

# Introduction

THIS IS A BOOK ABOUT the gradual transformation, reform, and attempted abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century in two zones of European-African interaction: French Senegal and the British Gold Coast. It focuses upon a comparison of the opportunities, agency, and actions of European and African actors in two geographically and socioculturally disparate regions. Comparative studies such as this one are, by definition, studies in opposition. In some respects, this makes it difficult for the author to achieve the specificity of a purely local study. However, the tension inherent in the contrast of places and times can also reveal overarching themes; and this, in turn, can aid in the interpretation of evidence of continuity and change at the local level.

In his influential 1983 synthesis, *Transformations in Slavery*, Paul Lovejoy pointed out that the discourse on slavery in Africa has been particularly lacking in such studies, suggesting that this topic “has suffered from the opposite problem to that of over-synthesis. . . . There are some brilliant local studies, which have their own implications in terms of the study of slavery in general, but these . . . suffer from a failure to place the particular case in the context of Africa as a whole, or even specific regions within Africa.”<sup>1</sup> Lovejoy was writing at the crest of a renewed academic interest in African slavery. Historians of African descent, such as Walter Rodney, had begun to investigate the evolution of slavery in several regions of West Africa in the late 1960s,<sup>2</sup> and during the next decade, monograph-length studies had been produced on servitude in areas as diverse as Zanzibar and Sierra Leone.<sup>3</sup> The Wolof and Sereer polities of Senegal north of the Gambia River were no exception. The French priest and missionary François Renault compiled a framework study of the origins and impact of French policies on slavery in Senegal in the early 1970s, and historians at Dakar’s Institut Fondamental d’Afrique Noire also investigated issues surrounding emancipation. Most notable among these historians is M’Baye Guèye, who published the seminal scholarly article on emancipation in St. Louis and Gorée.<sup>4</sup> Attention was

similarly drawn to slavery by Ray Kea's superb study of seventeenth-century society in the Gold Coast, including the sociopolitical and economic roles of slaves.<sup>5</sup>

Paul Lovejoy thus had a variety of materials from which to draw when writing *Transformations in Slavery*. In addition to a number of regional studies, the Africanist community's interpretation of slavery had been advanced by comparative anthropological studies such as Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death*, and by Igor Kopytoff and Suzanne Mier's anthology of anthropological and historical studies, *Slavery in Africa*.<sup>6</sup> Lovejoy was thus able to identify a number of core issues in the study of slavery and emancipation in Africa. Among these were themes in domestic and trade slavery, the impact of transformations wrought by Islam, the Atlantic slave trade and its abolition, and manumission and emancipation.

The modern study of emancipation, of which this book forms a part, arose out of this dynamic discourse on slavery both in Africa and outside it, and this book draws somewhat on a number of monographs, articles, and anthologies on emancipation from the 1970s and 1980s. Important works from this period span a thematically diverse range, from analyses of imperial policy and colonial rule to ethnographic works relating to slave agency. More recent works have emphasized the agency of slave owners and studies of postemancipation transformations in social hierarchies and labor practices.

The Gold Coast region has been the subject of one of the more fully developed regional discourses on emancipation in Africa. For his chapter "The Abolitionist Impulse" in *Transformations in Slavery*, for example, Lovejoy drew heavily upon a somewhat revisionist article on emancipation on the Gold Coast by Gerald McSheffrey. In this article, "Slavery, Indentured Servitude, Legitimate Trade, and the Impact of Abolition in the Gold Coast, 1874–1910," McSheffrey for the first time located slaves at the center of an emancipation equation, arguing that slaves in Akan polities were the most important agents in emancipation.<sup>7</sup> McSheffrey's contribution was part of a growing discourse on emancipation in the Gold Coast led by Raymond Dumett, who was engaged in analyzing the formation of antislavery ordinances from the perspective of the British colonial apparatus, and Marion Johnson, who focused on the supply of slaves to and from what would become the Northern Territories.<sup>8</sup> These two historians collaborated to produce a chapter in a 1988 anthology engaging McSheffrey's arguments and outlining further research questions that could contribute to our understanding of emancipation in the Gold Coast and other regions of modern Ghana.<sup>9</sup>

The anthology in which Dumett and Johnson's chapter appeared was *The End of Slavery in Africa*.<sup>10</sup> Edited by Suzanne Miers and Richard Roberts, this vol-

ume was promoted as a sequel to *Slavery in Africa* and included studies encompassing diverse regions of Africa. Perhaps most importantly, it proposed a theoretical and comparative framework for exploring a number of themes, such as the role of the colonial state, modes of liberation, the “ambiguities” of freedom, and the impact of emancipation on indigenous societies.<sup>11</sup>

