Introduction

In the conventional view, Indian Ocean World (IOW) slavery shared the same essential features as the Atlantic slave system. Studies, inspired by the Atlantic model, have concentrated overwhelmingly on the export of East Africans by Arabs to Zanzibar and the Persian Gulf, and by Europeans to European enclaves in the IOW, notably the Mascarene Islands and the Cape. At these destinations, imported chattel labour underpinned “slave modes of production”.

What is missing from the bulk of these studies is an authentic IOW dimension. This is generally true even of the few studies of other forms of slavery indigenous to the IOW. This contribution is offered as a corrective to conventional views of IOW slavery. It first defines the term “Indian Ocean World” and discusses its historic significance as the location of the first “global economy”. It then analyses the meaning and significance in IOW history of the slave trade and slavery.

In order to distinguish forms of servitude in the IOW from those in the Atlantic World, it is vital to establish the meaning and historical significance of the IOW – a concept fundamentally different from that of the “Atlantic” or “Pacific” World. It was introduced from the 1980s by Asia-centric historians in order to counter Eurocentric historiography that emphasised Europe as the centre of the first global economy and, from the “Age of Discoveries”, European domination of the major commodities and sea lanes of the Indian Ocean arena (Wallerstein, 1974). Instead, Asia-centric historians posited Asia as the centre of the first global economy, one that developed by at least AD 1000 – possibly much earlier – and which remained dominant until at least the mid-eighteenth century. Some historians would argue it remained dominant until the early nineteenth century.

These historians’ argument is based on the adaptation of Braudelian concepts of “oceanic” space to the Asian region. Fernand Braudel, a major French historian in the post-1945 era, argued that conventional frameworks for historical analysis, notably territorial entities such as nation states, empires and continents, were inadequate because they largely ignored human–environment interaction. Thus, while Paris exercised political dominance over southern France, the material existence of people who lived in southern France had more in common with other inhabitants of the Mediterranean littoral, including northern Africa, being largely shaped by the
Mediterranean Sea and its climate, than with residents of northern France (Braudel, 1996).

Braudel’s theories inspired not only the development of the *Annales* School of historians in Europe, but also the new Asia-centric school of historians, who highlighted the role of the Asian monsoons – a complex system of winds and currents governing the waters of the northern Indian Ocean, the Indonesian Sea, and the South and East China Seas. Unique to this macro-region, the monsoons both regulated agricultural production and facilitated the early development of trans-oceanic trade.

The monsoons were critical to the emergence of specialist crop zones in the northern sector of the IOW. The most basic division was between winter “dry” crop wheat cultures of the Middle East, North India, Central Asia and northern China, where some irrigation was required if winter rains proved insufficient, and the summer “wet” rice cultures of Southeast and South Asia (and later of Madagascar) (Chaudhuri, 1985: 23). The technology of water control and storage techniques associated with economies based on irrigation emerged during the “Neolithic Revolution”, characterised by a concentration of population, the development of water conservation techniques and irrigation, and the domestication of wild food crops and animals.

This agricultural specialisation helped lay the basis for inter-regional trade. More fundamentally, the monsoons promoted the rise of trans-oceanic exchange. From April to September, as the Asian land mass heats up, hot air rises producing a vacuum that sucks in the air from the ocean, creating the southwest monsoon. During the other six “winter” months of the year, the opposite reaction occurs, creating the northeast monsoon. The monsoons thus comprise an alternating system of strong winds that blow from the northeast for six months of the year and from the southwest for the other six months, permitting the early development of trans-oceanic, intra-Asian sail. In addition, the monsoons, supplemented by a perennial system of equatorial winds and southern hemisphere southeast trade winds, offer a potential for regular trans-oceanic sail and commerce unparalleled in other oceans. As a result, purposeful two-way trans-oceanic trade emerged during the course of the first millennium AD, which by about the tenth century connected the major productive areas of Asia, China, India and Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq) in a sophisticated and durable network of long-distance maritime exchange of commodities, money, technology, ideas and people (Abu-Lughod, 1993: 78–79). It is this system that constituted the first “global” economy.

