

# Shadows of Slavery

## in West Africa and Beyond. A Historical Anthropology (ERC GRANT 313757)



**“It becomes vital to understand what social legitimacy slavery possesses”**

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Antonio De Lauri interviews  
William Gervase Clarence-Smith<sup>1</sup>

**Antonio De Lauri:** Shall we start with a brief biographical note? How did you become an academic?

**W. G. Clarence-Smith:** I was born in Ahmedabad (Gujarat), and brought up in Eritrea and Cameroun. Although I was sent back to boarding school in England at the age of eight, these early experiences on three frontiers of the Dar al-Islam awakened a precocious interest in Islam. At Cambridge University, I chose courses on imperial and African history, and followed this up in Paris, at the Institut d’Études Politiques, for the equivalent of an MA. My PhD, at SOAS, University of London, was on southern Angola in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. My first teaching job, in 1975, was in the History Department of the University of Zambia, Lusaka. I then did a spell as a research fellow at the Centre of Southern African Studies, University of York, England, while also teaching in the Politics Department. In 1980, I obtained a lectureship in the History Department at SOAS, University of London, where I have been ever since. I moved from the African to the Southeast Asian section of the SOAS History Department in 1992, after a two-year retraining period. In 2004, I became chief editor of the new *Journal of Global History*, which produced its first issue in 2006, and is published by Cambridge University Press.

<sup>1</sup> William Gervase Clarence-Smith is Professor of the Economic History of Asia and Africa at SOAS, University of London, and chief editor of the *Journal of Global History*, Cambridge University Press. He published *Islam and the abolition of slavery*, (London: Hurst, 2006), and edited *The economics of the Indian Ocean slave trade in the nineteenth century* (London: Frank Cass, 1989). In addition to works on slavery, he has also written widely on Islam, sexuality, science, colonialism, diasporas, non-slave labour, manufacturing, transport, and agriculture and livestock. He currently teaches on Islam in Southeast Asia 1760s-1960s, and on historical methodology.



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**Antonio De Lauri:** Who are the scholars and intellectuals that have mostly influenced your work?

**W. G. Clarence-Smith:** In my youth, the Second Vatican Council and Pope John XXIII awakened a persistent engagement with reformist Christianity. As a student, the revisionist Marxist works of Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser were a major influence, and their scepticism about economic determinism has carried over into my querying the economic nature of slavery. At the same time, I studied Sigmund Freud and psychoanalysis, and developed an abiding orientation towards psychohistory, reinforcing convictions about non-economic aspects of servitude. As I became increasingly disenchanted with even revisionist Marxism, I moved closer to the École des Annales, notably the writings of Fernand Braudel. Later still, I was attracted to the work of Douglass North and New Institutional Economics, albeit disappointed by the group's continuing slide into the arid artificiality of game theory. As I delved further into Islam, I learned much from the writings of Fazlur Rahman on modernism and its rivals. Two outstanding scholars have also acted more personally as my mentors, Tony Hopkins, with his insistence on the centrality of the firm in economic history, and Patrick O'Brien, who has initiated me into matters fiscal and scientific.

**Antonio De Lauri:** When has your interest on slavery started?

**W. G. Clarence-Smith:** I first began to research slavery in depth in the early 1970s, when working on my PhD Thesis on Angola. The official Portuguese line, as I was carrying out my research, was that the workers in the fisheries and farms of southern Angola were not slaves, but were contract labourers 'redeemed from servitude'. However, foreign writers, notably Henry Nevinson around 1900, and many others since, asserted that they were indeed slaves. In my doctoral project, which gave rise to my first book, and in later research on the cocoa plantations of the Gulf of Guinea, I established, to my own satisfaction, that the bulk of workers in many colonial enterprises were in reality slaves, despite the legal formalities of contracts. 'Contracts' were not only bought and sold without reference to the workers themselves, but workers were also automatically 'recontracted' at the end of their official period of indenture, and any children born to them were automatically 'contracted' on becoming adults. As a local ditty put it, cited by James Duffy among others, 'In São Tomé, there is a door to go in, but none to go out'. I also ascertained that the Portuguese Republicans, who swept to power in the revolution of 1910, quite quickly put an end to this disguised form of slavery. To be sure, they soon resorted to coercing labourers, some of whom were handed over to private employers, but forced labour is not the same as slave labour. Only later, as I moved away from a focus on Portuguese-speaking Africa, did I interrogate the ideological underpinnings of the peculiar institution more insistently.

