CONCEPTS AND HISTORIOGRAPHIC DEBATE FROM THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF OLAUDAH EQUIANO (1745-1797)

Artur José Renda Vitorino¹
Gisele Maria Beloto²

Introduction

This text seeks to explain the fundamental concepts for historicizing the topic of Africa, such as the concept of “slavery”, contextualizing the origin of its use in the continent (“domestic slavery” or “dependence” situation due to integration with the family group, “slavery” from the influences of Arab expansion in the 7th century and the transatlantic slave trade); and possible conceptual transformations through the connections mentioned, along with the historiographic debate.

The debate on Africanist historiography involved historians with wide international recognition, such as Izabel de Castro Henriques (2003), Paul Lovejoy (2002), Elikia M’Bokolo (2009), Alberto da Costa e Silva (2002), Olaudah Equiano (2012), John Thornton (2003), among others. This conceptual debate was developed in the Master’s thesis of Gisele Maria Beloto in the field of study of Public Policies in Education, in the Postgraduate Program in Education at the Pontifical Catholic University of Campinas (PUC-Campinas). In this dissertation, the construction of this debate had the objective of developing a paradidactic material on History, focused on students on the 6th year of schooling, as a means of assisting teachers and students analysing the

¹ Postgraduate Program in Education, Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Campinas. Campinas, Brazil. E-mail: arturvitorino@uol.com.br. ORCID: http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8654-3182
² Postgraduate Program in Education, Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Campinas. Campinas, Brazil. E-mail: giselembeloto@hotmail.com. ORCID: http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2519-7685
historiographical debate about the History of Africa and Africans, as required by the law n.° 10.639/03 (Beloto 2019).

The study, thus, did not seek to construct a historiographic research with the aim of solving or bringing hypotheses about certain historical events, through the use of historical sources and arguments, but rather it was built as a description of historiographical divergences, without necessarily defending one or another idea, but highlighting what we consider fundamental: the historical role of Africans.

Thus, the primary source of the study is the autobiographical narrative by Olaudah Equiano (2005): “The interesting narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African written by himself”. The selected excerpts, aimed at enriching the historiographic debate, tell us of Equiano’s childhood in Igbo, when he witnesses from a tree a conflict involving his family, his experiences after his abduction and his first impressions on the slave ship.

It is essential to highlight the advances and dissemination of research on the Africas, with emphasis on the Igbo region, since it was the second largest supplier of enslaved people to the American colonies, thus having a fundamental role in the construction of the cultural identity of the Americas. Finally, Equiano’s work also played a key role in the construction and formation of Nigerian identity after its independence in 1960.

The methodological path will be that of Adalberto Marson, in “Reflections on the historical procedure”. Marson (1984) criticizes in his text the rules of historical procedure rooted and defended by positivist historians for narrating stories, in the sense of the false idea of achieving an exact historical reconstruction and narrative. In this way, Marson (1984, 46) argues that it is primarily necessary to recognize the stories that produced us, a movement which is a “[...] decisive step in the achievement of the freest possible reflection on what we are and what we have done in our work ”3.

Marson (1984) defends the use of the historical source in combination with the sets of elements that made it historical, in such a way that emphasizes those protagonists who were hidden by Eurocentric historiography and breaks with the traditional historical narrative. In this sense, it is a matter of not highlighting the winners’ memories, but of carrying out historical reconstruction, with emphasis on the identities that make up the African continent and, consequently, the American continent as well.

3 Translated by us. Originally: “[...] passo decisivo na conquista do direito de reflexão mais livre possível a respeito do que somos e do que temos feito no nosso trabalho”
“The interesting narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African”: Concepts & Debates

It is essential to explain the debate around the concept of dependency and slavery from the perspective of Africanist historiography before and after the beginning of the Atlantic trade, tied to the primary source of the ex-enslaved Olaudah Equiano in order to broaden the debate and its understanding.

In this way, conceptualizing and contextualizing what would be the forms of “slavery” among Africans, before European colonization, becomes a necessary task. However, it is worth mentioning, at the beginning of this exhibition, the philological problems in the application of several concepts, such as *slave* and *slavery*, as they have a remote periodization. According to Henriques (2003), this is an anachronistic and Eurocentric concept, as can be seen in the excerpt below:

In fact, both *slave* and *slavery* are recent terms in the cultural history of the world: the term *slave*, from the medieval Latin *sclavus*, coming from *slavus*, would have appeared in the 13th century, while the word *slavery* would only have integrated the European languages in the 16th century. The use of the two terms is thus due to a trivializing operation that, in a sense, creates a kind of homogeneity of social practices, denying the very meaning of history (Henriques 2003, 62, emphasis added by the author).

