material, but yet have come to very different conclusions. One of the reasons probably is that, as I have discussed above, some Africanists are altogether very careful in employing the terms "slavery" or "slave", because of the negative connotations of the word and because the image of North American plantation slavery looms large in public consciousness. Another valid point would be that slavery has not been under close scrutiny in these earlier studies. For example, Eirola concentrated on the political responses of the kingdom of Ondonga to the German colonial encroachment, and he was not primarily interested in the connections that the Ovambo had with Portuguese settlers in Angola. On the contrary, Hayes examined, among other things, the penetration of Portuguese merchant capital into Ovamboland. In my research (Gustafsson 2004) on the slave trade in Ovamboland I have sought to emphasize the links between Namibian and Angolan histories, and from that perspective I have also had to pay attention to the uses of slaves within the Ovambo communities.

My reading of the Finnish missionary sources and travel literature on slavery in Ovamboland is to a large extent influenced by Orlando Patterson's comparative study on slavery in global history, and before dealing with the comments on slavery in primary sources, I want to summarize Patterson's view on slavery. In *Slavery and Social Death* (1982), Patterson has pointed out that slavery was first and foremost a relation of domination created and maintained by violence. The second constituent element as defined by Patterson was the slave's natal alienation or his social death. Thirdly, slaves were persons who had been dishonoured in a generalized way. Thus, on the level of personal relations, slavery was a permanent violation of natally alienated and generally dishonoured persons. As social processes, the relations became institutionalized.[18] All these three points come up when we turn to examine the institution of slavery among the Ovambo.

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[18]   Patterson 1982: 2–13. However, as more recent scholarship on the Atlantic diaspora has effectively demonstrated, social death did not equal cultural death. Instead, the cultural heritage of African slaves still shapes the arts nowadays, for example. Because slavery as "social death" conveyed a motivatingly deep sense of personal nonexistence, Africans in the Americas sought to gain recognized places in coherent New World communities, as Miller (2004) has shown. According to Miller (2004: 83), slaves everywhere built lives of their own under slavery, if they were allowed to remain long enough in one place to consolidate the social connections that validate anyone's being.

Slavery in Africa was virtually always initiated through violence. Paul Lovejoy has argued that, through violence, the status of a person was reduced from a condition of freedom and citizenship to a condition of slavery. According to Lovejoy (2000: 3–4), warfare, slave raiding, and kidnapping have accounted for the vast majority of new slaves in history. Instances of voluntary enslavement occurred usually when the threat of starvation left the person with no other recourse. However, sometimes parents sold their children to improve their prospects or ensure their survival. Such cases occurred in Ovamboland as well. Kurvinen, a Finnish missionary, noted in the 1870s that a man from Ondonga travelled far over the Kunene to sell his child to the Portuguese for some glass beads.[19] During famines, people could also sell their children as slaves in exchange for vegetables, grain or milk, as Roiha reported from Ondonga.[20]

War and raiding were old traditions among the Ovambo and cannot be seen as a consequence of European influence. All healthy men were subject to military service. The main object of raiding was the procurement of cattle from other communities, but raiding also produced captives, primarily young women and men. The rationale for capturing young people as slaves, according to McKittrick (1996: 117), was that they forgot their families more quickly and were less likely to escape. Besides raiding each other, the Ovambo kingdoms directed their expeditions north of the Kunene river to the Nkhumbi and Nyaneka communities as well as to the east banks of the Okavango, where they raided the Kwangari.[21] According to Siiskonen, in Ovambo tradition, raiding and war expeditions were considered nearly synonymous.[22] This was also emphasized by Reijonen in 1879, who wrote that the Ovambo,

> when they are waging war, do not fight publicly man against man, but they try to sneak into the enemy territory secretly and then swiftly steal cattle, captives etc. from there. (...) Attacks like these could be called raids instead of wars.[23]

Raids were prepared in secret, and the Finnish missionaries often heard of them only after the raiders had returned to their homes, or sometimes even several days after the captives had already been sold to the Portuguese.[24] Captives as well as cattle could be traded for firearms, alcohol, beads and clothing with the Europeans. However, following a raid it was customary that captives' relatives came to

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19 Kurvinen 1880: 37.