**Antonio De Lauri:** What is the role that Islam has played in the history of slavery?



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**W. G. Clarence-Smith:** The role of Islam in the history of slavery is complicated, and can appear to be contradictory. On the one hand, the Qur'an and later texts laid down that slaves had to be treated humanely, and that manumission was a righteous and meritorious act. On the other hand, Islam entrenched the legitimacy of the status of slavery for centuries. To be sure, there were always some believers who questioned aspects of the legitimacy of enslavement, or even of slavery per se. However, it was not until the 1870s that a clear emancipationist current emerged, initially in British India, and quite precociously in the Tatar zones of the Russian empire. Islamic abolitionism then spread around the Muslim world, slowly at first, but more rapidly after World War II. Unlike every other major world religion, however, resistance to the abolition of slavery became entrenched in some 'fundamentalist' circles, and has remained so to this day. Mauretania, for instance, has probably abolished slavery four times, which speaks volumes about the difficulties of enforcing the measure. The enslavement of Yazidis, carried out very recently by the so-called Islamic State in Iraq, is only the latest manifestation of this phenomenon.

**Antonio De Lauri:** *Do you think religions have an intrinsic emancipatory force or, conversely, a power of "conservation"?*

**W. G. Clarence-Smith:** I have come to believe that slavery is not essentially an economic institution, but rather a social institution, which may have economic consequences. It thus becomes vital to understand what social legitimacy slavery possesses, and this is often related to its religious underpinnings.

And yet, all major world religions have been divided over the question of slavery. Mostly, religious teachers have insisted on treating slaves well, and on recognising their humanity. They have even at times propagated a more radical uneasiness over servile status, especially when slaves have converted to their faith. However, religious leaders have also given divine sanction to slavery, for example as a form of legitimate property. Thus, St Thomas Aquinas tied himself up in absurd logical knots over the issue. In the Confucian tradition, slavery was condemned for weakening the family structure of slaves, but abolition was rejected for threatening the patrimony of slave-owning families. The question is thus why particular factions have emerged at certain historical conjunctures within different religious traditions, and how they have evolved in relation to each other, and in relation to secular forces.

**Antonio De Lauri:** *To what extent and how does your studies on slavery and sexuality interact?*

**W. G. Clarence-Smith:** Many authors have noted that slaves are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation. The great majority of authors refer to heterosexual rape, or the non-consensual sexual relations involved in concubinage. However, it should be noted that unequal homosexual relations were also common, with Barbary corsairs in North Africa



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possessing harems of young slave boys. In Islam, the castration of eunuchs, who had to be slaves in sharia law, was particularly cruel, with the added twist that Muslims were not meant to engage in castrating slaves themselves. Circumcision, both male and female, might also be imposed on slaves, as another form of bodily mutilation.

That said, some religious authorities strove to protect slaves from forms of sexual exploitation. Islam forbade the prostitution of one's slaves, and there is evidence for enforcement, for example in the Ottoman empire. Also, a Muslim concubine who gave birth to her master's child was automatically manumitted at the death of her master, as long as he had recognised paternity of the child or children. To give another example, in the eighteenth century, Catholic bishops of what is today Venezuela struggled to encourage slave marriages and stable families, and to prevent concubinage, with apparently positive effects on birth-rates of slaves.

**Antonio De Lauri:** *Would you qualitatively distinguish contemporary forms of bonded labour from traditional slavery?*

**W. G. Clarence-Smith:** The essence of slavery is that a person is reduced to the legal status of a thing, or perhaps more accurately an animal. A slave can thus be bought, sold, exchanged, mortgaged, gifted, inherited, and in all other ways transferred to become the property of someone else. Slavery is thus an institution of civil society, on which the state often has little purchase. Overall, this differs from contemporary forms of bonded labour, and indeed also from older kinds of bonded labour, whether penal, administratively forced, indebted, or serf. All involve the coercion of persons, but it is reification that is typical of slavery.

**Antonio De Lauri:** *Which are the crucial questions on slavery that scholars should further investigate?*

**W. G. Clarence-Smith:** Research on the history of slavery has been intense, and the mountain of books and articles is still growing fast, including online. Inevitably, there are gaps, and it would be foolhardy to attempt to identify them all. I might suggest two, arising from my own work. Firstly, enslaved Black Africans have been studied more than other victims, and this needs to change. Working on Islam, I became acutely aware that every population group, not excluding Muslim Arabs, had at some point been reduced to slavery. The relations between race and servitude need to be approached with much greater caution, even if there have always been some links between the two.

Rebalancing is also needed for the impact of religion on slavery. Christianity and Islam have attracted a disproportionate amount of attention, whereas we know rather less about Judaism and Animism, the latter existing in hugely diverse forms. However, the biggest gap consists of studies of the Hindu, Jain, Buddhist, and Confucian worlds. This is beginning to change, but the disproportion remains very marked.



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