Interest in emancipation on the Gold Coast has grown over the last few years. Much of the new research has been carried out by a Ghanaian scholar, Kwabena Opare Akurang-Parry, who has written intensive articles dealing with both colonial policy and slave agency in the postemancipation Gold Coast.<sup>12</sup> Akurang-Parry’s work provided new perspectives and has raised interesting questions as to the interpretation of the actions of both Europeans and indigenous peoples. Emancipation also forms an important component of the recent work of Peter Haenger, whose excellent study of slavery and reform deals largely with the impact of the Basel Mission on slaveholding but also illuminates a number of other issues surrounding the end of legalized slavery on the Gold Coast.<sup>13</sup>

The study of emancipation in Senegal has similarly crossed something of a threshold during the past few years, marked first by the publication of Martin Klein’s 1998 monograph on emancipation in French West Africa, including Senegal, entitled *Slavery and Colonial Rule in French West Africa*.<sup>14</sup> Klein had already published several important articles on slavery in Senegal and the West African interior and contributed a chapter on slave agency and emancipation in coastal Guinea to *The End of Slavery in Africa*.<sup>15</sup> He further solidified his position at the forefront of the study of slavery in French West Africa when, in 1993, he produced the seminal Anglophone article on emancipation throughout French colonial West Africa.<sup>16</sup> His work did draw on that of Guèye and Renault, but it also added new dimensions both by exploring African initiatives and by expanding the field geographically to encompass the French protectorates as well as Senegal Colony. *Slavery and Colonial Rule in French West Africa*, published five years later, built on the foundation of this article and was influenced by important studies of emancipation in West Africa such as Lovejoy and Hogendorn’s work on northern Nigeria and Ibrahim Sundiata’s exploration of postemancipation Fernando Po and the Bight of Biafra.<sup>17</sup> Klein’s work is in many ways a model for addressing the juxtaposition of colonial imposition of reforms to slavery and the initiatives of slaves. Nevertheless, its generous scope, although it achieved a necessary synthesis, forced Klein to concentrate on certain major regional transformations, allowing those of us who follow to pinpoint local trends.

Although Klein’s *Slavery and Colonial Rule* informed this work from the very

beginning, the publication of James F. Searing's *God Alone Is King* in 2002 forced a late reconceptualization of my approach to Senegalese history.<sup>18</sup> A sort of sequel to Searing's earlier insightful research into the Senegal River Valley political-economic complex, *God Alone is King* attempts to situate emancipation as a transformative process within a contemporary Wolof perspective, placing it at one corner of a triangle whose other points were formed by the expansion of Murid Sufism and peasant groundnut cultivation.<sup>19</sup> The publication of this book, which I quote extensively in late chapters, enabled me to build a truly comparative model in which local trends and relationships are perceived as being as important as imperial policies in formulating the actions of both slaves and slave owners. In an equally successful study, Alice Conklin has placed postfederation emancipation within the perspective of French imperial and colonial discourse by arguing that in the early twentieth century, the eradication of slavery became a central theme of the *mission civilisatrice*.<sup>20</sup> Several collected works have also recently appeared that bridge not just regions but continents.<sup>21</sup>

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This work is intended to address perceived gaps in understanding the central role of Africans—slaves and slave owners—in the process of reform and emancipation. While not primarily an ethnographic study of indigenous societies, it is an attempt to place Africans as agents both in the implementation of colonial policy toward slavery and in the success and failure of reforms culminating in emancipation. It therefore incorporates an appraisal of the conditions under which reform, abolition, and emancipation could occur and places this within the framework of emancipation developed in the narrative. The positions and strategies of slaves, slave owners, and Europeans are discussed against the backdrop of a changing local environment and the conflicting demands of European metropolises for both stable, profitable African colonies and the abolition of indigenous slavery. By locating Africans within this model, this study illuminates the role of slave owners in shaping reform, as well as the agency of slaves in formulating modes of liberation and desertion, negotiating settlements, and developing postemancipation means of existence.