20 FNA/FMSA, Eac 6, Roiha to Tötterman, 10.11.1883.

21 Gustafsson 2004: 29–31.

22 Siiskonen 1990: 203. On Ovambo raiding activities, see also Hayes 1992: 51–57.

23 FNA/FMSA, Eac 5, Reijonen to Tötterman, 30.6.1879. Translation by the present author.

24 FNA/FMSA, Eac 3, Kurvinen to Sirelius, 27.2.1871; Eac 4, Skoglund to Tötterman, 28.11.1876.

search for them, and prisoners were freed if the relatives were willing to pay the negotiated ransom. The size of ransom depended on the captive's age, sex and social position. If it was known that the captive was from a wealthy family, the size of ransom was considerably larger. Wealthy families often had to pay the ransom in cattle, but from poor relatives even hoes were accepted as payment.[25] Women were far more valuable than men and children. In 1879 in Ondonga, a man from Uukwanyama paid ten head of cattle for a female captive. According to King Kambonde, wives were "the big thing" for the Ovambo, and thus women were so highly valued.[26]

If the ransom was not paid, a captive became a slave, who could be subjected to the whims of his or her master. Raiding should be considered an economic activity through which the kings sought to increase their wealth. But the contribution of slaves to the Ovambo society was far more important than mere economic calculations would indicate. The kings' large establishments consisted largely of slaves, and, on the one hand, their numbers could assist kings and more important headmen to undermine lineages. Kings sought to build large retinues of slaves. It was reported in the early 1870s that all the children in King Nuujoma's court in Uukwambi were children captured in raids.[27] On the other hand, lineages could also strengthen themselves by incorporating slaves.[28] This was the fundamental tension generated by the use of slaves in the Ovambo communities. As Cooper (1979: 107) has argued, the main site of struggle over the use of slaves was between lineages and the king or ruling class. The success of different groups in controlling slaves, and the way they employed them, could alter the structure of society.

Besides the kings, the men who participated in raiding were able to acquire wealth, especially in the form of cattle but also in the form of captives, who could be treated as slaves by the captors. For example, in January 1871, approximately a hundred head of cattle and the 73 captives – over a half of whom were women and children – taken from the north by the Kwambi were divided between the men who participated in the attack.[29] Upon the return of the raiders to their homes, the leader of the raiding band divided the spoils so that each soldier received a head of cattle. According to Siiskonen (1990: 204), most of the booty was taken to the

[25] FNA/FMSA, Eac 5, Rautanen to Tötterman, 4.8.1879. Cf. Tönjes 1911: 124.

[26] FNA/FMSA, Eac 5, Reijonen to Tötterman, 30.6.1879.

[27] FNA/FMSA, Eac 3, Tolonen to Sirelius, 5.6.1871. According to Tolonen, Nuujoma always sent away the wives he impregnated.

[28] Hayes 1992: 44.

[29] FNA/FMSA, Eac 3, Rautanen to Sirelius, 11.5.1871. Quite surprisingly, these captives were not sold to the Portuguese, although Uukwambi was the leading slave trading kingdom, with Uukwanyama and Ondonga, in Ovamboland in the early 1870s.

king, who kept some of it for himself and divided the rest among his war commanders. On the contrary, László Magyar noted in the early 1850s in Uukwanyama that it was also common for the elite and lineage elders to bring gifts or pay tribute to the king in the form of ivory, ostrich feathers, cattle, copper, or slaves.[30] However, by gifts Magyar might also mean the spoils of raiding that were first brought to the king and then further redistributed to the war commanders.

THE TREATMENT OF SLAVES IN OVAMBOLAND

To ensure a slave's social death – to use Patterson's phrase – the Ovambo carried out rituals that gave a symbolic expression to the *omupika*'s new status. One of these rites was called *elyateko*, and, as Estermann has argued, its purpose was to rob the captive of the will to escape. In Uukwanyama, the ritual involved the captor's mother and father, who poured water over a little whetstone, which was then used by the prisoner's master to beat the victim on the top of the cranium, "to prevent him from having thoughts of escape." According to Estermann (1976: 128–129), the Kwanyama believed that, as the stone was motionless, the person so treated came to possess the same quality as the stone. In addition, a male slave's right leg was tied to a heavy pole and in the case of a woman slave, the leg was wrapped with a heavy wickerwork encumbrance. Loeb describes another ritual, during which the captive was taken to the captor's reception area (*olupale*), smeared with red ochre and given a drink extracted from a herb called *ondimbwa*, to erase the memory of the captive's previous home and identity.[31] The purpose of these rituals was to incorporate the slave into the captor's clan and to establish kinship-like relations. However, the slaves assimilated in this way were subject to kinship relations that often embodied authority and obligation, so that the resulting position was not necessarily "benign".