Thus, it is noted that they are concepts from a later European context, which started to be integrated in the vocabulary from the beginning of European colonization in the Americas; therefore, insufficient to describe an African context prior to the beginning of the slave trade. In terms of the “slave”, defending her statement, Henriques (2003) cites Henrique de Carvalho’s source in which he described the *Muatiânvua*’s trip to Mussumba and noted the different categories of social hierarchies and words present in that society. In this case, the social category “mururos” and “mubicas” were misinterpreted by the Portuguese as a word analogous to the concept of “slave”, however, it was a structure equivalent to a certain type of “dependency”.

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4 Translated by us. Originally: “Efectivamente, tanto o escravo como a escravatura são termos recentes na história cultural do mundo: o termo escravo, do latim medieval sclavus, provindo de slavus, terá aparecido no século XIII, enquanto a palavra escravatura só teria integrado as línguas europeias no século XVI. A utilização dos dois termos deve-se assim a uma operação banalizadora que, em certo sentido, cria uma espécie de homogeneidade das práticas sociais, negando o próprio sentido da história.”
It is advisable to bring such warning, as mentioned earlier, however, even though Africanist historiography is advancing rapidly, it is still a recent field of research, especially if we think that this field seeks to distance itself from Eurocentric bonds. At the expense of this, many terms and concepts used can lead, arbitrarily, to a certain anachronism and Eurocentrism. However, no matter how generalizing terms such as “slave” and “slavery” are, they can also help to bring greater understanding and be useful for situating oneself, if it is explained that we are within a pre- or post-start of the Atlantic trade Africanist perspective. In short, it is about, according to the possibilities, bringing together the concepts and notions of the African worldview from the cut of previously delimited space and time.

In order to present the history of Africa and the history of “dependency” or “slavery” relations on the continent, it is extremely important to expose historical sources from the African point of view. According to Thornton (2003), only studies and documents of European origin were the ones that stood out and gained the researchers’ attention.

As a large part of African civilizations were formed by oral tradition, with words transmitted from generation to generation as a way of preserving ancestral wisdom, there was a diversion of attention on the part of the academy due to the lack of written documentation. Even in areas such as West Africa, where writing started to be developed in the 15th century, few Westerners wrote. In this way, researchers viewed African civilizations of oral tradition with disinterest, as they demanded the development of complex techniques for the analysis of oral tradition. The interests turned, above all, to European civilizations that developed writing, however, “[...] orality is an attitude towards reality and not the absence of a skill” (Vansina 2011, 140).

Ki-Zerbo (2010, 37) states that written sources should also not be neglected, but rather, “[...] cross a new qualitative and critical threshold on the vision of the African past”, in this way, the historical source to be followed is the autobiography of Olaudah Equiano (1745-1797), which constitutes a narrative of emancipation that “[...] reflects the situational, mobile, entrenched and oscillating dynamic that characterizes the Black Atlantic” (Bicalho 2016, 2327).

Translated by us. Originally: “[...] a oralidade é uma atitude diante da realidade e não a ausência de uma habilidade”.

5 Translated by us. Originally: “ [...] a oralidade é uma atitude diante da realidade e não a ausência de uma habilidade”.

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Olaudah Equiano was the son of an *embreche*⁶, born in an Igbo village⁷ — although there are controversies⁸ — published in 1789 in England, after his freedom, under the title “The interesting narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African”⁹. According to Canto (2015), Equiano’s full account fluctuates between fiction - there are unselected passages in which his narrative is linked to biblical issues and the reconstitution of a mythical Africa¹⁰ — and veracity — unquestionable episodes for current historiography. Likewise, it is worth mentioning that, “[...] the facts, literature and fiction are part of the narrative and memory” (Canto 2015, 89) and such elements are part of the historian’s job. As stated earlier, much of the African continent, in this period, was adept of oral tradition and not writing, and such tradition did not diminish its value as a source, as well as Equiano’s childhood memory – more specifically, when he was eleven years old – that is, he became an adult in contact with Western culture; therefore, his view had been influenced by the Western Christian world.

As mentioned earlier, only a few excerpts were selected. In the excerpt below Equiano (2005, n/p) relives his memories when he reports that he witnessed a conflict in his region:

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⁶ According to Silva (2012, 276) “*embreché*” was a specific member with the title of Ozo. Its distinction was given by the scarification “*itchi*”.

⁷ “*Ibos*” – or Igbo – is a group of people who inhabited the region of present-day Nigeria. In these groups, there was no figure who exercised a position of total control of the central power; generally, decisions were made on public meetings (Lopes and Macedo 2017, 150). According to Uchendu (1977. apud. Canto 2015, 94), the correct term to use is “*Igbo*”, since “[...] *Ibo* is its transliteration for Western Languages” and the social structure and politics was based on lineages, among other titles attributed from his courage as a warrior, ability in speech or based on wealth. In addition, according to Alagoa (2010), the Igbo region, from archaeological sources, was populated in the Stone Age period and was based on agriculture, such as yam cultivation.

