

Thoughts on two late 18th Century Histories of Dahomey relating to the Anti-Slavery Debate

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I.

During the second half of the 18th century, anti-slavery thought gained a new level of urgency on both sides of the Atlantic world. Obviously, this ideological change had a lot to do with changing contexts on a global scale. The reinvigorated expansion of French and British empires into Asia, the independence achieved by American settlers, the revolution and independence of Haiti, all played a role, and so did some new ideas of the age – ideas on the proper role of religion, politics and economics in society, ideas of national solidarity, equality and individual liberty. The so-called Enlightenment brought to a head a radically new frame for reference in worldly as well as spiritual matters. Instead of reliance on God and Revelation, rational discourse and argumentative debate grew in importance as means for justification of human deeds and affairs. “Humanity” was the new catchword, and it served as base for many formulations of a new human morality proposed by both, secular philosophers and Christian theologians. The issue of slavery was at the center of those formulations and debates. Increasingly, slavery and the slave-trade were considered amoral and inhuman. By and by they came under fire by the advocates of the new morality, the soon so-called “abolitionists” whose ultimate goals were the abolition of the slave trade and the end of slavery, the emancipation of slaves.¹

A point of crucial importance is that abolitionism referred indeed to a “new” morality. There might have been critics of slavery throughout the world and human history, but now, for the very first time, they were at the verge of

¹ For recent overviews on the topic of abolitionism, see Drescher (2009), Sonderegger (2008b). Midgley (1992) and Jennings (2005) demonstrate the importance of women in the abolitionist movement.

entering the center stage of decision making in one of the world's dominant political powers, the British Empire. This is a crucial point, because it explains why anti-slavery thought – which runs against the interests of many businessmen who make a fine and comfortable living of slavery and human trafficking – would ultimately prove politically effective in course of the 19th century.

In the longer run, the anti-slavery cause forged an utterly new discourse on Africa, unprecedented both in scale and tone, creating its own blind spots and peculiar ambivalent attitudes. No longer could anti-slavery advocates be easily dismissed by those trafficking in slaves and profiting from slavery. On the contrary, now they were bound to take the abolitionists' attitudes seriously trying to refute them point by point. In this sense the pro-slavery publications published to an increasing degree between 1788 and 1793 were, in important parts, a reaction against the thriving abolitionist challenge – the challenge posed by now widely circulating new moral ideas of humanity, and by increasingly successful efforts of institutionalizing those ideas and putting them into practice. On the practical side, the colonization of Sierra Leone offers an outstanding example. Starting in 1787, it was brought about by the efforts of a group around the abolitionist Granville Sharp (Curtin 1973: 97ff.). In the very same year there was founded a *Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade* which initiated a many-sided strategy soon proven to be highly effective. First, it was going "rural", mobilising communities throughout the country. Second, it collected data on the slave trade and published accessible accounts on its miseries and profound inhumanity; the most famous early abolitionist writers were Thomas Clarkson and Olaudah Equiano, "the African" (Clarkson 1787, Equiano 1794 [1789]; on Equiano see Lovejoy 2012). Third, the abolitionists sought for direct political influence making the slave trade and slavery a steady issue in parliamentary debates. The first of these were the testimonies gathered by parliamentary committees during the late 1770s. By and by that changed the mood and public opinion radically.

Before the organized attack on the slave trade and slavery by abolitionists, there had been no need to defend these business practices. They were considered normal (Walvin 2006: 11ff.). After the abolitionists' critique, both popularized and growing in currency, everything changed. The profiteers and defenders of the slave trade now had to respond – and they did by representing themselves in terms of "experts" on African affairs; which, in the sense of first-hand experience on the West African shores, was true

enough, for European entrepreneurs had been actively involved in the slave trade across the Atlantic Ocean since the late 15th century. Indeed, in terms of mere first-hand knowledge, the European slave traders active on the coastal stretches of West Africa stood on firmer ground than their anti-slavery adversaries.

