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Henry W. Nevinson and Modern Slavery

Flog him! Flog him! A good flogging! . . . Boa chicote!

Henry W. Nevinson

AN ENGLISH JOURNALIST and his native carriers, fevered and sore-footed, walked east twenty miles a day on the narrow, dusty path through Angola's Hungry Country. Antelopes, porcupines, and warthogs roamed amid the scruffy trees and bitter grasses growing in deep, white sand. Green parrots and cranes flew overhead, and in the evening, leopards roared. Butterflies, ants, and bees—indeed, all creatures—were “crazy for salt.”¹ Bees drove the writer from his tent after he treated his feet with saltwater, and they caused the carriers to go “howling along the path by creeping up under their loin-cloths.” While there was wildlife, the travelers saw few humans. Villages marked on their maps no longer existed.

Yet evidence of recent human passage through the area abounded, with graphic indications that the slave trade was alive and well in the Hungry Country. Human bones littered the sides of the trail, so many that it “would take an army of sextons to bury all the poor bones which consecrate that path.” The bones in the dust were those of slaves who could no longer march, who were too weak to walk. Some captives were simply left to die; many others were killed by a blow to the head. The journalist wrote that when he raised the head of a recently killed slave, “the thick, woolly hair came off in my hand like a woven pad, leaving the skull bare, and revealing the deep gash made by the axe at the base of skull.” Shackles that had bound hands and legs to prevent escape hung from the lower limbs of trees; if needed, they could be recovered by later trading parties. Such shackles were disconcertingly simple to make. A native carved an “oblong hole” out of a piece of wood, into which arms or legs fit (often securing two slaves), and a round peg driven through small holes secured the limbs. But should even these simple shackles prove difficult to come by along the trail, the slavers, whoever they were, had little need to worry about runaways surviving to tell their brutal tale—there was no place for the slaves to

run to in the Hungry Country. After all, the evidence of their failure to escape was abundant.



The journalist, Henry Woodd Nevinson (1856–1941), was on assignment for *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, gathering information that would be the basis for a series of articles and a subsequent book describing slavery in Portuguese West Africa. The Hungry Country through which the reporter and his party trekked extended for some two hundred miles from the River Cuanza nearly to the fort at Mashiko in the interior of Portuguese Angola. Nevinson landed on the coast of Angola in December 1904. He first visited Luanda, a worn-out capital of decaying forts with rusty guns whose mix of the religious and the secular, of the old and the new, testified to a glorious past fallen on hard times. Portugal had abolished slavery in all of its colonies, including Angola, in the 1870s, but plantation owners and others still desperately craved workers. To satisfy this constant demand for labor, a state-supported system of “contract labor” emerged, wherein government agents certified that natives could, of their own free will, sign contracts committing themselves to five years of labor at a set wage. Government officials assumed responsibility for the proper treatment of workers, who allegedly were free to return to their homes at the end of their contracts should they so desire. During his trip throughout West Africa, Nevinson sought evidence to confirm or deny the suggestion that such contract labor was not, in fact, voluntary, but simply another form of slavery.

In his description of the journey, Nevinson wrote about alighting from a mail steamer at Lobito Bay, about two hundred miles south of the capital, and making his way inland a few miles to Catumbela, an old town that had long been the terminus for slave trade from the interior. Later, he went to the nearby Angolan port of Benguela, second in importance only to the town of Luanda and formerly the center of the slave trade to Brazil. At Benguela, he joined a South African Dutch, or Boer, ox-wagon train (there was a Boer settlement in southern Angola) for a two-month, 450-mile trek into the interior through Bihé country. The trip was both strenuous and dangerous. The incessant fording of streams and steep climbs through the rugged countryside provided ample opportunities for serious or even fatal accidents. West of the high plateau, the terrain was beautiful, a “land of bare and rugged hills, deeply scarred by weather, and full of the wild and brilliant colors—the violet and orange—that bare hills always give,” and it was teeming with wild animals, including elands, lions, zebras,

and buffaloes, as well as eagles, vultures, hawks, flamingoes, parrots, cranes, au-reoles, honey guides, and great bustards.