Although slavery in Ovamboland was often characterized as a mild institution and slaves were in theory incorporated into the Ovambo lineages, slavery was a violent institution in Ovamboland. Slavery was virtually always initiated through acts of violence. Slaves were treated by their owners in ways that would never have occurred if they were full members of the clan. Some slave owners were known for their cruelty, and the court slaves were especially prone to be injured. Tolonen, a Finnish missionary, reported in 1871 that Shipandeka, the King of Uukwanyama at the time, usually beat up or killed one of his slaves when he

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[30] Magyar 1857, "Ladislaus Magyars Schilderung der Negerresidenz zu Nambambi", *Das Ausland* 42: 1002, quoted in Mildner-Spindler 1996: 128.

[31] Loeb 1962: 125. The meaning of the oshiKwanyama verb *okudimbwa* is 'to forget'.

was angry. Shipandeka was known for his inhumanity toward slaves.[32] Shipandeka's successor, King Namhadi, did not fare any worse. In his time of rule in the first half of the 1880s, numerous slaves and many royal counsellors were put to death because one of the kindred member's of the king was barren. It was said that they were "eating" royal persons with witchcraft, and this had caused the king to be angry with them (Hiltunen 1986: 30). In Ondonga, King Kambonde's slaves sometimes ran away, indicating that he did not treat his slaves so well either. In 1876, Weikkolin reported of a female slave who had ran away from Kambonde's court and was seeking to return to her home in Ongandjera. The king's men were able to catch the runaway and she was returned to Kambonde.[33]

Although slaves were often ill treated by the Ovambo kings, in court they had greater opportunities for social mobility than in ordinary households.[34] Williams (1991: 114) has shown how a slave named Iitamale rose to prominence as Iipumbu's war commander in Uukwambi in the early 20th century. Another example was Hamupanda, who acted as Nehale's chief counsellor in eastern Ondonga and fought the Germans at Namutoni in 1904. In Uukwanyama, a slave of Kavango origin called Hamukoto wa Kapa became one of the most important headmen in the early 20th century and carried over his position into the colonial period. The fact that male slaves had opportunities of social mobility in royal Ovambo households has probably also led scholars to conclude that slavery was not so exploitative in Ovamboland. However, it would be important to study whether these slaves were really removed from the limbo of kinlessness and integrated into their new communities, or were they still treated as distinct from everyone else because of their foreign origin. Further, it would be important to study how their children were treated. In many cases, as Meillassoux (1991: 32) has argued, the children of the alien man or woman were despised – sometimes cruelly. Furthermore, the slaves who rose to influential positions in the Ovambo communities often participated in acquiring new captives, and thus produced new kinless outsiders. In that way, slavery was an endless cycle. Or as Meillassoux (1991: 36) puts it, as a mode of exploitation, slavery existed only where there was a distinct class of individuals with the same social state, constantly and institutionally renewed.

The female slaves often did not have the same opportunities as the male slaves. Hayes has shown that female slaves were clearly subordinated within domestic relations. They were allocated smaller portions of land and excluded from domestic religious ceremonies. Within the *egumbo* or household they were restricted to agricultural and domestic labour, and sexual services. However, if the

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[32] FNA/FMSA, Eac 3, Tolonen to Sirelius, 14.12.1871.

[33] FNA/FMSA, Eac 4, Weikkolin to Sirelius, 30.6.1876.

[34] The view that court slaves were in a favourable position is also echoed in FNA/FMSA, Eac 13, Koivu to Mustakallio, 23.2.1909.

head of the household had to travel or visit the king, he could not spend the previous night with any female slave. Sexual intercourse with slave women was also forbidden on days of domestic religious offering. According to Hayes, as a corollary to their exclusion from domestic religious ceremonies, they could not enter the inner part of the *egumbo*, nor could their children. Even if the man had no wives, the female slaves belonging to him occupied peripheral huts and were not allowed into the inner part of the household. As raiding intensified in Ovamboland in the last decades of the 19th century, the founding of new households with female captives might have been an attractive option for young men, as the evidence from Uukwanyama suggests. However, because of the female slaves' social marginality, younger men with female slaves still sought free marriage partners to occupy the inner part of the homestead.[35] So, although female slaves were incorporated into their master's clan, exclusions still operated in various ways.