As the slave business came under attack by the abolitionists, its adherents and practitioners started a counter-campaign, amongst others by publishing accounts of Africa and specific African settings arguing the case for Atlantic slavery and the slave trade. This marks a second crucial point. Challenged by the abolitionist attack, some of the Europeans active in African trade affairs did their best to counteract the beneficial images of Africa and Africans proposed by anti-slavery advocates and paint a picture of Africans which would lend itself easily to justify the “African Slave-Trade” (Norris 1789a [1788]). However, those accounts are highly ambivalent in their characterization of Africans – this might seem contradictory at first glance; at second glance, however, it makes sense in so far that many of the portrayed Africans were actually partners in trade and, some at least, valued friends and reliable informants on local affairs. Hence the fact, that these 18th century texts must be considered very important historical sources.² My paper draws upon two exemplary texts of this sort – Robert Norris’ *Memoirs of the Reign of Bossa Ahadee, King of Dahomy* and Archibald Dalzel’s *The History of Dahomy, an Inland Kingdom of Africa*, published in 1789 and 1793 respectively (Norris 1789b, Dalzel 1793). Both books were written by men who had been living on the West African Coast, and published in Britain at the height of the first wave of abolitionist success.

Not much is known about Robert Norris who spent life as a trader in West Africa from the 1750s to the 80s. In the early 1770s he seems to have visited Abomey, the capital of Dahomey, at least three times. More permanent were his stays at Ouidah, the infamous slave marketing dependency conquered by Dahomey in 1727. In the late 1780s he gave witness before investigative committees set up by the British government, representing Liverpool slave traders. This led to the publication of a pamphlet titled *A Short Account of the African Slave Trade* in 1788, republished only one year later as part of his book on Dahomey (Norris 1789a [1788]). Norris died in Liverpool in 1791 (on his life see Prince [n.d.], Law 1989).

² See Law (1989) and Akinjogbin (1966) for particular demonstrations of their worth as historical sources.

When publishing his history of Dahomey in 1793, Archibald Dalzel was acting governor of Cape Coast Castle, i.e. responsible for law and order among the traders on this part of the Gold Coast. He retired from this job in 1802, and died several years later in 1811. A Scot by birth and a surgeon by profession, he first went to West Africa in 1763 and soon earned his living by trading in slaves. He could, however, never earn enough money to settle down in Britain as he had wished. His trade brought him to Dahomey's commercial outpost, Ouidah, where he lived continuously for four years, from 1767 to 1770 (Akinjogbin 1966). Even though Dalzel had first-hand experience of Dahomean trade and state power, his account nevertheless relied heavily on Norris' book parts of which have been integrated verbatim, others slightly paraphrased and elaborated upon by Dalzel (Law 1989).

II.

Both texts are valuable as historical sources for Dahomean history in the late 17th and 18th centuries. It is crucial, however, to be aware of the polemical character of certain parts of the texts. As Robin Law has it, neither Norris nor Dalzel did "[...] write [...] as a disinterested reporter, but as a propagandist for the slave trade." Their "[...] slave-trading interests were also a source of bias." (Law 1989: 220) In course of propagating this agenda, says John Thornton, "Dahomey was defined as the classic example of either a pariah state dedicated to the capture and sale of people to European slavers, or of a state so addicted to violence that sale of its victims was an act of mercy." (Thornton 2014: 447) Dahomey was pictured as a state where superstition reigned supreme. Imagined in terms of a society where cannibalism was practiced occasionally (Norris 1789b: x) and human sacrifices frequently, Dahomey was turned into the paradigmatic state of horror. Dahomeans were depicted as a warlike, cruel and blood thirsty people. The argument in defense of the slave trade ran as follows,

[...] in consequence of this trade, many innocent lives are spared, that would otherwise be sacrificed to the superstitious rites and ceremonies of the country; many prisoners of war exempted from torture, and death: and the punishment of many crimes commuted from death in Africa to life in America; [...]. (Norris 1789b: 172f.)

Perceived in such perspective, those surviving the middle passage across the Atlantic ocean “[...] may be considered as rescued by this means from that certain death, which awaited them in their own country.” (Norris 1789b: 156f.)

Being written in the time of the enlightenment, recourse was made to both empiricism and universal rationalism in arguing the anti-abolitionist case. Referring to his African experience, Norris made a grave generalization, “[...] from every circumstance of intelligence and observation, the general state of the Negro, in Africa, is that of slavery and oppression, in every sense of the word.” (Norris 1789b: 157) This remark was followed by a hardly less generalizing statement pointing, however, to Dahomey in particular,

In *Dahomey*, the king is absolute master of the life, liberty, and property, of every person in his dominions; and he sports with them, with the most savage and wanton cruelty. [...]