The most important feature of this study, and its greatest innovation, is that it undertakes a comparison between two geographically and ethnically distinct African regions that nevertheless underwent comparable transformational processes resulting in both divergent and similar results. By comparing the experi-

ences of French/Senegalese and British/Gold Coast situations, this book makes significant advances in addressing two issues central to the discourse on emancipation: whether European-initiated emancipation generally represented continuity or transformation, and the relative importance of internal (African) agency and external (European) pressures.

For much of the nineteenth century, these two regions received disproportionate attention, as compared to neighboring areas, from European colonial powers. In the mid-1800s, the production of groundnuts joined the trade in gum in Senegal, and palm-oil cultivation took off in certain portions of the Gold Coast. These commodities helped to transform local concepts of slavery and at the same time increased the European commitment in these two areas. Thus, underpinning the events described in this book are the metropole's experiments in imperialism and colonialism, which were, as Frederick Cooper rightly points out, not so much "a coherent set of practices and discourses . . . as a set of hegemonic projects."<sup>22</sup>

The eradication of slavery, as a colonial project, was a theme of growing importance in the early nineteenth century and would form a cornerstone of liberal and progressive rationalizations for the occupation of Africa by the end of the century. Abolitionism can be found alongside the eradication of ritual murder in validations of the French Republic's colonial ventures, and next to the conversion of pagans in Britain's popular imperialist dogma. However, little action was actually taken to end slavery before pacification was nearly complete, and thus abolition within the African colonies was, with a few exceptions, a twentieth-century project. For much of Senegal and the Gold Coast, by contrast, early and significant involvement in local affairs by Europeans led to the first strong European initiatives against indigenous slavery in West Africa—the 1848 act of emancipation in colonial Senegal and the proclamation of emancipation in 1874 on the Gold Coast. These initiatives, based on nineteenth-century perceptions and events, shared characteristics that provide an interesting contrast with the more prevalent twentieth-century antislavery initiatives carried out in other parts of West Africa. In fact, one could argue that these two regions served as laboratories and models for subsequent efforts to deal with slave trading and holding in other African colonies.

A key experience for colonial agents in Senegal and on the Gold Coast, and one from which important conclusions were drawn, was the relative success of local resistance strategies against antislavery initiatives. The long history of European interaction had led to the establishment of strong Euro-African trading communities protective of their rights to own slaves. Additionally, the nineteenth

century was a period in which chiefly officeholders and Islamic bodies were key to shaping and delimiting the expansion of European political authority. The groups generally resisted unilateral attempts to reform slavery. The strength of the proslavery lobbies in both regions led directly to the establishment by both Britain and France of forms of indirect rule that would leave postemancipation settlements largely in the hands of slaves and their owners.

The specific results of emancipation in Senegal and the Gold Coast reflect both the differences and the similarities between the two regions. This book undertakes to analyze the causes and results of emancipation both within the two regions generally and within diverse sociopolitical segments specifically. In the first chapter, the basis of comparison is established, and important historical themes and actors are introduced. Following chapters deal with the interacting processes of the expansion of European authority, initiatives to reform slavery and the internal slave trade, and the agency of both slaves and slave owners on both the societal and individual levels.

Within this comparative structure, this volume advances the scholarship on emancipation in several ways. It presents a new understanding of how local factors—the attitudes of European administrators, intercontinental economics, and, most importantly, significant indigenous resistance—placed Africans centrally in the resolution of slave reforms, generally resulting in the failure of the implementation of reforms. The volume contributes to our comprehension of the circumstances in which these measures could be—and sometimes were—transformative, especially through the initiative of slaves. It investigates the mechanisms of slave desertion and emancipation. Finally, this book is intended to add to the reader's knowledge of the integrated slave routes that fed slaves into the coastal regions and the extent to which they were extinguished in the nineteenth century.

#### A NOTE ABOUT ORTHOGRAPHY

One unfortunate legacy of the haphazard attitude toward African culture and society that characterized nineteenth-century European intervention is a marked confusion over the spelling of indigenous personal and place names. Administrators and missionaries tended to impose their own preferred names for people and regions, and one place in which this is most obvious is the judicial record, in which, as I show, the interior origins of many slaves left magistrates baffled as to their ethnic affiliations.

In the postcolonial period, Africans have attempted to reclaim their own locales and histories, and I support that by endeavoring, where possible, to use either the modern appellations designated by African governments or, failing that, the spellings preferred by African academics of note. As a result, I have largely adhered to the orthography of the Senegalese historian Boubacar Barry and the Ghanaian scholars Robert Addo-Fening, Francis Agbodeka, and Akosua Perbi.