The heavy copper anklets that the female were forced to wear have caused confusion among scholars, and it is no wonder, since the original sources refer to these "ornaments" only vaguely. The copper anklets were so obvious even to outsiders that many sources mention them. The Swedish explorer and hunter Charles John Andersson, who visited Ovamboland in the early 1850s, was the first one to mention these "ornaments". According to Andersson (1856: 179), the anklets were one of the reasons why the outward appearance of the women deteriorated in early age. The anklets were next mentioned by the Swedish traveller T. G. Een in the 1860s, who wrote that King Shikongo's concubines in Ondonga wore heavy anklets on their feet. According to Een (1872: 90), only the king's slaves had these. On their arrival in Ovamboland, the Finns also noticed women wearing these in Shikongo's homestead. Piirainen wrote that some slaves had as many as four of these copper anklets.[36] However, it is possible that free women were also forced to carry them.[37] It is certain that they hindered escape, and slaves often sought to escape and return to their families. But free women, especially young ladies, also sometimes sought to escape from their fathers,[38] so they might have been forced to wear the anklets as well.

Indeed, slaves often chose to run away instead of serving the Ovambo masters. Obviously, some of the slaves were not happy with their plight, no matter

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[35] Hayes 1992: 43–45. On women's importance in African slave systems, see Robertson & Klein 1983.
[36] FNA/FMSA, Eac 3, Piirainen to Sirelius, 30.7.1870.
[37] Taube 1947: 83.
[38] FNA/FMSA, Eac 3, Björklund to Sirelius, 31.10.1870. The reason for this, according to Björklund, was that the fathers wanted to give the girls as wives to older men, who were accepted by the fathers but not wanted by their daughters.

how well they were treated. If the slaves were not able to get refuge in other kingdoms, they were usually caught. In January 1878, eight Bushman[39] slaves ran away from Ondonga, but they were caught before they reached Ongandjera. The men who had been sent to search for the runaways killed an old man and a woman, and then returned the rest to Ondonga.[40] Even more dramatic was the fate of those slaves who chose to take their own lives. In Ondonga, a slave killed himself because his master was punishing him excessively.[41] Thus, when a slave took his own life, masters were reminded of the importance of treating their slaves kindly.

In some parts of the continent, especially in central and eastern Africa, the Christian missions were the most active agents in the fight against indigenous slavery, and the mission stations welcomed fugitive slaves.[42] The Finnish Missionary Society did not have resources to rally for the emancipation of slaves in Ovamboland, although the missionaries were driven, in part, by the abolitionist flare.[43] However, the Finns had close contacts with people that had been captured in slave raids, and it was not unusual that they were given captive children. Very soon on their arrival at Uukwambi in 1870, King Nuujoma "donated" a captive boy from Uukwanyama to the missionaries. He did small chores around the mission station, such as washing the dishes.[44] The only known case of buying such a captive by the Finns occurred in 1880, when Reijonen paid two guns and some unidentified smaller objects for a girl called Nalutoni, who was about 8-10 years old. At that point, Nalutoni had been in Reijonen's service already for three years.[45] Nanguroshi, the first Ovambo who was baptised, was also of captive origin. Nanguroshi had been captured in a raid from Ombandja, and she grew up in King Nuujoma's household, before she was given to Pietari and Wilhelmina Kurvinen. Nanguroshi followed her foster parents to Finland in 1875, and in June

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[39] The Bushmen were a special category of slaves in Ovamboland. As the missionaries noted, these hunter-gatherers were easily captured and enslaved, and they seem to have been present in large numbers at least in Ondonga. FNA/FMSA, Eac 5, Rautanen to Tötterman, 8.1.1881 and Weikkolin to Tötterman, 15.1.1881. Galton (1891: 142) noted that the Ndonga employed their Bushman slaves primarily as bodyguards or as a kind of standing army. McKiernan (1954: 167), in the 1870s, described how the Bushmen were eager to fight the Ovambos, because they were often made slaves by the Ovambo. According to Pettinen (*Suomalainen*, 11.9.1890), the Bushmen were slaves in Ondonga. On Bushmen as slaves in South West Africa, see Gordon & Douglas 2000: 31–32.