⁸ With the publication of his account “The interesting narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African” in 1789, the work became a kind of abolitionist campaign. According to Silva (2012, 275), to disqualify him, they questioned his African origin, claiming that he had been born in the Caribbean.

⁹ According to Canto (2015), as Equiano’s autobiography was for abolitionist purposes, his work was financed by 321 people who pledged to buy it.

¹⁰ According to Canto (2015, 98), texts of the time are common, mainly those with the abolitionist intention (above all, due to the fact that Equiano is part of the abolitionist groups) to reconstruct a mythical Africa: “[...] there was a need to show Europeans an Africa rich in food, knowledge and quality of life, in particular, with the aim of arguing how pernicious and destructive the slave trade was”, since “[...] in the 18th century, news from the African continent through European travelers were about famines, exotic diseases and barbarism among Africans themselves”.

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I was once a witness to a battle in our common. We had been all at work in it one day as usual, when our people were suddenly attacked. I climbed a tree at some distance, from which I beheld the fight. There were many women as well as men on both sides; among others my mother was there, and armed with a broad sword. After fighting for a considerable time with great fury, and after many had been killed, our people obtained the victory, and took their enemy’s Chief prisoner [...]. The spoils were divided according to the merit of the warriors. Those prisoners which were not sold or redeemed we kept as slaves.

From this selected excerpt from Equiano (2005), it is possible to identify that wars were the main source of enslaved people, “[...] the activity that most frequently transformed free men into captives, throughout history” (Silva 2002, 108), with some exceptions11. In addition to the war, the endogenous slavery present in Igbo was, in the most common cases, for political reasons (Canto 2015)12.

Equiano described these conflicts from the top of a tree, but was not so lucky afterwards. His account also discusses the day when he was kidnapped, moved between several families and finally negotiated for crossing the Atlantic on a slave ship. It was common to take the captured away from their place of origin, covering great distances (Silva 2002). In the case of Equiano (2005, n/p), according to the account of his first capture, he was taken to a region far from his birth: “[...] After many days travelling, [...] I got into the hands of a chieftain, in a very pleasant country. [...] they all used me extremely well, and did all they could to comfort me; particularly the first wife, who was something like my mother”.

In sub-Saharan Africa, armed conflicts yielded enslaved people from neighboring regions, who were then transported – approximately 500 to 600 kilometers away – and passed on to make it difficult for them to escape or return to their homeland. Those who were not sold over long distances, would remain, for the purpose of replacing casualties and working for the winning group. It was a lucrative option and a synonym for political and military power, since they were extremely necessary for the maintenance of this structure: “[...] to expand the armed groups and the armies with which

11 According to Thornton (2003), wars for the capture of slaves in Africa were similar to wars over territories in Europe in search of power and political influence.

12 As well as in other regions, due to judicial, religious procedures, punishments for murder, theft, adultery. In addition to cases like orphans, widows without children and in cases of hunger, they sold themselves as enslaved people (Lovejoy 2002; Silva 2002).
more slaves were produced, essential to the process of accumulation of wealth and political domination” (Silva 2002, 89).13

Silva (2002) argues that the genesis of the condition of “slave” or “dependent” lies in a specific context – of collector nomadism or later movement – for convenience. That is, at the end of conflicts between different groups, women and children would serve as substitutes for casualties and to add to the workforce of the winning group (Silva 2002). According to Henrique (2003), the act of domination over the other is something that comes from and belongs to homo sapiens, which is why there are different power relationships in different social contexts and periods. In this way, it is something that does not depend “[...] only on the cultural and political system, but on the power relationship that allows men and especially women to be classified and hierarchized” (Henrique 2003, 66).14

According to Silva (2002), in Sub-Saharan Africa, the enslaved worked alongside the family, but exercised the most arduous functions, allowing for the expansion of wealth and power. In these agricultural regions, conflicts did not yield many slaves, but on the other hand, casualties were significant, especially in small communities. Domestic slavery – integrated into the family group – is likely to have been the first form of slavery that Africa has known.

According to Henrique (2003), African domestic slavery is closer to social structures that integrate the power relations which generate the condition of dependence, precisely due to the non-existence of the concept of “slave” as a commodity, such as that within a colonial logic in the Americas. Therefore, the thesis defended by Henrique (2003, 68) is that domestic slavery is constituted by dependents, not by “slaves”. The concept of “domestic slavery” is incompatible with such a structure, approaching a more tenuous and flexible “dependency” condition. In this way, the structure of integration with the family group generated a system that repelled “[...] the most violent forms of domination and exclusion” (Henrique 2003, 68).15

On the other hand, Silva (2002, 82) criticizes the thesis that domestic slavery was less violent due to proximity with the slave-master, resulting in a possible and “[...] progressive reduction of his marginality, by the incorporation to the master’s family and to the flock” (Silva 2002, 82). Silva (2002) states that it was through violence that the enslaved were subjected to serve others. It was