The IOW is thus a new conceptual framework. Whereas the Atlantic World is defined by oceans and land masses, the IOW is defined by the monsoons. Oceanic trade in the European global economy that developed from the fifteenth century was characterised by mercantilist precepts, reflected in an alliance between the state and the merchant class. By contrast, maritime exchange in the IOW global economy was, throughout the macro-region, dominated by littoral mercantile communities that retained a large degree of political and juridical independence from the centralised land-based polities in the hinterland. These polities, nevertheless, realised the advantages of having strong mercantile societies, and in many cases tried to protect such networks through the use of state power. These mercantile communities were externally oriented, developing trading networks and diaspora along the coastlines of neighbouring and overseas regions. They were also closely connected with riverine and overland trade arteries.
It is impossible to discuss bondage in the IOW without reference to forms of enslavement and trafficking in humans. Societies that developed economies based on irrigated agriculture required unprecedented labour inputs to create and maintain water channel and storage systems, and to harvest, store and transport the enhanced agricultural output of “wet” agricultural systems. It also required an extremely large and highly concentrated coerced labour force, notably in societies located alongside major rivers. Over time, the demographic growth stimulated by greater agricultural production generally allowed slave owners to easily acquire the labour they needed. The capture by the elite of surplus agricultural output, and their control of natural and human resources required to maintain the system, led to the emergence of highly stratified centralised hierarchical polities by around 2500 BC in Mesopotamia, Egypt and the Indus Valley (Ponting, 1993: 43–44, 55–56, 60), and separately in China by about 1750 BC (ibid., 49, 61). The leaders of such polities placed major restrictions on the geographical mobility of subject populations in order to ensure vital labour input into agriculture.

From around 2000 BC, the wealth generated by the water storage and control technology, along with associated increases in agricultural output and demographic growth, enabled the major centralised states, such as the Middle Kingdom in Egypt and Babylonia in Mesopotamia, to form powerful armies and engage in military expansion. As they pushed forward the frontiers of the state through the conquest of less powerful neighbouring populations, these armies were faced with the problem of what to do with captives. This resulted in two broad systems of enslavement that were maintained throughout the IOW up to the end of the nineteenth century. In the first system, most adult male captives from pastoralists and hunter-gatherer societies were executed, while female and child captives were enslaved, taken back to the imperial centre, and sold. The killing of male captives was largely motivated by the expense of enslaving men, who were more likely to flee or rebel than women or children (Goody, 1980: 32–34; Campbell, 1991). This system was the reputed origin of slavery in Mesopotamia in the third millennia BC (Goody, 1980: 18), and was widely practised throughout the IOW down to the nineteenth century (Boomgaard, 2004).

In the second system, adult male captives from advanced and settled agricultural regions were commonly maintained in situ alongside captive women and children in a state of community bondage. Some scholars believe this to have been the origins of praeedial servitude in India in the first millennia BC (Patnaik, 1985: 3). It also seems to have motivated the emergence of caste-like regulations that, as in India and Imerina (central highland Madagascar), served to curtail geographical mobility and thus ensured a permanent agricultural workforce in fertile, conquered regions (Campbell, 1985: 112–33). Such factors made viable the enslavement and surveillance of male captives (Goody, 1980: 21–22).

Nevertheless, over the long term, the majority of people entering slavery in the IOW probably did so through debt. Enslavement was legally enforced for defaulting debtors and their relatives in many IOW regions. In addition, the punishment for certain crimes was exacted in fines, which often led to indebtedness and subsequent enslavement (Reid, 1983: 10). Indebtedness was normally expressed in monetary terms, although it was often incurred in non-cash forms such as food or tools. As enslaved debtors were from the dominant slave-owning society, however, they generally enjoyed a higher status.
than imported slaves. Once they had paid off their debt, they could regain non-slave status.