[40] FNA/FMSA, Eac 5, Weikkolin to Tötterman, January 1878. According to Weikkolin, two of the Bushman slaves were probably killed because they could not walk anymore.

[41] FNA/FMSA, Eac 4, Weikkolin to Sirelius, 30.6.1876.

[42] Lovejoy 2000: 262–267.

[43] On manifestations of abolitionism in Finnish missionary ideology, see Gustafsson 2003.

[44] FNA/FMSA, Eac 3, Piirainen to Sirelius, 30.9.1870 and Weikkolin to Sirelius, 26.11.1870.

[45] FNA/FMSA, Hha 2, Reijonen's annual report, 31.12.1880; Eac 5, Reijonen to Tötterman, 24.1.1881.

1876 she was christened Eeva Maria.[46] As Christianity began to gain a stronger foothold in Ovamboland in the late 19th and early 20th century, it was not unusual for slaves and former slaves to eagerly join the church. For people who were labelled because of their outsider status, churches offered communality, and unlike in traditional religion, slaves could participate in religious ceremonies. For slaves, Christianity as a way of life offered a way out of exclusion and marginality.[47]

Although no quantitative sources exist that would point to the economic importance of slaves in the Ovambo communities, further qualitative remarks on the treatment of slaves can be found in oral literature. As Vignondé has pointed out in his study of Fon oral literature in Benin, proverbs offer excellent pathways to our understanding of slavery and the slave trade in African history.[48] The plight of slaves was reflected upon in several Ovambo proverbs collected together by Kuusi from various sources. The proverb "there is not a slave who was not with his father and mother once"[49] commented on the origins of the *aapika* and pointed to their status as outsiders. Even though slaves were integrated into the acquisitor's family, their treatment was different, because, according to a proverb, "a goat is not a dog, one's own child is not a slave."[50] The possibility of escape was always a threat to the *aapika*'s masters, and a proverb mentioned that a master should not give a calf to a slave to tend, for he was not to be trusted and could take the calf to his own tribe. Thus, "a cow born on the land is not bought for a slave."[51] Finally, people were reminded that they do not know the slaves' conditions: "Ask the dog about the cold, ask the slave about early hours."[52]

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[46]   For a biographical sketch of Nanguroshi, see Halén 1986: 236–239, and the present author's unpublished manuscript "Kun Nanguroshi Suomeen saapui – Afrikka ja suomalaiset 1870-luvulla" (2002).

[47]   Although the conclusions are my own, this aspect of Christian missions is also discussed in McKittrick 2002: 100–118. According to McKittrick, one common thread runs throughout the story of virtually all those drawn to the churches as young people. These early converts had experienced unprecedented levels of insecurity in their lives: they had witnessed assassinations, attacks, and robberies; they had been enslaved, lost siblings and parents to famine, and suffered hunger and expulsion from their homes. However, there were also instances when the masters did not allow their slaves to be baptised, as reported in FNA/FMSA, Eac 7, Weikkolin to Tötterman, 18.2.1887.

[48]   Vignondé 2001. On the use of proverbs as historical evidence, see also Weiss 2003: 240–243.

[49]   Kuusi 1970: 63, proverb 372c).

[50]   Kuusi 1970: 193, proverb 1424.

[51]   Kuusi 1970: 193, proverb 1423b).

[52]   Kuusi 1970: 276, proverb 2095c).

OVAMBO SLAVERY AND THE ANGOLAN SLAVE TRADE

The "frontier of violence" that had characterized over three centuries of the Angolan slave trade spread to Ovamboland in the second half of the 19th century.[53] The major event that influenced this course of history was the establishment of Mossamedes on the southern Angolan coast in 1840. Through their Mbangala middlemen, the Portuguese traded glass beads and spirits for ivory, but this initial phase soon ceded as the Portuguese turned increasingly towards the slave trade. Slaves were desperately needed to fuel the economic development of Mossamedes and its hinterland. In 1849, the Kwanyama king pronounced himself ready to raid neighbouring communities for resources to buy goods from the Portuguese. Raids had been usual in the past, but with the appearance of Portuguese traders into southern Angola, raiding underwent a transformation, as it was reoriented for economic purposes. By engaging in trade, kings sought mainly prestige goods. Alcohol became the most important item of exchange, and firearms were the second most important category of products as the decades proceeded. Horses were also imported on a small scale, and some of the Ovambo became expert riders.[54]