13 Translated by us. Originally: “[...] para engrossar os grupos armados e os exércitos com que se produziam mais escravos, essenciais ao processo de acumulação de riqueza e de domínio político”.
14 Translated by us. Originally: “[...] só do sistema cultural e político, mas da relação de força que permite classificar e hierarquizar os homens e sobretudo as mulheres”.
15 Translated by us. Originally: “[...] as formas mais violentas de dominação e de exclusão”.

unlikely that, when captured, he or she could assume a role similar to that of a true member of the family group, given that he or she was left with the heaviest and most ungrateful work. In times of crisis and hunger, they were sold, even though they had already been fully incorporated into the family.

According to Henriques (2003), considering a dependent as a vassal, subject to abuse and indifferent to the family is an ethnocentric view, since it was an interpretation of the European when faced with the relations of power and social hierarchies in Africa. However, it is evident that transformations between African slavery occur, in the conceptual sense of the word slave, due to the influences of the trade carried out by Muslims and Europeans and the way these trades dealt with the captured, constituting a commercial and violent sense.

According to Equiano (2005), the conditions of those who were subject to “domestic slavery” or “dependence” were significantly different on the other side of the Atlantic, making it clear that they are not the same subordinations: “[...] how different was their condition from that of the slaves in the West Indies! With us they do no more work than other members of the community, even their masters” (Equiano 2005, n/p), and, after moving to work for a second family, Equiano tells us:

I was washed and perfumed, and when meal-time came I was led into the presence of my mistress, and ate and drank before her with her son. This filled me with astonishment; and I could scarce help expressing my surprise that the young gentleman should suffer me, who was bound, to eat with him who was free; and not only so, but that he would not at any time either eat or drink till I had taken first, because I was the eldest, which was agreeable to our custom [...] There were likewise slaves daily to attend us, while my young master and I with other boys sported with our darts and bows and arrows, as I had been used to do at home.

From these excerpts, Equiano seeks to present differentiations in the forms of submission which he experienced. According to Canto (2005), from Victor Uchendu, there were different ways of obtaining enslaved people in Igbo, some of which could be through improved life conditions. In this way, “[...] the distance between the status of diala, free, and ohu, slave, was very small. However, it is very clear that in Igbo society, slavery was never the basis of the social system” (Canto 2005, 104, emphasis added by the author)16.

16 Translated by us. Originally: “[...] a distância entre o status de diala, livre e ohu, escravo, era muito pequena. Entretanto, é muito claro que na sociedade Igbo, a escravidão nunca foi a base do sistema social”.

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In this sense, according to Henriques (2003), dependents were considered as children for political leaders, and also, when integrated into the family group they caused positive effects – increased the power of lineage and strengthened the demography of the group – as pointed out in Equiano’s account previously. From the contact with the European slave trade, wars in search of capturing people were effective due to this demography, generating large numbers of enslaved people to the American colonies (Henriques 2003). Equiano’s account (2005, n/p) regarding his contact with the slave trade with white traffickers turns into a painful tone, as explained in the excerpt below:

I even wished for my former slavery in preference to my present situation, which was filled with horrors of every kind, still heightened by my ignorance of what I was to undergo. I was not long suffered to indulge my grief; I was soon put down under the decks, and there I received such a salutation in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life: so that, with the loathsomeness of the stench, and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat, nor had I the least desire to taste any thing. I now wished for the last friend, death, to relieve me; but soon, to my grief, two of the white men offered me eatables; and, on my refusing to eat, one of them held me fast by the hands, and laid me across I think the windlass, and tied my feet, while the other flogged me severely. I had never experienced any thing of this kind before.

According to the Dictionary of African History, elaborated by Lopes and Macedo (2017, 108-109), the concept of slavery meets the thesis defended by Henriques (2003): “In several parts of West Africa, what the experts called ‘slavery of lineage’ was in place, a situation expressed in the word jonya in Fulani language (bend, lean; seek protection, asylum)”18. In this perspective, the concept of “slavery” would not incorporate the European mercantile logic given to the enslaved as a commodity with the use of violence, as Equiano tells us after entering the slave ship.

The authors also emphasize that the concept of slavery, enslavement or bondage does not broadly reflect the different types of power relations and forms of subjection that produced the hierarchies, and so the social relations,

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17 Also, he had some “legal” requirements, in case of conditions of violence, the dependent could change his master. In this way, it was impossible a system in which the master “[...] treat the dependent as a thing, as can be seen in colonial slavery, [...] requires the ‘master’ to be reasonable and try not to offend the values of the false slave” (Henriques 2003, 68).

18 Translated by us. Originally: “Em diversas partes da África Ocidental, vigorou o que os especialistas qualificaram de ‘escravidão de linhagem’, situação expressa no vocabulo jonya, da língua fulâní (curvar, inclinar; buscar proteção, asilo)”.