Here, enslavement for indebtedness needs to be distinguished from debt bondage, even if both systems of enslavement could overlap. Enslavement for indebtedness was involuntary, whereas most people entered debt bondage voluntarily as a credit-securing strategy. Debt bondage embraced a vast range of people in the IOW, from farmers mortgaging future harvests and potential grooms borrowing a bride price, to small traders living off credit from larger merchants, to the ubiquitous rural gambler of Southeast and East Asia getting into short-term financial trouble, and including opium addicts in nineteenth-century China (Boomgaard, 2004; Delaye, 2004). Those subject to debt bondage often outnumbered those conventionally described as “slaves”. For example, enslaved people in debt bondage were the most numerous of the social categories in Majapahit, in Java, while in central Thailand in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries they formed up to 50 per cent of the total population. Their servitude was generally taken as paying off interest on the loan they had contracted, to which was added the cost of their accommodation, food and clothing. Consequently, their indebtedness invariably increased. Their servitude often became permanent, and sometimes became hereditary – at which point there was little to distinguish debt bondage from “slavery” (Rae, 2004).

Non-slave servile labour in the IOW was also sold or transferred involuntarily. People who were sold or transferred to others included “serfs” in Asia and Africa. In Africa, forms of pawnship were developed whereby children, especially girls, were “pawned” in return for money or an equivalent value in goods. They became “slaves” if they were not reclaimed within an established time period. Some were transferred as tribute or ransom. In open and private markets, people sold family members into temporary and permanent slavery. Other common forms of entry into bondage were through kidnapping by criminal gangs and through legally imposed enslavement for crime.

Some people entered slavery voluntarily, notably due to natural disasters. The Southern Oscillation or El Niño effect, produced every seven to ten years by changes in the pressure gradient across the Pacific Ocean, often provokes severe droughts throughout the IOW. Moreover, it tends to be followed in consecutive years by La Niña – a weather system that causes unusually heavy rain (Atwell, 2001: 39–40). Flooding that was destructive to property and harvests also frequently accompanied monsoons and cyclones. Moreover, Southeast and East Asia were centres of volcanic activity that could wreak both immediate local destruction and, through cloud veil-induced lower temperatures, years of depressed agricultural productivity across the macro-region and beyond. When El-Niño or La Niña coincided with sulphur rich volcanism, as in 1641, the effect could be catastrophic.

Natural disasters were frequently accompanied by famine and disease, which independently could have catastrophic consequences. For example, the bubonic plague that erupted in epidemic form in China in 1331 and spread along the main caravan routes of Asia to reach Crimea and Europe in 1346, killing an estimated 90 per cent of those infected, had a far greater impact in the IOW than in Europe. It killed some 50 per cent of China’s population, and was probably as devastating in centres of population in India, the Middle East and Africa linked to trans-Asian commercial routes (Ponting, 1993: 228–29).

Natural disasters could so impoverish households that in extremis they sold family members into bondage in order to enhance the chances of survival of both the individual sold and the remaining family members. In Africa, in times of famine, a kinship group
might transfer its rights in a kinship member to another lineage in return for goods or money, children and young adults being the most marketable. If not redeemed, these transferred “pawns” were retained by the creditor lineage (Kopytoff and Miers, 1977: 10–11). In China, in bad times, fathers often sold their daughters or secondary wives, though only non-elite households broke the taboo against selling sons. Throughout the IOW, parents also let their children out for adoption in exchange for money, while debt bondspersons could sometimes be exchanged, as could other servile people as part of a marriage dowry or a monastery donation. Even in relatively prosperous times poor low-status non-slaves occasionally offered themselves for sale to a member of the elite because of the promise of a higher standard of living and a higher status as the slave of a powerful or wealthy master. It was for these reasons, for example, that in the nineteenth century certain Filipino girls became concubines of high-status Sulu males (Warren, 2004; see also Watson, 1980: 227–36; Boomgaard, 2004).

Indian Ocean World slave trades over time

Indian Ocean World slave trades should thus be considered in the context both of the IOW global economy and of natural disasters. Demand for servile labour generally correlated directly with economic cycles and with high mortality associated with major natural disasters, famines and epidemic disease. Long-term economic cycles appear clear, with sustained peaks from c. 200 BC to AD 200 AD; c. AD 800–1300; and c. 1780–1910. Records clearly illustrate the disastrous impact of natural disasters in the mid-seventeenth century. However, much more research is required to flesh out medium- and short-term economic cycles, other periods of high mortality, and intra-IOW regional variations in both economic performance and natural disasters.