Yet, this worst of slavery does not prevent population, as it, doubtless, would in any civilized part of the world, where liberty is prized above all other enjoyments. But the idea of slavery is different in an African. Had the Negro the love of rational freedom existing in his breast, it is next to impossible that he could act thus. But, alas! He knows nothing of this inestimable blessing, having never enjoyed it!

The country which gave him birth, the soil from which he sprung, produce no such blossom; and, should it ever appear, which is highly improbable, [...], the bloody and unrelenting arm of tyranny is ever ready to cut it down. (Norris 1789b: 157ff.)

This amounts to a racializing, say racist, characterization of not only Dahomeans but Africans in general. Not only country and climate are mentioned as determining factors, but recourse is made to the quite new racial type of “the Negro” as well.³ It is both endogenous and exogenous defects of the African character then, according to Norris, that make Africans dealing in slaves. The responsibility of the European traders who buy them is therefore absolved, as is the European demand of slaves neglected as source for wars in Africa (Law 2001: 31f.),

³ On the topic of racism and racial discourse in the British African context, see Sonderegger (2009, 2010).

That the wars which have always existed in Africa, have no connexion with the slave trade, is evident from the universality of the practice of it between communities in a savage state. [...] Besides the motives of ambition and resentment, which the African has, in common with other nations of men, the turbulent and irascible disposition of a Negro prompts him to harass and dispute with his neighbour upon the most trivial provocations. (Norris 1789b: 173)

Here again, Norris employed a universalizing rhetoric based in naturalizing, racist stereotyping.

As already mentioned, there is a certain portion of ambivalence in these accounts. Beside such negative depictions, there are also depictions which seem to be more in favour of the portrayed. One passage of Dalzel may serve to illustrate this,

The general character of the Dahomans is marked by a mixture of ferocity and politeness. The former appears in the treatment of their enemies, and in the celebration of those Customs which have been sanctioned by the immemorial practice of past ages, under the idea of performing a grateful oblation to the deceased; the latter they possess far above all the African nations with whom we have hitherto had any intercourse: this being the country where strangers are least exposed to insults, and where it is easy to reside in security and tranquillity. Of their bravery we shall have occasion to produce many conspicuous examples; and of their hospitality and generosity, every stranger who has resorted to the Dahoman coast can testify. The nature of their government makes them very reserved with regard to every state transaction; but on occasions where this restraint is unnecessary, they are abundantly affable and communicative. (Dalzel 1793: xix)

But even here, the image of the Dahomean state is considered diametrically opposed to a political system considered legitimate. Frequently calling its king a “despot” and its ruling system “despotism”, these defenders of the slave trade did not simply dismiss Dahomean political culture but were establishing a strong argument in favor of their own bias. As Robin Law (1989: 220) put it, “The picture of Dahomey which Norris presents,” – and which Dalzel reinforces – “as an aggressively militaristic and despotic state,

practicing human sacrifice on a large scale, was evidently intended to support the anti-abolitionist case, both by reflecting the views that wars in Africa were caused by the slave trade, and by suggesting that those taken as slaves to the Americas were actually being rescued from a worse fate within Africa.”

III.

To arrive at a conclusion: It is a sad irony that there was indeed “[...] a degree of congruence between the interests of anti-abolitionist polemic and the reality of Dahomian political culture [...]”, for according to oral traditions the “[...] emphasis upon militarism, royal absolutism, and human sacrifice was part of the Dahomians’ own self-image.” (Law 1989: 220)

It must be clear, however, that such emphasis was more often ideological pretension than actual historical reality. Concerning militarism, it is good to remember John Thornton’s *bon mot*, that “[...] although Dahomey had a reputation for military prowess, and repeated successful military attacks on its neighbors were the source of its slaves, Dahomey was not, in fact, particularly successful as a military state, losing a good number of its wars.” (Thornton 2014: 448) Concerning human sacrifice, a hundred years of modern research – from Le Hérissiér in the early 20th century to Melville Herskovits in the 1930s to countless historians since the 1950s⁴ – has shown that executions in Abomey were much less frequent and, until the paradoxical effect of the European abolition of the slave trade took its toll within Dahomean political economy in the 1840s, of a much smaller scale than in the public imaginations of a European readership – or, in the minds of the writers, who penned down vastly exaggerated numbers in the first place.