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in this case, “[...] are linked to the great lineages of hegemonic groups, becoming directly dependent on their chiefs, or else on their rulers” (Lopes and Macedo 2017, 108-109)\(^{19}\), as shown in the story of Equiano. M’Bokolo (2009) also points out that it is a relationship of dependence through unprecedented violence, at least until the 7\(^{th}\) century – at the beginning of the Arab-Muslim traffic – which endured until the 19\(^{th}\) century, having the slave trade across the Atlantic started in the 16\(^{th}\) century.

Trans-Saharan trafficking and slave trade across the Atlantic: transformations in the concept of “slavery” in Africa

According to Nicolau (2013), Arab domination in Africa began in 639 AD and in 711 AD the conquest was complete in the Northern region. Arab-Muslim trafficking, or Trans-Saharan trafficking, began on a small scale after the preaching of the Prophet Mohammed, from the Arab expansion in North Africa, lasting until the beginning of the 20\(^{th}\) century.

Arab conquests led to a development of the traffic, legitimizing the practice, since “[...] any idolater captured in a holy war was condemned to slavery. [...] they could not ask for freedom, even if they converted to Islam” (M’Bokolo 2009, 215)\(^{20}\). According to Lovejoy (2002), the absence of culture meant the absence of lineage; therefore, a greater possibility of control, since people were not from the same culture. Even when the enslaved converted to their owner’s culture, in this case to Islam, he was still considered less devout. It was unlike the slavery developed by Europeans in their colonies, which was justified on a racial basis, as a means of social control (Lovejoy 2002).

The Arab conquest in North Africa – through trade routes with Sub-Saharan Africa – also influenced that region, gaining adherents to Islam among smaller populations. In this way, “[...] the Islamization of the African continent led to the emergence of an elite of Black Muslims capable of adapting the then existing agricultural societies to an effective political and commercial system” (Lopes and Macedo 2017, 159)\(^{21}\).

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19 Translated by us. Originally: “[...] se vinculam às grandes linhagens dos grupos hegemônicos, tornando-se dependentes diretos de seus chefes, ou então de seus governantes”.

20 Translated by us. Originally: “[...] qualquer idólatra capturado numa guerra santa estava voltado à escravatura. [...] não podiam reivindicar a liberdade, mesmo convertendo-se ao Islã”.

21 Translated by us. Originally: “[...] a islamização do continente africano proporcionou o surgimento de uma elite de muçulmanos negros capazes de adaptar as sociedades agrícolas então existentes a um sistema político e comercial eficaz.”
For M’Bokolo (2009), the Arab military and religious expansion, and the subsequent formation of caliphates, generated a sudden transformation in the continent. From that moment on, the forms of dependence or subjection by lineage, which until then had a marginal aspect among African societies, was transformed, and, consequently, incorporated the concept of market-based slavery in the continent, especially after contact with Europeans, which happened through Muslims.

According to M’Bokolo (2009), the slave trade across the Atlantic adopted characteristics of the Trans-Saharan trade carried out by the Arabs. In the first contact established between these two worlds, the beneficiaries were “[...] perhaps the African ruling classes, for whom the Portuguese represented an additional opportunity and who knew, particularly in Senegambia, how to use competition between Christian and Muslim traders in their favour” (M’bokolo 2009, 260).22

However, according to Thornton (2003), when Europeans and Africans started the trade of enslaved people, the former did not have sufficient military power to force any disadvantageous participation for African leaders. Africa resisted and repelled the first European attempts of attack in search of irregular trade; such commodity exchanges were only carried out when they met the interests of these African elites. This trade resulted in Europeans accepting and trading in accordance with the numerous state control mechanisms of African elites.

Thornton (2003) states that African elites were able to preserve sovereignty and European merchants were unable to control the trafficking of enslaved people in Africa. The elites insisted on being the first beneficiaries, as well as controlling the beginning and the end of commercial activities. However, M’Bokolo (2009) disagrees that Africans have benefited during all the centuries when the slave trade existed to supply the demands of the American colonies, but only during its first attempts. In this way, European crowns soon recovered their advantages and obtained financial advances for the exploitation of that market: “[...] it was in Central and Southern Africa that Europeans were able to penetrate entirely new spaces and disturbed, in a very short time, the structure and logic of exchanges to benefit them” (M’bokolo 2009, 261).23

22 Translated by us. Originally: “[...] talvez as classes dirigentes africanas, para as quais os portugueses representavam uma oportunidade suplementar e que souberam, em particular na Senegâmbia, utilizar a concorrência entre comerciantes cristãos e muçulmanos”.

