

Mungo Park (1771-1806) was a Scottish surgeon who became famous as an explorer of West Africa. In 1795, the wealthy, noble, and geographically-curious Members of the African Association sent him on a mission to discover the course of the Niger, the principal river of West Africa. While Park never did follow the full course of the Niger, and died during a second attempt that began in 1805, he did become the first European to publish a record of a journey that covered the central portion of that river. To readers today, the most surprising portion of Park's travel book is Chapter 22 (almost all of which is included below), which unveils the presence of a vast slave society in the interior of black Africa.

### **Mungo Park on Slavery in Africa**

(*Travels in the Interior of Africa*, by Mungo Park, Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, North Bridge, printed by R. and R. Clark, 1858, pages 176-182; first published in 1799.)

A State of subordination, and certain inequalities of rank and condition, are inevitable in every stage of civil society; but when this subordination is carried to so great a length, that the persons and services of one part of the community are entirely at the disposal of another part, it may then be denominated a state of slavery; and in this condition of life, a great body of the Negro inhabitants of Africa have continued from the most early period of their history, with this aggravation, that their children are born to no other inheritance.

The slaves in Africa, I suppose, are nearly in the proportion of three to one to the freemen. They claim no reward for their services except food and clothing, and are treated with kindness or severity, according to the good or bad disposition of their masters. Custom, however, has established certain rules with regard to the treatment of slaves, which it is thought dishonourable to violate. Thus, the domestic slaves, or such as are born in a man's own house, are treated with more lenity than those which are purchased with money. The authority of the master over the domestic slave...extends only to reasonable correction; for the master cannot sell his domestic without having first brought him to a public trial before the chief men of the place. (In time of famine, the master is permitted to sell one or more of his domestics, to purchase provisions for his family; and in case of the master's insolvency, the domestic slaves are sometimes seized upon by the creditors, and if the master cannot redeem them, they are liable to be sold for payment of his debts. These are the only cases that I recollect, in which the domestic slaves are liable to be sold, without any misconduct or demerit of their own.) But these restrictions on the power of the master extend not to the case of prisoners taken in war, nor to that of slaves purchased with money. All these unfortunate beings are considered as strangers and foreigners, who have no right to the protection of the law, and may be treated with severity, or sold to a stranger, according to the pleasure of their owners. There are, indeed, regular markets, where slaves of this description are bought and sold; and the value of a slave in the eye of an African purchaser, increases in proportion to his distance from his native kingdom; for when slaves are only a few days' journey from the place of their nativity, they frequently effect their escape; but when one or more kingdoms intervene, escape being more difficult, they are more readily reconciled to their situation. On this account, the unhappy slave is frequently transferred from one dealer to another, until he has lost all hopes of returning to his native kingdom. The slaves which are purchased by the Europeans on the coast are chiefly of this description; a few of them are collected in the petty wars, hereafter to be described, which

take place near the coast; but by far the greater number are brought down in large caravans from the inland countries, of which many are unknown even by name to the Europeans. The slaves which are thus brought from the interior may be divided into two distinct classes; first, such as were slaves from their birth, having been born of enslaved mothers; secondly, such as were born free, but who afterwards, by whatever means, became slaves. Those of the first description are by far the most numerous; for prisoners taken in war (at least such as are taken in open and declared war, when one kingdom avows hostilities against another), are generally of this description. The comparatively small proportion of free people to the enslaved throughout Africa has already been noticed; and it must be observed, that men of free condition have many advantages over the slaves, even in war time. They are in general better armed and well mounted, and can either fight or escape with some hopes of success; but the slaves who have only their spears and bows, and of whom great numbers are loaded with baggage, become an easy prey... Again, when a freeman is taken prisoner, his friends will sometimes ransom him by giving two slaves in exchange; but when a slave is taken, he has no hopes of such redemption. To these disadvantages, it is to be added that the Slatees [black slave-merchants], who purchase slaves in the interior countries, and carry them down to the coast for sale, constantly prefer such as have been in that condition of life from their infancy, well knowing that these have been accustomed to hunger and fatigue, and are better able to sustain the hardships of a long and painful journey than free men; and on their reaching the coast, if no opportunity offers of selling them to advantage, they can easily be made to maintain themselves by their labour, neither are they so apt to attempt making their escape as those who have once tasted the blessings of freedom.