Beyond these mountains, the landscape opened onto a plateau. Near Caconda, a largely abandoned town, lay a fort with a Portuguese officer and thirty native soldiers, a few trading houses, and a Catholic mission in which several priests ministered to the natives with a church, workshops, a school, and a garden. A sisters' mission similarly catered to the needs of girls. Nearby were several small native villages, and Nevinson believed that the missions had "bought" the boys' and girls'



Map 1. Angola. Map by Lowell and Ellen Satre.

freedom from “slave-traders,” then trained them and settled them in these surrounding villages. The missionary fathers, however, refused to discuss the issue with him.

After leaving Caconda, the ox wagons spent three weeks struggling through bogs and fording five rivers in order to reach the Bihé district. In addition to a Portuguese fort at Belmonte and the nearby town of Caiala, a few trading houses were scattered throughout the area. According to Nevinson’s account, slaves worked at the trading houses, which were centers of slave trading, and on the few plantations, most of which grew sweet potatoes used to make rum, a primary trading currency. There were few animals in this almost treeless plateau, the climate was cool, and many Bihéans, or Ovimbundu, lived in huts grouped together in stockaded villages off the path. A chief, dressed in his “kingly” garb, dispensed justice and passed on traditions to his subjects. The Bihéans offered wisdom through a veritable cache of proverbs and sayings, and they reveled in music, particularly with drums and the *ochisanji*, a sort of portable piano.

Slave owning was common among the Bihéans. A man might trade his sister’s children to pay off a debt or to slake the thirst for rum. Occasionally, a family member would be sold to a Portuguese trader supplying contract laborers for the government. The Ovimbundu engaged in all manner of trade, bearing heavy packs on their heads or shoulders as they walked the narrow paths into the interior, six hours a day for two months, far beyond the Hungry Country. They exchanged beads, salt, and cotton cloth for rubber and beeswax, while guns, gunpowder, and cartridges provided valuable barter for the purchase of slaves.

After Bihé, Nevinson forded the River Cuanza and crossed into the Hungry Country, which in his narrative he termed the “Worst Part of the Slave Route,” with its gruesome evidence of bones and shackles. Following his journey through the Hungry Country and a bit beyond, he retraced his steps to Belmonte, in Bihé, where he took the course of the old slave path that ended at Catumbela and Benguela on the coast. The views from the mountains were a “radiance of jewels,” akin to nature landscapes that the “Umbrians used to paint as backgrounds to the Baptist or St. Jerome or a Mother and Child.” The path through the mountains was at times so steep that it was like a “goat-path in the Alps.” This was an especially active route during the dry season, when thousands of carriers in the large trading parties made their way into the interior. Rum was a major trade item, even though in 1890 it had been banned from being brought into the Bihé by the European colonizing powers.²

Though Nevinson spent several months in Angola, he never encountered a large slave caravan. He suggested several reasons for this. He noted, for example, that he was trekking at the end of the wet season, when traders were only starting their journeys inland for slaves. Further, slave traders were aware of Nevinson's presence and purpose and may have taken steps to cover up their trade. It was possible, as well, that alternative paths to the north of the main route might have been used for the slave caravans. And in 1902, a native uprising at Bailundu, in response to the greed, pillaging, and violence of traders and government officials, had for a time brought about a dramatic decline in the human trade and forced the government to recognize native grievances. A few slave traders were imprisoned, some slaves were freed, and forts were ordered not to tolerate the "chained gangs" on the routes. Also, slave trading in the watershed area of the Congo had proved increasingly dangerous for traders from Angola, as Belgians protected their own market through a ring of forts. Moreover, slave caravans were occasionally difficult to recognize, as traders camouflaged the slaves as carriers.

While not so open or flagrant by 1905, the iniquitous slave trade persisted. Near Caiála, in Bihé, Nevinson happened on a party of about twenty boys with light packs, guarded by two men with *chicottes* (whips made from the hide of a hippopotamus) hiding in the bush, and he suspected that they were a small slave caravan. In another case, Nevinson's carriers referred to a party they were meeting as *apeka* (slaves). All told, there were seventy-eight people in that caravan, with armed men at the beginning, middle, and end watching over a party of mainly young boys. With the aid of one of his carriers, Nevinson talked to a "beautiful woman of about twenty or [a] little more" who reported that she had been captured far in the interior by another tribe and sold to a "white man for twenty cartridges." Torn from her husband and three children, the youngest still nursing, she was heading for *okalunga*, a term natives used to signify hell or death. He spotted her again a few days later on the road to Benguela, one of forty-three "voluntary laborers" marching to the "Emigration Agent" under guard of a company of soldiers.