23 Translated by us. Originally: “[...] foi na África central e austral que os europeus penetraram em espaços inteiramente novos e perturbaram, num espaço de tempo muito curto, a estrutura e a lógica das trocas em seu proveito”.
However, if there have been transformations in dependency relations due to external influence, whether by Europe and/or by the Islamic world, it is a controversial topic among historians, since this debate is related to the autonomy of the Africans’ history. Lovejoy (2002) argues that contact with the Trans-Saharan, and later transatlantic traffic was the factor responsible for the transformations in Africa, since “[…] Europe and the Islamic central lands saw the areas on their periphery as a source of slaves, and Africa was one of those peripheral regions” (Lovejoy 2002, 55).

It is argued that in Sub-Saharan Africa slavery was not institutionalized, that is, slavery was a “[…] less important aspect of society […] incidental to the structure of society and the functioning of the economy” (Lovejoy 2002, 39)24, since it focused more on domestic and sexual exploitation. Lovejoy (2002) uses the arguments presented by Moses I. Finley, to affirm that the transformation took place from the moment in which slavery became institutionalized, based on the increased importance of the enslaved, who started to play an essential role in the economy and in the monopoly of political power, due to a higher demand in the colonies. This transformation from non-institutionalized slavery to an institution that started to play a fundamental role in the economy resulted in the development of a slave mode of production as the most important part of this society.

Silva (2002) also argues that, as a result of the contact established with both traffic routes (Trans-Saharan and transatlantic), there was a strong influence and, consequently, people who did not have it before, started to adopt slavery due to this external pressure, as, for example, the Casamansa diolas25. It is argued that the intense exploitation (from 1600 to 1800)26 prevented military and political leaders from consolidating a strong and centralized African state. The continent has remained fragmented, precisely in the areas that provided goods which interested Europeans – such as slave labor, gold, among others – along the Atlantic basin (Lovejoy 2002).

Lovejoy (2002) found that the expansion of slavery to the interior of the African continent resulted in an intensification of rivalry between African traders and rulers, who were fighting for control of markets and trade routes. Faced with this scenario, the economy became dependent on the export of

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24 Translated by us. Originally: “[…] aspecto menos importante da sociedade […] incidental à estrutura da sociedade e ao funcionamento da economia”.

25 The Casamansa diolas are a people that were concentrated in West Africa, in the current Republic of Senegal (Lopes and Macedo 2017).

26 According to the W. E. B. Du Bois Travel Database of Naval Ships, a total volume of 11,313,000 enslaved people were transported to America, having its high peak between 1701-1800, with 53.8% of the total volume (Lovejoy 2002, 51).
slaves and its intensification generated the need for more captures, the effects of which contributed to the expansion of African political fragmentation.

Canto (2015, 96) also has a perspective similar to the thesis of Lovejoy (2002) and Moses I. Finley, since it is stated that Equiano’s region, Igbo, suffered an intensification of conflicts aimed at capturing new slaves for the Atlantic trade, to the point that “[...] priests or oracles had the power to incite war between small clans or communities with the aim of acquiring slaves for sale”27. Therefore, Igbo suffered external influence on the part of the Europeans and their interests, changing the dependency relations established before the Atlantic traffic. This external influence occurred to the detriment that Igbo was a village and not a consolidated and powerful state as pointed out by Canto (2015, 95):

The Igbo nation was one of those that suffered most from the birth of the international slave market in the Atlantic world, mainly due to its type of social structure and the ease with which the slaves in these communities could be transported to the large slave distribution ports. [...] These villages, small political structures, made Igbo communities vulnerable, as there were no powerful states to protect their residents, [...]. Small wars between groups or clans, captures and kidnappings, like the one with Equiano, made Igbo communities the second largest supplier of slaves to the Atlantic world [...].28

Silva (2002, 90) does not believe that such a context has contributed to continental political fragmentation, as “[...] the transformations of slavery must have accompanied the political changes that brought together in micro-states villages governed by heads of lineage, and from these micro-states, they made kingdoms, and from kingdoms, empires”29. In other words, these transformations that occurred from external influences consolidated

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27 Translated by us. Originally: “[...] sacerdotes ou oráculos tiveram o poder de incitar a guerra entre pequenos clãs ou comunidades com o objetivo de adquirir escravos para a venda”.

28 Translated by us. Originally: “A nação Igbo foi uma das que mais sofreu com o nascimento do mercado internacional de escravos no mundo atlântico, principalmente em virtude de seu tipo de estruturação social e da facilidade com que os escravizados nessas comunidades podiam ser transportados para os grandes portos de distribuição de escravos [...]. Essas aldeias, pequenas estruturas políticas, tornavam as comunidades Igbo vulneráveis, pois não haviam Estados potentes para protegerem seus residentes, [...]. Pequenas guerras entre os grupos ou clãs, capturas e sequestros, como o ocorrido com Equiano, fizeram das comunidades Igbo a segunda maior fornecedora de escravos ao mundo Atlântico [...]”.