Slaves of the second description generally become such by one or other of the following causes: 1. Captivity; 2. Famine; 3. Insolvency; 4. Crimes. A freeman may, by the established customs of Africa, become a slave by being taken in war. War is, of all others, the most productive source, and was probably the origin of slavery; for when one nation had taken from another a greater number of captives than could be exchanged on equal terms, it is natural to suppose that the conquerors, finding it inconvenient to maintain their prisoners, would compel them to labour; at first, perhaps, only for their own support, but afterwards to support their masters. Be this as it may, it is a known fact, that prisoners of war in Africa are the slaves of the conquerors; and when the weak or unsuccessful warrior begs for mercy beneath the uplifted spear of his opponent, he gives up at the same time his claim to liberty, and purchases his life at the expense of his freedom.

In a country divided into a thousand petty states, mostly independent and jealous of each other, where every freeman is accustomed to arms and fond of military achievements; where the youth, who has practised the bow and spear from his infancy, longs for nothing so much as an opportunity to display his valour, it is natural to imagine that wars frequently originate from very frivolous provocation. When one nation is more powerful than another, a pretext is seldom wanting for commencing hostilities. Thus the war between Kajaaga and Kasson was occasioned by the detention of a fugitive slave; that between Bambarra and Kaarta by the loss of a few cattle. Other cases of the same nature perpetually occur, in which the folly or mad ambition of their princes, and the zeal of their religious enthusiasts, give full employment to the scythe of desolation.

The wars of Africa are of two kinds, which are distinguished by different appellations; that species which bears the greatest resemblance to our European contests, is denominated *killi*, a word signifying "to call out," because such wars are openly avowed and previously declared. Wars of this description in Africa commonly terminate, however, in the course of a single campaign. A battle is fought, the vanquished seldom think of rallying again; the whole inhabitants become panic struck, and the conquerors have only to bind the slaves, and carry off their plunder and their victims. Such of the prisoners as, through age or infirmity, are unable to endure fatigue, or are found unfit for sale, are considered as useless, and I have no doubt are frequently put to death. The same fate commonly awaits a chief, or any other person who has taken a very distinguished part in the war. And here it may be observed that, notwithstanding this exterminating system, it is surprising to behold how soon an African town is rebuilt and repeopled. The circumstance arises probably from this, that their pitched battles are few, the weakest know their own situation, and seek safety in flight. When their country has been desolated, and their ruined towns and villages deserted by the enemy, such of the inhabitants as have escaped the sword and the chain, generally return, though with cautious steps, to the place of their nativity; for it seems to be the universal wish of mankind to spend the evening of their days where they passed their infancy. The poor Negro feels this desire in its full force. To him no water is sweet but what is drawn from his own well, and no tree has so cool and pleasant a shade as the...tree of his native village. When war compels him to abandon the delightful spot in which he first drew his breath, and seek for safety in some other kingdom, his time is spent in talking about the country of his ancestors; and no sooner is peace restored, than he turns his back upon the land of strangers, rebuilds with haste his fallen walls, and exults to see the smoke ascend from his native village.

The other species of African warfare is distinguished by the appellation of *tegria*, "plundering or stealing." It arises from a sort of hereditary feud which the inhabitants of one nation or district bear towards another. No immediate cause of hostility is assigned, or notice of attack given; but the inhabitants of each watch every opportunity to plunder and distress the objects of their animosity by predatory excursions. These are very common, particularly about the beginning of the dry season, when the labour of the harvest is over, and provisions are plentiful. Schemes of vengeance are then meditated. The chief man surveys the number and activity of his vassals, as they brandish their spears at festivals, and, elated with his own importance, turns his whole thoughts towards revenging some depredation or insult, which either he or his ancestors may have received from a neighbouring state.

Wars of this description are generally conducted with great secrecy. A few resolute individuals, headed by some person of enterprise and courage, march quietly through the woods, surprise in the night some unprotected village, and carry off the inhabitants and their effects before their neighbours can come to their assistance. One morning, during my stay at Kamalia, we were all much alarmed by a party of this kind. The king of Fooladoo's son, with five hundred horsemen, passed secretly through the woods, a little to the southward of Kamalia, and on the morning following plundered three towns belonging to Madigai, a powerful chief in Jallonkadoo.

The success of this expedition encouraged the governor of Bangassi, a town in Fooladoo, to make a second inroad upon another part of the same country. Having assembled about two hundred of his people, he passed the river Kokoro in the night, and carried off a great number of prisoners. Several of the inhabitants who had escaped these attacks, were afterwards seized by the Mandingoes as they wandered about in the woods, or concealed themselves in the glens and strong places of the mountains.

These plundering excursions always produce speedy retaliation; and when large parties cannot be collected for this purpose, a few friends will combine together, and advance into the enemy's country, with a view to plunder, or carry off the inhabitants. A single individual has been known to take his bow and quiver, and proceed in like manner. Such an attempt is doubtless in him an act of rashness; but when it is considered that in one of these predatory wars, he has probably been deprived of his child, or his nearest relation, his situation will rather call for pity than censure. The poor sufferer, urged on by the feelings of domestic or paternal attachment, and the ardour of revenge, conceals himself among the bushes, until some young or unarmed person passes by. He then, tiger-like, springs upon his prey, drags his victim into the thicket, and in the night carries him off as a slave.