A particularly venal episode centered on a disreputable Portuguese trader who claimed extraordinary compensation from villagers for the loss of property during the Bailundu War of 1902. Although the natives appealed to an official at Belmonte, they were ordered to pay twenty times the damages suffered. To help pay off the debt, parents sold children into slavery. Just before Nevinson visited the village, a distraught father committed suicide after having "pawned the last of his children." The trader also forced the chiefs to dance in his compound. "So

6 the matter stands, and the villagers must go on selling more and more of their wives and children that the white man's greed may be satisfied," Nevinson wrote in disgust. Occasionally, slaves attempted to flee this living hell. Near Catumbela, a large Luvale man, bloody from his failed effort to gain freedom, was guarded by the owner's slaves, armed with long knives and "ready to cut him down if he tried to run again." His punishment, according to Nevinson's carriers, would be death by flogging in front of the owner's other slaves.

Nevinson did not adhere to the theology of Christian missionaries, but he admired their resolution and their benevolent work among the natives. All too often, they preached a gospel so complex that even the learned of the church could not agree on its tenets, and while the natives understood the words of a sermon, they generally did not understand the doctrine. Nevertheless, the repetition of the few hymns translated into a tribe's language—one chorus was "repeated seventeen times without a pause"—offered a kind of innocent joy. The missionaries lived in simple poverty, shared what little they had, and worked medical miracles, mending bones and treating the "terrible sores and ulcers which rot the shins and thighs, tormenting all this part of Africa." Although few natives were drawn to the missionaries by "persuasive eloquence or religious conviction," they did gain from the missionaries the "two charms of entire honesty and of inward peace." In one of his most powerful observations, Nevinson remarked: "In a country where the natives are habitually regarded as fair game for every kind of swindle and deceit, where bargains with them are not binding, and where penalties are multiplied over and over again by legal or illegal trickery, we cannot overestimate the influence of men who do what they say, who pay what they agree, and who never go back on their word. From end to end of Africa common honesty is so rare that it gives its possessor a distinction beyond intellect, and far beyond gold." Yet Nevinson saw that the missionaries were caught on the horns of a dilemma. While they disapproved of slavery, they dared not express their feelings publicly, lest they be "poisoned and . . . driven out of the country, leaving their followers exposed to a terrible and exterminating persecution." A local trader who disliked an American mission in Bihé occasionally sent his slaves to destroy it. For missionaries to complain to the *chefe* (the government agent) at the fort in Belmonte was useless. Should the *chefe* render justice, the other traders would report him to officials on the coast, and he "would be removed, as all Chefes are removed who are convicted of justice."

Nevinson believed that he had revealed an essential cause of the terrible suffering endured by the natives in Angola: Portuguese authority was ineffective. Por-

tugal's civil and military officials, and its traders as well, operated outside the law, and whatever authority officials exercised was either misused or abused. The curator general of Angola was responsible for ensuring that the contract binding a worker for five years was legal and that its provisions—including those related to hours of work, wages, food, and clothing, as spelled out under Portuguese laws and regulations of 1875, 1878, and 1903—were appropriate. The standard contract stated that the native had “come of his own free will to contract for his services.”³ The contract had to be signed by both laborer and employer in the presence of a magistrate or a representative of the curator. The contract was renewable after five years if both parties so desired, and magistrates were required to visit the districts to make sure that the contracts were honored and that any children born to the laborers were free. Legally, Nevinson stressed, the *serviçal* (contract laborer) was protected. The reality, however, was otherwise.