29 Translated by us. Originally: “[...] as transformações da escravidão devem ter acompanhado as mudanças políticas que reuniram em micro-Estados, aldeias regidas por cabeças de linhagem, e desses micro-Estados, fizeram reinos, e dos reinos, impérios”.
slavery, making it important for political figures to increase and centralize their power. As a result of this movement, slavery became more complex – through trafficking across the Red Sea, the Sahara and the Atlantic – in more centralized and hierarchical states.

However, Lovejoy (2002, 121, emphasis added by the author) argues that the situation of political fragmentation on the African continent along with the advances of Islamic, especially European, institutions in the slave trade, resulted in an Africa that “[...] remained the poor cousin of the world community [...] the continent’s role seemed to be that of sending its people to the plantations and mines of the Americas”\(^{30}\) and contributed to Africa remaining on the periphery of capitalism, even after the abolition of slavery in the Americas. These findings create an aesthetic of Africa that reduces and simplifies its image, measured from the judgment of values and the idea of progress, from the Eurocentric point of view, disregarding its complexities (Silva 2002). Silva (2003, 55) points out that Africa was “[...] a continent without external masters”, as far as the beginning of the 19th century, with the exception of Cabo da Boa Esperança and Portuguese possessions, but without large territorial dimensions, as it was in colonialism\(^{31}\). The establishments of European origin fixed in both sides of the coast paid rents, taxes or trade fees to the local chiefs (Silva 2003).

For Thornton (2003), Europeans did not enter Africa for plunder, as they were traders in a more developed and advanced economy - with organizational advantages and more elaborate notions of profit. Trade with Africa had complex dimensions, very well worked out by African governors, who were looking above all for ways to maximize profits and avoid losses. This trade resulted in Europe’s acceptance and trade in accordance with the numerous state control mechanisms of African elites.

The hypothesis that Africans were experienced traders is questioned by Lovejoy (2002) because of the demographic consequences, that is, the export of slaves would have been detrimental in relation to the loss of male adults, affecting sexual indexes, dependency rates and sexual divisions of labour (Thornton 2003). In regions where the number of male slaves was

\(^{30}\) Translated by us. Originally: “[...] continuou sendo o primo pobre da comunidade mundial [...] a função do continente parecia ser a de enviar o seu povo para as plantations e minas das Américas”.

\(^{31}\) According to Silva (2003, 63) “[...] history has its ironies”: in a British political movement, under the pretext of prohibiting the continuation of the slave trade and establishing control of the Atlantic, Europeans occupied Africa. With the help of gunpowder and new weapon technologies, they deposed African chiefs and elites and, consequently, destroyed monopolies, on which many founded their power. The “generous movement” to end human trafficking resulted in the colonization of Africa and the myth of the “civilizing mission”.
higher than that of female, or when the distribution was uneven – due to the high export of slaves to the Americas and slaves to the Islamic world – the birth rate could suffer large declines in proportion to the population, resulting in a demographic imbalance (Lovejoy 2002). Thornton (2003) does not believe that Africans were forced to make irrational decisions, since the slave trade developed rationally by African societies, as the enslaved were the only form of profitable private property, different from the European system that was based on profits from land tenure.

Silva (2002, 98) also points to the enslaved as “[...] the only type of truly private capital asset recognized by the customary laws of most parts of the African continent”32, different from Europe, in which the production of wealth was in the land. In Africa, on the other hand, the soil was the good that belonged to everyone, thus, those who had more slaves to work on the land would obtain more prestige and influences, and consequently produce wealth on the lands. However, it is worth mentioning that this currency of power was not guaranteed, since there was a cost to maintain and replace them in the event of escapes, illnesses, sacrifices, deaths, among other circumstances. In the case of escapes, the enslaved who were at risk could go against any region that would cause their capture again.

According to Manning (1998, 18), “[...] the main source of socio-demographic change was external influence”; thus, large-scale depopulation reached drastic numbers in the early 18th century, due to the sugar plantations in the colonies (Brazil, Barbados, Jamaica, among others). As a result, the prices of enslaved people (in decline) increased to the detriment of this intense demand (around 100 thousand per year, until the beginning of the 19th century). Thus, social transformation took place in the African continent, since this slave market – with new demands – caused impacts on demography, as mentioned above, and impacts on prices – around four times higher compared to the 17th century (Manning 1998).

As war was one of the main drivers that supported trafficking (transatlantic and trans-Saharan), it also enabled changes in the social organization of war itself and its technologies: that is, “[...] as the war gradually transformed from combat of elites, [...] and in objectives of territorial conquest, a proportionally inexhaustible flow of conflicts was released” (Manning 1998, 17)33.

32 Translated by us. Originally: “[...] o único tipo de bem de capital verdadeiramente privado reconhecido pelas leis costumeiras de grande parte do continente africano”.