Ideological pretension was at work again with regard to the allegedly royal absolutism of the Dahomean monarch. The Nigerian historian Isaac Akinjogbin argued convincingly that Dahomey was sort of forced into the slave trade. Founded in the early 17th century Dahomey was not a coastal kingdom, but situated in the hinterland. Other Aja kingdoms lying towards the south, like Allada and Ouidah, had established direct and steady relationships with European traders, and raided bordering territories. When Dahomey expanded towards the south in the early 18th century, ultimately ending Allada’s regional hegemony and occupying Ouidah in 1727, one of its motives in southward expansion was protective: the monarchy tried to get

⁴ See, for instance, Le Hérissiér (1911), Herskovits (1967), Campion-Vincent (1967), Law (1985: 54ff.; 67ff.), Bay (1998: 32ff.).

eventually rid of Allada's recurrent intrusions (Akinjogbin 1967, 1976). Even after the taking of Ouidah, then the most important slave trade place in that area (Law 2004), Dahomey was only very reluctantly entering the slave trade and the monarchy was eager to dictate the terms of trade.

Throughout the 18th century, European traders at Ouidah frequently criticized the monarchy for its policy of strict control of the traders, and deplored that the king was dictating the prices and fixing the numbers of slaves to be sold (Sonderegger 2008a: 273ff.). The slave traders had every reason to complain of the royal policy, for it reduced their profits and destroyed their dreams of making a fast buck; this accounts for European and African traders alike— both of whom, as should be remembered, were the main source of information used by both Norris and Dalzel (Law 1989, Akinjogbin 1966). It is evident then why they complained. The more so as the scale of the slave trade was, in fact, decreasing at Ouidah for most of the 18th century. Only in the 1780s it increased again. And then it was because the Dahomean monarch eventually bowed to the interests of private slave businessmen and “wealthy merchants” (Law 2001: 30), eventually giving up his hopes for an effective royal monopoly on the trade, introducing fiscal taxation instead (Law 2004, Bay 1998).

Again, the limits to royal absolutism were so strict as to make it deceptive to speak of the Dahomean state in such terms.⁵ Nevertheless, those notions — “despotism”, “bloodthirstiness”, “human sacrifice”, “tyranny”, “savagery” — stuck. Notions such as these were, indeed, reinforced through steady repetition by almost every 19th century writer who dealt with Dahomey, or any other place in Africa (Bay 1998: 1ff., 29f., 30ff., Sonderegger 2008a: 398ff.). In this paper I argued that the works of Robert Norris and Archibald Dalzel were direct responses to the abolitionist challenge. It was their anti-abolitionist bias that led both Norris and Dalzel towards dismissive stereotyping procedures. In order to justify the trade in humans in which they were engaged for the greater parts of their lives, they had to paint a picture of Africa in terms of a place of almost complete “slavery and oppression”, and stuck in a “savage state” at war with itself due to an allegedly natural “turbulent and irascible disposition of [the] Negro” (Norris 1789b: 157, 173). In short, they had to dehumanize Africans.

⁵ For a broad discussion of the notion of “despotism” with regard to Africa in general and Dahomey in particular see Sonderegger (2008a).

As they were accepted “experts” on Africa in their times, and steadily used as historical sources henceforth, their bias proved to be deeply disturbing – not only to the immediate abolitionist concerns but also in the long run. They laid down obstacles to any appropriate understanding of Dahomean politics and African societies in general for a long time to come. They became part of what V.Y. Mudimbe (1988) called “the colonial library” shaping the typical mindset coming to the fore in the debates on ending the slave trade and slavery and on justifying colonization during the 19th century as well as in the thoughts on the so-called civilizing mission and development in more recent times. The basic link explaining this persistence over time is the naturalizing tendency inherent in the universalistic approaches of writers like Norris, Dalzel and their heirs who avoid to reflect their own particular stance, overlooking the fact that they are “European universalists” not universalists proper. What enables them to do so is their complicity with both sturdy power interests and, as Immanuel Wallerstein (2006) put it so well, “the rhetoric of power”.

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