

Forms of Inclusion and Exclusion in African Slavery: An Interpretive Essay

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Enslavement and slavery have emerged as major themes in African history. Many estimates put the number of slaves in Africa by the late nineteenth century at ten million. Another salient feature of slavery in Africa is the diversity of societies in which slaves were employed, their economies, their cultural orientations, and their modes of employing captives. It is clear that the diversity of slaveries in Africa was greater than that for any other continent. One of the implications of this diversity is that the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion of slaves within Africa varied dramatically from society to society. Scholars of slavery have long argued over whether the essence of African slavery was its inclusiveness--incorporating slaves into kin groups--or whether slavery in Africa was just as exclusive as that in the Americas. This debate offers starting points for our investigation, but it fails to account for the specific ways in which forces for inclusion and exclusion of slaves differed from slave society to slave society. What were the factors influencing the degree to which slaves were incorporated or excluded from the societies in which they served their slavery? How did the enslaved negotiate their positions within the societies of their captivity? Was it possible to be simultaneously included and excluded in a particular society? What were the forces for change in social position over time?

This interpretive essay argues that the study of forms of exclusion and inclusion among ex-slaves in contemporary society must start with an examination of the period of slavery itself. My method will be to work from both primary research and a careful reading of the secondary literature to examine these questions. The essay will be comparative in nature, setting selected African slave societies side-by-side to examine the relative importance of master and slave strategies, demography, marriage systems, land availability, domestic arrangements and other factors that influenced the social incorporation and exclusion of slaves.