During sustained economic booms, high demand existed for servile labour for both directly productive work (agriculture, craft, commerce, transport) and non-productive work (military and guards, domestic labour, entertainment, sexual services). As periods of economic prosperity correlated directly with agricultural output and demographic growth, demand for productive labour was met chiefly by traditional forms of local servile labour. Consequently, many imported bondspersons, especially women and children, became items of conspicuous consumption. Women were deployed as domestics, wet-nurses, secondary wives, and providers of childcare, entertainment and sexual services. Girls were groomed for similar roles, while boys were employed as grooms, guards and soldiers. In royal circles, enslaved boys, if talented or particularly favoured, could become bureaucrats or advisers.

At times of economic slowdown, stagnation or regression, demand declined for both productive and non-productive forms of labour. The fall in demand for imported servile labour was initially more marked in non-elite circles, where masters might first enter joint-ownership schemes, and eventually divest themselves entirely of servile labour. Some elite owners engaged in conspicuous consumption went bankrupt because of their desire to maintain a vast retinue of unproductive bondspersons. On the supply side, the quantity and quality of servile labour varied chiefly according to the incidence of warfare, slave raiding and kidnapping, natural disasters, and indebtedness – factors that could often, but not necessarily, overlap.

No precise estimates exist of the number of slaves traded in the IOW, chiefly due to the limited nature of extant records, and the fact that, in contrast to the Atlantic system,
IOW slaves rarely constituted a specialist cargo. However, it is likely that the cumulative number of slaves traded in and across the IOW over the centuries far exceeded the 10 to 12 million landed in the Americas. In the nineteenth century, when the IOW slave trade peaked, possibly 1.5 million slaves were exported from East Africa. Slaves comprised between 20 and 30 per cent of the population of many IOW societies, rising to over 50 per cent in parts of Africa and in Indonesian ports (Campbell, 1988: 474–75). The greatest IOW slave traffic was probably overland, notably in Africa, Hindu India and the Confucian Far East. In India alone, there were an estimated eight million to nine million indigenous slaves in 1841, double the number of black slaves in the United States in 1865.

Throughout the IOW, markets were supplied with slaves chiefly from neighbouring regions, because local slaves were cheaper to capture and transport. Consequently, merchants shipping such slaves suffered fewer losses en route than they did when trying to transport slaves from more distant regions (Arasaratnam, 1995: 200). In the eastern IOW, China and other centralised states obtained many of their slaves from attacks against decentralised hill “tribes” and “maritime” communities. Nevertheless, slaves were also exported from the eastern to the western IOW and further afield. For example, Indonesians were shipped to Southeast Asia and Cape Town, while in the nineteenth century Chinese slaves were sent to Singapore and San Francisco.

The bulk of studies of slavery in South Asia focus on imported Africans, mainly due to an Atlantic bias in the literature (Harris, 1971; Alpers, 1997). Nevertheless, the majority of the servile population in South Asia were of local origin (Kidwai, 86–8; Miller 25). Moreover, most slaves imported into India, at least in medieval times, were probably of Turk and Slavic origin. South Asia also exported bondpeople: Indians, for example, were exported as slaves to Macao, Japan, Indonesia, Mauritius and Cape Town.

In the Middle East, Circassians and Central Asians formed a clear majority of imported slaves until the tenth to thirteenth centuries, when their numbers may have been equalled by imported Africans, who possibly formed an absolute majority of slaves there in the nineteenth century (Lewis, 1990). In the early twentieth century, slaves were also imported into the Middle East from the Makran coast of Iran, Western India, Indonesia and China (Miers, 120–36).

The long nineteenth century witnessed enormous quantitative and qualitative difference in demand for servile labour in the IOW. The changes in IOW slavery were shaped primarily by the new forces of the international economy, by the attempts of indigenous states to modernise, by secondary imperialism, and by a growing commercialisation of labour. Much of the growing demand in the West for tropical produce from the mid-eighteenth century was supplied from the IOW. This demand, disrupted during the Napoleonic War, revived after 1815 and was sustained at ever higher levels by the industrial consumption of products such as copra, animal and vegetable oils, wax and rubber, and by an expanding Western taste; generalized for cash crops such as tea, coffee and sugar; and bourgeois tropical luxuries such as ivory, exotic feathers and animal trophies.