Slavery was institutionalized in Ovamboland even before the Portuguese colonists appeared on the scene. Slaves were widely available in Ovambo communities, and traditional raiding activities could be intensified to provide a steady supply of captives to the Portuguese plantations and fisheries on the coast. The most active raiders came from Uukwanyama, which was the most populous community. Uukwanyama was suitably situated to serve the Portuguese needs, because of its location in the north of the area defined as Ovamboland. Another important centre for the slave trade was Uukwambi, which flourished under King Negumbo, who ruled from 1875 until 1907. Negumbo's predecessor, King Nuujoma was so hard on his subjects that many people escaped from Uukwambi in the early 1870s before Nuujoma's death.

It was also in Uukwambi where the Finnish missionaries first came into conflict with the slave traders. Although the Finns, especially Kurvinen, tried to preach against the violence brought about by the slave trade, and negotiated with Nuujoma and tried to convince him that the slave trade was evil, the Portuguese influence in the kingdom was so strong that the Finns were finally driven out in

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[53] On slaving violence in Angolan history, see Miller 1988, who describes the spreading of the slave trade into the interior of Angola as a "frontier of violence".

[54] This section is based on Gustafsson 2004, unless otherwise indicated by notes. The Portuguese side of the story is told in Clarence-Smith 1979.

1872, after less than two years in the community. That was a huge setback for the Finnish mission, which was then confined almost solely to Ondonga for the next three decades. The missionaries were apparently a problematic factor in the Portuguese economic configurations, and the two camps were ideologically so far from each other that conflict could not be prevented.[55]

The failure of the missionaries in Uukwambi to prevent slave trading set the precedent for the missionary policy towards the slave trade. Because it was impossible to act against the slave trade in concrete ways, the Finns condemned it in their rhetoric and preached against it without any notable success. In effect, the missionaries were "living on the king's land and drinking the king's water" (Miettinen 2000), which meant that criticizing the king and his participation in the slave trade openly would have put the mission in jeopardy. In Ondonga, the Finns tolerated the slave trade and actively reported it to their superiors. The participation of Ondonga in the slave trade increased in the 1880s and 1890s, especially after 1886, when the kingdom was effectively split into two parts. Chief Nehale ruled one part with an iron hand whereas King Kambonde tried to control the other. Both rulers consumed large amounts of alcohol, which they actively sought from the Portuguese by sending their trade envoys to fetch it from Humbe.

Putting a decisive end to the slave trade would have meant actively involving the colonial powers. Although one of the reasons cited by the European powers for colonial occupation was the goal to abolish the slave trade, little was done in effect by the German and Portuguese officials in Angola and German South West Africa. The international treaties had no effect on the traffic in firearms and alcoholic liquor in Ovamboland. The colonial encroachment started to have an effect on affairs in Ovamboland only during the first two decades of the 20th century, when the Portuguese subjected the Mbandja to their rule in 1907. However, Uukwanyama, the most powerful kingdom both politically and militarily, was not conquered until 1915.

The slave trade had negative and upsetting consequences in the Ovambo communities themselves. One of the most important transformations that enslaving underwent in the last two decades of the 19th century was that the Ovambo rulers turned more and more towards internal resources to pay for their trade with the Portuguese. This meant that kings captured their own subjects to be sold as slaves to the Portuguese. Alcohol was the chief consumer import, and Clarence-Smith (1979: 65) has called it a "destroyer good" in view of its negative effects. Many kings and their trusted headmen became alcoholics, whereas numerous people were unjustly captured and accused of being witches. The people's trust in the kings as just and fair rulers crumbled. This caused a notable refugee problem

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[55] The closure of the mission in Uukwambi, and the reasons for it, are examined in detail in Weiss 2000.

in Ovamboland. People started to flee from their home communities, either to other Ovambo kingdoms or outside of Ovamboland altogether. Ovambo exiles formed new communities in Hereroland and in Humbe.