An agent, or a “labor merchant,” scoured an area for slaves, often far in the interior. He bargained with a chief or chiefs who, in exchange for guns and cartridges, kegs of rum, or bales of cotton, provided a specified number of men, women, or children. Often the agent, with a large gang, sold his services to one of two tribes at war, his payoff being the right to purchase captives. The labor merchant ultimately procured them in many places, through many deals. Nevinson enumerated several reasons why natives might end up as slaves: “Some had broken native customs or Portuguese laws, some had been charged with witchcraft by the medicine-man because a relative died, some could not pay a fine, some were wiping out an ancestral debt, some had been sold by uncles in poverty, some were the indemnity for village wars; some had been raided on the frontier, others had been exchanged for a gun; some had been trapped by Portuguese, others by Bihéan thieves; some were but changing masters.” Many slaves did not survive the march to the sea, their bones adding to the landscape. Of those who reached the ports, recalcitrant ones could expect to be beaten. In Catumbela, at the end of his long journey, Nevinson heard from the courtyards “the blows of the palmatoria [paddle used to beat the palm of the hand] and chicote and the cries of men and women who were being ‘tamed.’”



Where were all of these slaves going? Some remained in Angola, clearing brush on plantations, toiling at trading houses, or mating as concubines. But most of them, around four thousand per year, were shipped to the islands of São Tomé and Príncipe, where they would spend the rest of their lives on cocoa plantations.

The whole process at Benguela was oriented toward providing labor for these islands. A few days before a steamer arrived, the town stirred to life. The curator took his place in a large room in the tribunal building, and an agent “herded” before him “gangs” of slaves. An official asked the slaves if they were willing to work in São Tomé under the regulations set down in a 1903 decree. Nevinson’s outrage flowed through his pen: “No attention of any kind is paid to their answer. In most cases no answer is given. Not the slightest notice would be taken of a refusal.” A legal document for five years of labor was then completed. Nevinson wrote, “[Each slave] receives a tin disk with his number, the initials of the Agent who secured him, and in some cases . . . the name of the island to which he is destined.” A slave was also given a paper with personal information, which was deposited in a tin cylinder. As Nevinson elaborated: “The disks are hung round their necks, the cylinders are slung at their sides. . . . All are then ranged up and marched out again, either to the compounds, where they are shut in, or straight to the pier where the lighters, which are to take them to the ship, lie tossing upon the waves.” But they were no longer slaves, for the curator had made them into *serviçais* (the plural form of *serviçal*). Nevinson commented bitterly: “The climax of the farce has now been reached. The deed of pitiless hypocrisy has been consummated. The requirements of legalized slavery have been satisfied. The government has ‘redeemed’ the slaves which its own Agents have so diligently and so profitably collected. They went into the Tribunal as slaves, they have come out as ‘contracted laborers.’ No one in heaven or on earth can see the smallest difference, but . . . by the excuse of law [Portugal] smooths her conscience and whitens over one of the blackest crimes which even Africa can show.”

In Nevinson’s estimation, greed led to the slavery he saw in Angola: “The only motive for slavery is money-making, and the only argument in its favor is that it pays.” Angola itself was a functioning slave state, with at least half the population in slavery. The price of a male slave in Benguela was about £20, the value of a male or female in São Tomé about £30. The list of those benefiting was long—the government that charged various duties for each slave, the agents who delivered laborers to the islands, the steamship company *Empresa Nacional* that shipped them, the doctor who kept them alive, the captain who got them to their destination, and the port that received them.

This labor system was not without its critics in Angola and Portugal. Though some were disturbed over the institution of slavery, many in Angola complained that labor essential for the development of the province was going instead to cre-

ate wealth for rich plantation owners on the islands. A newspaper in Luanda, *A Defeza de Angola*, bravely “exposed” the “whole system.” Those who questioned the institution of slavery feared the threat of physical violence. Conscientious officials found themselves replaced, forced out by the powerful local economic interests. Nevinson, who suffered from fever occasionally during his tour of Angola, was poisoned just before he sailed for São Tomé. While he was not certain that the poisoning was deliberate, all evidence pointed toward that conclusion, as he had often been warned that his investigation put him at risk. During his last few days in Angola, he made plans to send his papers to England should he die.