All these commodities needed to be produced or collected, sometimes treated, transported to docks, loaded onto vessels, and shipped to IOW and external markets, while the return flow of goods in exchange required shipping, offloading, and overland transport and distribution. Thus the growing commercial activity in the IOW associated with the international economy required a huge input of labour. Western scholars have focused attention initially on African slaves, and increasingly, as British anti-slave
trade pressure increased in East African waters in the early nineteenth century, on
the millions of Indian and Chinese indentured labourers recruited to work cash crop
plantations across the IOW. By 1900, there were about one million Indians
indentured on European-managed plantations in India. Between 1834 and 1920, two
million Indians were shipped to overseas plantations (Chandra, 1993: 11). Often
overlooked, however, is the fact that indigenous IOW elites also profited from the
commercial opportunities afforded by an expanding international economy. In part, they
profited from slavery designed to meet regional demand. For example, the luxury
market in the Middle East, South Asia and the Far East, particularly for tropical
animal products, was much more varied and dynamic than that of the West. However,
another reason for an increase in slavery in the IOW in the nineteenth century was
to cater for increased demand within the IOW. Thus indigenous IOW demand for
Chinese indentured labour was greater than European-generated demand. Of the
approximately 6.7 million people who emigrated from South China to Southeast Asia
in the period 1851–1901, only about 4 per cent ended up as “indentured” labour on
European estates.3

European warfare and imperialism also led to increased demands for labour in the
IOW. High mortality and sickness in tropical zones among European troops and seamen
inevitably resulted in growing demand for indigenous IOW replacements. Thus the
British in India increasingly attempted to recruit from the Sikhs, Gurkhas, and other
so-called “martial races” to secure and expand their interests not only in South Asia but
also throughout the IOW and beyond.

Demand for female servile labour also increased dramatically in the nineteenth century
so that in the IOW, in direct contrast to the Atlantic slave system, the proportion of
females in servitude increased in the modern era. This was often due to the demand for
sexual services established by men in sexually unbalanced situations, including indigen-
ous and European long-distance traders, soldiers and ships’ crews. Chinese emigration to
Southeast Asia and the creation of Portuguese, French, Dutch and British outposts in the
IOW had, from the early seventeenth century, created a considerable business in hired
and purchased female slaves to serve Chinese and European traders as sexual partners,
domestic servants and commercial agents. By the early nineteenth century, this aspect of
IOW slavery constituted what Anthony Reid terms a large-scale “marriage market”
(Reid, 1983: 26–27).

This demand for enslaved labourers increased dramatically during the nineteenth
century. In part, this was due to the commercial boom associated with the expansion of
the international economy and thus leading to increased numbers of single traders
(European and indigenous) operating in the IOW. Second, there was a massive growth
in the number of military, both indigenous and foreign. Academic research has con-
centrated on the impact of Europeans garrisoned in the IOW, which further stimulated
the trade in females (Chatterjee, 150–68).

Increased demand for female prostitutes also emanated from the rise of mass migra-
tion of indentured labour. Although Indian indentured labour was generally sexually
balanced, nineteenth-century labour migration in the IOW overall led to concentrations of
predominantly male workers. This was particularly pronounced in the case of the millions
of impoverished Chinese men who, between the 1840s and 1890s, emigrated to the new
commercial centres in the Americas, Africa and Southeast Asia since Chinese women were
officially forbidden to travel abroad. For instance, between the 1840s and 1890s, millions
of impoverished Chinese males emigrated to the new commercial centres in the Americas, Africa and Southeast Asia. The result was large groups of poor Chinese men in Singapore and Hong Kong, both places falling under British rule in 1821 and 1842, respectively (Jaschok and Miers, 1994: 19–20). Chiefly due to male immigration from south-eastern China, Singapore’s population quadrupled from the 1880s, resulting in a huge sexual imbalance of fourteen males for every female.

