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## Gender And Slavery

Slavery can be defined as a condition in which one human being was owned by another which meant a slave was considered by law as property, consequently depriving them of most of the rights held by free persons. The slave systems in Africa consisted of internal practices such as Political slavery which was the use of slaves in government/ military, Productive slavery which was the use of slaves in production and Domestic slavery, the use of slaves within households. A common feature across practices is that they all involve trading men, women and children, which raises the question on the importance of gender in shaping or having an effect on the way the African slave systems worked.

Saleability was also another common feature across all practices and in some cases, women were perceived to be more valuable than men because they were high in demand which meant that they consistently brought high prices. This supports the view that gender played a pivotal role in shaping African slave systems, in this essay I will delve into the economic, social and political perspectives of gender and slavery, whilst taking into account the historiography of African slave systems in the 1800s. According to Robertson and Klein in their book 'Women's Importance in African Slave Systems', the majority of sub-Saharan African slaves were women, yet many accounts of African slavery are written as though the slaves were exclusively men as they assume that the owners and users of slaves were male. This is supported by Young who mentions in her work 'Women, slavery compensation and gender relations in the 1830s' that although Brathwaite may have argued that Caribbean slavery was essentially a "male enterprise" the records of the Slavery Compensation depict a different picture. As numerical evidence states that between 40 and 45% of these claims were filled by women suggesting that female ownership was more prevalent than one might assume, therefore supporting the argument that these women received minimal attention in the historiography of slavery abolition.

A way in which gender shaped African slave systems was that women tended to be higher in demand than men which resulted in large economic advantages for the slave owners because enslaved females consistently brought in large profits, thus showing their high monetary value. This is supported by Austen who noted that in Cameroon adult male slaves brought in the best prices in the 1790s however from the 1860s to the 1890s we see the doubling of prices paid for women and children. Robertson and Klein acknowledged in their work that there was a major debate over the function female slaves in regard to production and reproduction, many historians have assumed that African women were preferred as slaves because of their value of reproduction. This is supported by Goody who assumed that female slaves were only valued for biological reproduction. However, this argument can be dismissed because although most colonial North America favoured young men as slave the majority of them were shipped to the West Indies because their sugar crops dominated the international trade economy. This created a gap and thus contributed to the increase in the demand of female slaves because of their availability.

Skilled labour such as carpentry was assigned to male slaves which had a direct impact on the number of men available for agricultural work thus leading to female slaves eventually outnumbering men in field forces. Although, on small farms women were more likely to perform

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the same labour as men on larger farms field work was divided based on gender because more physically demanding tasks were handed to men. For example, "men might chop wood for a fence while women were put in charge of construction. " Miller argues that this debate has not been resolved because it is sufficient to point out that both the reproductive and productive functions of women shaped the social lives of female slaves within specific households and communities that their relative importance changed during the life cycle of the female slave and over time. An example of this is that overtime female slaves who tended to be younger girls were mainly employed as agricultural laborers whilst becoming firmly attached to the households of their male owners and through marriage or childbearing.

When looking into the role that gender played in shaping African slave systems, we must explore the different functions enslaved females played within the system proved of more importance than their male counter parts. Mack argues that enslaved females were crucial to the maintenance of the seats of power in 19th century Nigeria and were more highly valued than men in the local market. This formed the structure of the largest slave-holding households in northern Nigerian towns as Shehu Usman dan Fodio began his campaign to reform local Islam in 1804. Raiding and kidnapping became a way of obtaining both male and female slaves but it could be argued that women suffered more from this because of the exploitation of the black woman's sexuality. Despite this, some enslaved females saw this as a gate way to improve their future life because the relationships that developed between the enslaved females and their owners gave hope to some women hope that such relationships would increase the chances that they or their children would be liberated by their master.

Therefore, it could be argued that gender did shape the African slave systems because men and women were treated differently and, in some cases, women had some advantages over men purely because of their gender. This can also be supported by the fact that women played a major role in the smooth operation of these affluent urban household, especially those highly dominated by Islamic traditions because Islam enforced the seclusion of wives thus giving a rise to the need of domestic slavery. This was prevalent within royal settings where enslaved females had the role of attending to the needs of the wives whilst nurturing their children who also inherited a royal status. Thus, creating the structure of the largest slave-holding households in Northern Nigerian towns as Shehu Usman dan Fodio began his campaign to reform local Islam in 1804.

Furthermore, it is important to consider opposing arguments in regard to whether gender shaped slavery, one could argue that gender may have not shaped slavery because in some regions the sale of enslaved males was close to parity which highlights that gender may have not mattered as much for some slave owners. These regional differences can be supported by how in Zaire River, there was almost equal demand for men as canoe paddlers and women as food producers, and the male to female ratio was close to parity, similarly in Zanzibar there were close to parity mainly because of the high value placed on male labour. Despite this it could still be argued that gender shaped slavery in African slave systems because enslaved males and females were assigned roles based on their gender. For example, men being assigned roles such as canoe paddlers was based on their physicality, it fits into the traditional views of men being strong and women being weak hence why they were given more menial roles such as food producers. Meillassoux and others have also argued that African societies were stratified by age and sex, which determined the division of labour a structure that was incorporated during slavery. This argument can be explored further via Klien's sociological argument that the greater ease of assimilating enslaved females as opposed to enslaved males is not only due to

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structural factors and women's reproductive functions, but also their submissive socialisation because in many societies' women were almost conditioned to obey men unquestioningly.

Women seemed to be more affected than men socially because if they were freed through their reproductive functions, they were also trapped by them because they often refused to abandon their children. For example, the mother of Swema chose to sell herself into slavery along with her daughter rather than being parted from her, here we do not only see gender shaping slavery we also see its intervention with households and family structures. However, stressing reproduction and assimilation also distorts the position and functions of enslaved females by underestimating their productive functions, purely because arguments which attribute to the high prices paid for women to their biological reproductive function do not hold up very well under the impact of the fertility data available. This argument isn't consistent because it can be dismissed by the fact that, the internal African market, which was the largest of the 3, absorbed mainly women and children, this was evident not only on the mainland, but also in Madagascar. Therefore suggesting that women were highly valued because of their reproductive functions as it translated in their saleability across many regions.

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