The ship on which Nevinson sailed carried 150 slaves from Benguela, picking up others at Novo Redondo and Luanda for a total of 272, not including an estimated 50 babies. Dressed in bright new clothes provided “to give them a moment’s pleasure,” the natives stayed on the lower deck, seldom talking, “and over the faces of nearly all broods the look of dumb bewilderment that one sees in cattle crowded into trucks for the slaughter-market.” Natives feared the worst: for many, the name São Tomé had become synonymous with *okalunga*—hell. Although Portuguese law required that *serviçais* be given the opportunity for repatriation after five years, with funding provided by deductions from the workers’ monthly pay, none of them ever returned from the islands.

From the upper deck, first-class passengers looked down on the *serviçais* “with interest and amusement.” At Novo Redondo, a mother with a very young infant struggled to mount the unsteady steps in the rolling sea, providing Nevinson’s narrative with a poignant scene:

At last she reached the top, bruised and bleeding, soaked with water, her blanket lost, most of her gaudy clothing torn off or hanging in strips. On her back the little baby, still crumpled and almost pink from the womb, squeaked feebly like a blind kitten. But swinging it round to her breast, the woman walked modestly and without complaint to her place in the row with the others.

I have heard many terrible sounds, but never anything so hellish as the outbursts of laughter with which the ladies and gentlemen of the first class watched that slave woman’s struggle up to the deck.

A few days later, a slave leaped overboard. A boat quickly captured him, and when he was returned to the ship, beaten and bruised, the passengers yelled, “Flog him! Flog him! A good flogging! . . . Boa chicote!”

The voyage from Benguela to São Tomé took eight days. The small equatorial island was often shrouded in mist and clouds, which occasionally cleared to reveal mountains and “the white house of some plantation and the little cluster of out-buildings and huts where the slaves were to find their new home.” On June 17, 1905, the laborers were landed and then assembled according to the plantations for which they had been requested. Gangers (foremen of groups of workers) led them in the walk to the plantation. “For them,” Nevinson wrote, “there are no more journeyings, till that last short passage when their dead bodies are lashed to poles and carried out to be flung away in the forest.”

The islands of São Tomé, about thirty miles by twenty, and the much smaller Príncipe, to the north, lie in the Gulf of Guinea some one hundred fifty miles off the west coast of Africa. Nevinson stressed that population figures were hard to come by; São Tomé’s slaves numbered between twenty thousand and forty thousand and Príncipe’s a bit over three thousand. The prosperity of the islands was based on the production of cocoa beans. The cocoa trees, set on “fine volcanic soil,” thrived in “a hot-house climate—burning heat and torrents of rain in the wet season, from October to April; stifling heat and clouds of dripping mist in the season that is called dry.” There were about 230 *roças* (plantations) on São Tomé and 50 on Príncipe, some owned by individuals, others held by corporations. The wealthy owners normally lived in Lisbon, Portugal.

Conditions on the *roças* differed considerably, depending on “the wealth of the owner and the superintendent’s disposition.” All shared a basic plan: cocoa-tree groves, an area containing huge pans for drying cocoa beans, the planter’s house, slave quarters, and a hospital. The size of the labor force on a *roça* varied, with the largest numbering about a thousand *serviçais*. One morning, Nevinson visited a “model” plantation on São Tomé, “a show-place for the intelligent foreigner or for the Portuguese shareholder who feels qualms as he banks his dividends.” The *roça* featured brick huts for the slaves, neatly tended cocoa trees, modern machines, electricity-generating engines, and a “clean and roomy hospital with its copious supply of drugs and anatomical curiosities in bottles.” The plantation doctor remarked in passing that the death rate was “twelve or fourteen per cent. a year among the *serviçais*.” The chief cause was “Anæmia” brought on by “unhappiness.” The doctor testified that the life span of the *serviçais* was decent if they could be kept alive through the first few years, when misery and homesickness took a terrible toll. According to a British consular report, Príncipe’s adult death rate for 1901 was slightly over 20 percent per annum. The superintend-

ent of a large, well-managed São Tomé plantation acknowledged that its child mortality rate was 25 percent per year.