When a Negro has, by means like these, once fallen into the hands of his enemies, he is either retained as the slave of his conqueror, or bartered into a distant kingdom; for an African, when he has once subdued his enemy, will seldom give him an opportunity of lifting up his hand against him at a future period. A conqueror commonly disposes of his captives according to the rank which they held in their native kingdom. Such of the domestic slaves as appear to be of a mild disposition, and particularly the young women, are retained as his own slaves. Others that display marks of discontent are disposed of in a distant country, and such of the freemen or slaves as have taken an active part in the war, are either sold to the Slatees, or put to death. War, therefore, is certainly the most general and most productive source of slavery, and the desolations of war often (but not always) produce the second cause of slavery, famine, in which case a freeman becomes a slave to avoid a greater calamity.

Perhaps, by a philosophic and reflecting mind, death itself would scarcely be considered as a greater calamity than slavery; but the poor Negro, when fainting with hunger, thinks like Esau of old; "behold I am at the point to die, and what profit shall this birthright do to me?" There are many instances of free men voluntarily surrendering up their liberty to save their lives. During a great scarcity, which lasted for three years, in the countries of the Gambia, great numbers of people became slaves in this manner. Dr. Laidley [a British merchant who had resided in West Africa for many years] assured me, that at that time many free men came and begged with great earnestness to be put upon his slave-chain, to save them from perishing of hunger. Large families are very often exposed to absolute want; and as the parents have almost unlimited authority over their children, it frequently happens, in all parts of Africa, that some of the latter are sold to purchase provisions for the rest of the family. When I was at Jarra, Daman Jumma pointed out to me three young slaves which he had purchased in this manner...

The third cause of slavery is insolvency. Of all the offences (if insolvency may be so called) to which the laws of Africa have affixed the punishment of slavery, this is the most common. A Negro trader commonly contracts debts on some mercantile speculation, either from his neighbours, to purchase such articles as will sell to advantage in a distant market, or from the European traders on the coast—payment to be made in a given time. In both cases the situation of the adventurer is exactly the same. If he succeeds, he may secure an independency. If he is unsuccessful, his person and services are at the disposal of another, for in Africa not only the effects of the insolvent, but even the insolvent himself, is sold to satisfy the lawful demands of his creditors.

The fourth cause above enumerated is the commission of crimes, on which the laws of the country affix slavery as a punishment. In Africa, the only offences of this class are murder, adultery, and witchcraft; and I am happy to say, that they did not appear to me to be common. In cases of murder, I was informed that the nearest relation of the deceased had it in his power, after conviction, either to kill the offender with his own hand, or sell him into slavery. When adultery occurs, it is generally left to the option of the person injured, either to sell the culprit, or accept such a ransom for him as he may think equivalent to the injury he has sustained. By witchcraft is meant pretended magic, by which the lives or healths of persons are affected; in other words, it is the administering of poison. No trial for this offence, however, came under my observation while I was in Africa, and I therefore suppose that the crime and its punishment occur but very seldom.

When a freeman has become a slave by any one of the causes before mentioned, he generally continues so for life, and his children (if they are born of an enslaved mother) are brought up in the same state of servitude. There are, however, a few instances of slaves obtaining their freedom, and sometimes even with the consent of their masters; as by performing some singular piece of service, or by going to battle, and bringing home two slaves as a ransom; but the common way of regaining freedom is by escape; and when slaves have once set their minds on running away, they often succeed. Some of them will wait for years before an opportunity presents itself, and during that period shew no signs of discontent. In general, it may be remarked that slaves who come from a hilly country, and have been much accustomed to hunting and travel, are more apt to attempt their escape than such as are born in a flat country, and have been employed in cultivating the land.

Such are the general outlines of that system of slavery which prevails in Africa, and it is evident, from its nature and extent, that it is a system of no modern date. It probably had its origin in the remote ages of antiquity, before the Mahomedans [Muslims] explored a path across the desert. How far it is maintained and supported by the slave traffic, which for two hundred years the nations of Europe have carried on with the natives of the coast, it is neither within my province nor in my power to explain. If my sentiments should be required concerning the effect which a discontinuance of that commerce would produce on the manners of the natives, I should have no hesitation in observing, that, in the present unenlightened state of their minds, my opinion is, the effect would neither be so extensive or beneficial as many wise and worthy persons fondly expect.