Enterprising elites sought to cut a share of the profits from the slave trade for themselves, and they also became involved in the slave trade as it progressed. Although the slave trade had initially increased the kings' power, it eventually started to undermine the power base of the kings. Because the leading headmen became so involved in the trade, insecurity in the communities increased. More and more people were captured and sold to the slave traders. Besides, external raiding did not cease although the internal resources were tapped. Raiding continued on a large scale, especially after outbreaks of rinderpest, when the Ovambo sought to reconstitute herds and pay for imported goods. Kwanyama raids extended deep into Angola, as far north as the foothills of the Huila uplands.

Although some people profited from the slave trade, it left communities battered and badly prepared for calamities such as rinderpest and famine as well as colonial occupation. McKittrick (2002: 58) has shown that some decentralized communities – such as Onkwankwa, Ehinga, and Okafima – disappeared from the map altogether, as their populations dispersed or were enslaved. Common insecurity was the general state of affairs in Ovamboland during the period of the slave trade. In 1913 the remnants of slavery were cleaned out in Mossamedes. At that point, the Ovambo policies had been strained by over half a century of the slave trade. Its maturation had been extremely intense in Ovamboland, and it had drained human resources in a crushing manner. In the upheaval of the time, however, its demise was hardly noticed by the onlookers. There was no celebration to welcome the end of the slave trade in Ovamboland, because new challenges to survival lay immediately ahead.

After the colonial occupation of the Ovambo flood plains in 1915, kings and powerful headmen could no longer raid and exact tribute, but they retained considerable powers and advantages as officials in the colonial system, as Clarence-Smith has shown. These influential men also managed to retain much of their wealth, especially through the control of their domestic slaves. According to Clarence-Smith (1979: 82), slaves and their descendants do not seem to have been completely absorbed into the kinship system, but rather to have continued to form a hereditary group of "servants", attached to the families of their masters. However, more research would be needed on the descendants of those individuals, who were the victims of the Ovambo raiding economy during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It would be interesting to see whether they have been affected by social stigmatisation or exclusion and what is their social standing in the communities today.

CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed contours of slavery in Ovamboland during the late 19th century. To what extent can we speak of slavery in African societies has been the central question, and by presenting my own interpretation of slavery in the Ovambo social formation, I have sought to clarify some differing viewpoints that emerge from the existing research literature on the history of the Ovambo. Although we cannot speak of African slavery as a monolithic institution, by examining the functioning of slavery in different social settings and different time periods, we can see that slavery has been an important institution in Africa throughout its history, and especially during the 19th century, when slaves were more widely exploited in Africa than ever before that or ever since then. Although some scholars have argued that there were no slaves in Ovamboland during the 19th century, it is important to question whether that conclusion has been drawn in the name of political correctness or whether it really reflects what contemporary sources can tell us about slavery in that specified time and space.

In this paper, I have employed Orlando Patterson's framework of slavery as social death. In Ovamboland, slaves were outsiders, who had been violently torn from their kith and kin. Although the slaves were gradually integrated into their master's family and they often worked alongside their masters, they were excluded from the community's spiritual life. The slaves also worked longer hours than the free members of the kin group – a proverb reminded people that they should ask the slave about the early hours of the day. The treatment of slaves, although usually characterized as benign and lenient, was often arbitrary. Slaves were subject to cruel punishments, sometimes without a clear reason. Although some people rose to positions of prominence despite their slave origin, we should not be led to the conclusion that slavery as an institution always operated so smoothly and without causing friction in the communities. Apparently, in certain aspects the slaves were seen as a species of their own. They lacked the security that came from being a part of a closely-knit kin group.

During the final decades of the 19th century, the slave trade spread to Ovamboland, and Portuguese merchant capital reached the Ovambo communities in the form of alcohol and firearms. Because slaves were widely available in Ovambo communities at that time, it did not present any notable problems for the kings to engage in trade with the Portuguese. As the slave trade grew in proportion and gained maturity, traditional mechanisms of enslavement were adapted to meet the purposes of the long-distance trade. Raiding became more effective, and probably internal slavery in the Ovambo communities intensified as well. Besides the slaves who were sold to Angolan traders or redeemed by their relatives, the

successful raiders retained numerous captives. Thus, slavery as an institution retained its vitality until the early decades of the 20th century.

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