The *serviçais* were paid once a month, with men commanding a higher wage than women. The pay was considerably less than the minimum required by the decree of 1903, and the owners did not even deduct a portion for the required repatriation fund, as they knew none of the laborers would ever be returned to their homeland. The workers were paid in cash and often were required by the owners to spend their money at the plantation store, on items such as cloth, food, and rum. As noted earlier, the law required that labor contracts had to be renewed after five years, and the curator approved and signed renewals in batches, either at the plantation or at his office. The *serviçais* were never consulted.

Laborers were valuable, and owners worked diligently to keep them from escaping, with dogs providing security in the evenings. Nevertheless, some slaves escaped—especially on Príncipe—and fled into the interior, where they were hard to track down. By law, apprehended runaways had to be returned to the owners, who flogged them and returned them to work. While most hunting parties sent out to capture runaways were unsuccessful, Nevinson related one planter's account of an instance in which the fleeing slaves, men and women, were spotted hiding in the trees: "It was not long, I can tell you, before we brought them crashing down through the leaves on to the ground. My word, we had grand sport that day!" Eighteen slaves fled from Príncipe via a canoe in early 1905 and made their way to the island of Fernando Po, but Spanish authorities there returned them to Príncipe.

Although corporal punishment was used, Nevinson believed that self-interest tempered the violence inflicted on slaves. As he put it: "The cost of slaves is so large, the demand is so much greater than the supply, and the death-rate is so terrible in any case that a good planter's first thought is to do all he can to keep his stock of slaves alive." Nevinson asserted that not only did plantation owners need to replace *serviçais* who died, they also required additional laborers to expand cocoa-bean production to attempt to satisfy the insatiable market so that "England and America can get their chocolate and cocoa cheap." This unquenchable thirst for labor on the cocoa islands drove up the price of the slaves and dictated the Angolan slave trade; the government "[urged] its Agents to drive the trade as hard as they can, and the Agents do their very utmost to encourage the natives to raid, kidnap, accuse of witchcraft, press for debts, soak in rum, and sell."

A flurry of treaties to prohibit slavery in the heart of Africa, signed in the nineteenth century by European nations including Portugal and Britain, had usually

proved worthless. Commercial interests begged to be satisfied, Nevinson pointed out, and by signing a paper, the slave became a “free” *serviçal*, and all interested parties—government, business, and humanitarian—were satisfied. Even Great Britain, which had actively opposed the evil trade by stationing a warship off the coast of Benguela, had lost much of its moral authority by reason of reports of its recent abuse of labor in the Australian colonies and in the South African mines.

Nevinson contended that those who saw the creation of wealth on the fertile islands as a measure of success approved the use of well-treated *serviçais*, even though the word *serviçal* itself was simply a legal term for *slave*. Portuguese capitalists and others accepted the belief that Africans would not work on the islands “without compulsion.” “But they forget,” he added, “that legal terms make no difference to the truth of things. They forget that slavery is not a matter of discomfort or ill treatment, but of loss of liberty. They forget that it might be better for mankind that the islands should go back to wilderness than that a single slave should toil there. I know the contest is still before us. It is but part of the great contest with capitalism, and in Africa it will be as long and difficult as it was a hundred years ago in other regions of the world.”

Nevinson left São Tomé on June 30, 1905, arriving in England on July 21. His articles on slavery, which contained many photographs (including scenes of a skull lying by a trail and a shackle dangling from a tree limb), appeared in *Harper's Monthly Magazine* from August 1905 through February 1906 under the title “The New Slave-Trade.” His book *A Modern Slavery*, mainly a compilation of his *Harper's* articles, was published in 1906.⁴ While appalled by the slave trade and slavery that he witnessed, Nevinson found Portuguese West Africa a varied, interesting, and beautiful country, and—unusual for his time—he regarded the natives as hardworking and intelligent people who cared greatly for the welfare of their families. He never referred to them as being inferior to Europeans. He did not wish to “civilize” the natives but to free them to practice their own unique and important way of life.

From 1905 to 1914, because of his determination to eradicate the slavery he had exposed in Portuguese West Africa, Nevinson found himself in the middle of a controversy that encompassed England's political, diplomatic, economic, humanitarian, and journalistic interests.⁵ He made public a wealth of information that confounded the British government and forced Cadbury Bros., one of England's great chocolate manufacturers, to justify before a court of law its purchase of cocoa beans from the islands of São Tomé and Príncipe.