33 Translated by us. Originally: “[...] à medida que a guerra foi-se transformando de combate de elites, [...] e em objetivos de conquista territorial, um fluxo proporcionalmente inesgotável de conflitos foi liberado.”
In summary, Manning (1998) defends the idea that the external influences on the African continent in the slave trade to the New World were intense enough to bring about social changes in African political structures.

Conclusion

From reading and analyzing excerpts from Equiano’s autobiography, in light of the divergent debate of Africanist historiography, the work’s important abolitionist characteristic is reinforced, as well as its contribution to the understanding of the Igbo-born main character’s experiences. In this way, the divergences between the pre-existing power relations in Sub-Saharan Africa were highlighted, from Igbo point of view and the divergences among historians regarding violent forms or their absence in this context. Equiano told us about his experiences from before his kidnapping, such as the conflicts between different groups and their conquests, which included new subjects, as well as his first experiences as a captive living and working as an integrated member of a family distinct and far from his home region. His account incorporates a more melancholic tone from the narrative of his contact with European merchants inside the slave ship, highlighting the various forms of violence never experienced before, as narrated in this excerpt: “[...] the white people looked and acted, as I thought, in so savage a manner; for I had never seen among any people such instances of brutal cruelty” (Equiano 2005, n/p).

This statement by Equiano runs counter to the Eurocentric discourses present among missionaries during the slave trade and, above all, to the discourses that expanded throughout the 19th century regarding the concept of civility and progress defended by racial theories as opposed to “barbaric customs” and “savages” associated with the African continent. In this sense, it raises reflections about the contradictions present in world history, mainly in the construction of philanthropic discourses that remained rooted in literature for much of the 19th and 20th century (Visentini, Ribeiro and Pereira 2012).

His narrative was marked by a more intense suffering from the contact with the slave trade practiced by Europeans, showing the main characteristics of the concept of slavery and its possible transformations along the connections and external influences: “In this manner we continued to undergo more hardships than I can now relate, hardships which are inseparable from this accursed trade” (Equiano 2005, n/p). In Igbo, purchases of new slaves were not common, as well as kidnappings in large quantities,
however, after the external influences started by the slave trade in the Atlantic, kidnappings became more common. In Igbo, the kidnappers were called *Abam* and *Ekumeku* (Canto 2005).

According to Silva (2012), Equiano went first to Virginia and then to England; he acquired freedom in 1776 and died in 1797. After almost two centuries of his death, Equiano became a source of inspiration for the formation of the Igbos’ identity during the 20th century, as stated by Canto (2015, 117):

Equiano’s autobiography has been obscured for a long time. Only in the sixties, in the period when Nigeria became independent and when the Biafra war exploded, did it surface again. Equiano’s text is again a strong ideological weapon. If, during the period in which it was written, it had the pamphlet nature in relation to abolition, in the 20th century it will have the power to constitute the identity of the Igbo. Gustavus certainly did not imagine that his text would go through the centuries and be reborn again as a political tool.34

It was in the period when Nigeria was emancipated, in 1960, that Equiano’s work became a key point as a political instrument of identity formation. Thus, the primary source highlighted is of paramount importance for greater understanding, not only for the outline established in this research, but also for understanding contemporary Nigeria and the formation of Brazil, since, “[...] Igbo [was] the second largest supplier of slaves to the Atlantic world” (Canto 2015, 95)35.

REFERENCES


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34 Translated by us. Originally: “A autobiografia de Equiano ficou obscura durante muito tempo. Somente nos anos sessenta, no período em que a Nigéria se tornou independente e que explodiu a guerra da Biafra, é que ela veio à tona novamente. O texto de Equiano é novamente uma forte arma ideológica. Se, no período em que foi escrita, tinha o cunho panfletário em relação à abolição, no século XX vai ter o poder de constituir a identidade dos Igbo. Certamente Gustavus não imaginava que seu texto iria percorrer os séculos e renascer novamente como ferramenta política”.

35 Translated by us. Originally: “[...] Igbo [foi] a segunda maior fornecedora de escravos ao mundo Atlântico”. 


Canto, Rafael Antunes do. 2015. “Olaudah Equiano: a vida de um marinheiro negro no atlântico do século XVIII e a memória de África.” Dissertação de Mestrado, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul.


ABSTRACT
The text seeks to debate fundamental concepts regarding the History of Africa theme, above all, the debate around the concept of dependency/slavery and its possible transformations in the face of external influences and connections with other cultures, such as Islam and Christianity. This text was developed from the historical autobiographical source of Olaudah Equiano and through the methodology of Adalberto Marson (1984). The objective is focused on advancing the conceptual debate through Africanist historiography and is justified by the importance of advancing research regarding the regional profile of Igbo, since it was one of the regions that most exported slaves to the American continent, having as great contribution to the formation of the American cultural identity.

KEYWORDS:

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