The demand for sexual services among enslaved people was in part met by “voluntary” prostitution. This trend was most marked as a response to “traditional” demand, from Muslim markets and from traders. Most “concubines” in the Middle East, free and servile, enjoyed a better lifestyle than the majority of female peasants (see e.g. Reid, 1983: 25–26). Above all, the greater assimilation of female slaves into the local slave-holding society meant that, although around three-quarters of slaves imported into the Gulf region were female, women comprised only one quarter of slaves seeking manumission from British consular officials.

Demand from traders, and occasionally from European visitors, was met in some regions voluntarily by indigenous “entrepreneurs” who hired out their services to traders, often on a seasonal basis. Thus in Madagascar, parents commonly hired out their daughters to serve as concubines and agents of foreign traders.

In the nineteenth century, however, there was a marked increase in the commercialisation of sexual services, which in turn led to increased involuntary prostitution and the exploitation of young females. Overlapping with debt bondage, the IOW trade in females has continued to this day. Wherever war or insecurity becomes endemic, as recently in the Sudan, it has expanded. Moreover, over the past few decades of rapid globalisation, it has also become more brutally commercial. An estimated 400,000 girls are trafficked each year in India alone. Precious little protection is offered to such females, while traditional possibilities of gaining economic independence have largely been closed as the trade has fallen increasingly into the hands of male-dominated, mafia-type structures. The very high risk of contracting HIV and dying young of AIDS has further stigmatised and sharply reduced the life expectancy and living standards of such women.

Servitude in the Indian Ocean World

From the foregoing analysis, it is evident that there existed in the IOW complex and shifting slave trades that started well before the Common Era, remained vigorous into the twentieth century, and in some areas are still maintained. In all of these trades, sources, markets, routes and slave functions varied considerably. Thus, with the exception of a minority of European settlements such as Réunion and Mauritius, the characteristics of IOW slavery contrasted sharply with those of the Americas. In the American “model” of slavery, 10–12 million African slaves were put to work mostly on plantations and in mines; they formed large concentrated communities of visibly servile “foreigners” of African descent, deprived of civil rights, and whose status was hereditary. Moreover, violence against them was intrinsic to the system.

In the IOW, outside the few plantation economies such as Mauritius, slaves rarely lived in large communities. Moreover, slaves were employed in a vast range of functions, the range and responsibilities of which were much wider than those encompassed by the Atlantic model. Slaves may have performed most field labour in Africa and India, but there, as elsewhere in the IOW, peasant slave owners generally worked alongside their
slaves in predominantly subsistence production. Slaves also laboured in mines, craftwork, porterage, fishing, commerce, and, if they were female, in textile production (Goody, 1980: 21, 32). Some slaves received shelter, food and clothing from their owners; others were given land, from which they were expected to obtain the resources to sustain themselves. Yet others were rented out or left free to seek livelihoods. However, in the IOW most slaves were probably acquired as symbols of conspicuous consumption, to reflect the power and wealth of their owners.

Outside European-managed plantations, violence was rarely used extensively against slaves. Slaves represented a substantial capital asset worth maintaining or even enhancing, while maximum slave productivity could be achieved only through acknowledging the essential humanity of slaves (Klein, 1993: 11–12; Meillassoux, 1991: 9–10). Indeed, slaves in the IOW generally enjoyed an array of traditional and prescribed rights unknown on the American plantations. Even in European settlements, outside the Mascarenes, their treatment was tempered by local economic and political forces. Even in Korea and China, where the most extreme systems of hereditary slavery were practised, slaves possessed a legal status and were immune from state corvées, and their marriages were generally respected.

It is at this point that the application of the simplistic, literally black-and-white dichotomies of the Atlantic model in IOW slavery studies become nonsensical. The terms used in languages indigenous to the IOW, and which are conventionally translated as “slave”, do not derive from a common root, as in most European languages (slav), and rarely carry the conventional Atlantic connotations of the term. There exist, even within the same cultures, a variety of terms signifying different levels of servility, the meanings of which vary according to place and time (Eno, 83–93). Not only do servile statuses often overlap, they can move up and down in the hierarchy of statuses, and some of those conventionally described as “slaves” were sometimes also owners of “slaves”. Most slaves possessed some rights, many that were upheld in law – as in the wide band of Islamic societies that ran in a wide arc across the IOW. For example, in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Sulu, banyaga slaves married, owned property and performed wide-ranging functions on the same terms as non-slaves. Again, most female slaves probably enjoyed a lifestyle and a respect often superior to that of both male slaves and female peasants. There are instances of concubines in the Middle East sending for family members to join them – albeit as non-slaves. In some cases, as in nineteenth-century imperial Madagascar, some slaves even refused freedom to avoid being subject to a corvée system that reduced “free” subjects to comparatively worse living standards and a lower life expectancy than slaves.

This renders irrelevant the application to the IOW of the conventional dichotomy between slave and “free” that is central to any analysis of slavery based on the Atlantic model. The slave–free dichotomy that characterised New World slave societies was premised on the notion of the absence or possession of individual liberty. This concept was largely absent in IOW societies, where each person had an allotted status that carried with it a multiplicity of rights and obligations, but which could also overlap with other status and change position in the hierarchy of statuses. This fluidity makes it difficult to forge hard-and-fast distinctions between types of servitude, or to contrast “slave” with “free”. As Anthony Reid underlines, the concept of personal freedom can be pitched against that of slavery only when all other forms of servitude are subsumed into a clearly defined category of “slaves” (Reid, 1983: 21).
The meaning of IOW systems of bondage becomes clearer if conceptualised within a hierarchy of dependency in which “slaves” constituted one of a number of servile groups. It was a reciprocal system in which obligation implied servitude to an individual with superior status, to a kin group or to the crown in return for protection. The highest status was enjoyed in acephelous societies by a group of elders, and in centralised societies by a sovereign who theoretically “owned” all those of inferior status: this was possibly most visible with corvée labour imposed on subjects who, in most IOW countries, were considered crown “property”. In this sense, it could be argued, corvée fits the concept of “property” performing “compulsory labour” used by some authors as a defining characteristic of slavery (see Watson, 1980: 7).

Moreover, in the worldview of pre-industrial societies, there was no division between the temporal and the spiritual; the supernatural could bless or curse human activities and so required respect and appeasement from mortals. Thus in most communities the living and the dead were incorporated into a giant hierarchy of overlapping statuses, each with associated rights and obligations, in which the concept of bondage transcended temporal life. Kings were considered to be imbued with sacred power, but were in turn governed by the ancestors or gods. In Islam, for example, all Muslims were “slaves” of Allah.

Conclusion

To date, most studies of slavery in the IOW have been inspired and informed by the Atlantic model of slavery, in which there is a clearly distinct black “foreigner” community, of permanent and inheritable slave status, deprived of civil rights, and in which the violence exercised by the white slave-owner community on slaves is pervasive. Historians have concentrated overwhelmingly on the experience of East Africans shipped as slaves to European and Muslim settlements and plantations in the Western Indian Ocean.

However, slavery in the IOW cannot be understood outside the context of the IOW global economy, which arose during the first millennium AD and lasted into the nineteenth century, when the forces of the international economy increasingly embraced the macro-region. The IOW global economy was a sophisticated and durable system of long-distance exchange that linked China to Southeast and South Asia, the Middle East and Africa. It established a demand for different types of servile labour, primarily met by the military and political conquest of neighbouring peoples, but which also gave rise to complex slave trades involving enslaved peoples of many different origins, cultures and skin colours. During the history of the IOW slave trade, probably many more slaves were traded than in the Atlantic system and, overall, black Africans formed a minority of slaves traded. Moreover, most slaves were probably objects of conspicuous consumption by elites – whose wealth and power they were purchased to reflect. These slaves, who performed little economically productive labour, enjoyed a status and standard of living higher than most nominally “free”, yet still servile, peasants.

Notes

1 A salutary exception is William Gervase Clarence-Smith, who, however, concentrates on an analysis of the Indian Ocean slave trade within the context of the burgeoning international economy of the nineteenth century, rather than within the pre-1800 global economy (Clarence-Smith, 1989).

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2 Janet Abu-Lughod considers that a nascent global economy existed by the second century AD. However, she argues that its core was not Asian economies but the Roman Empire, and that it failed to survive the collapse of the latter in the third century (Abu-Lughod, 1993: 80).


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