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INTERVIEW

A Plea for Openness and Debate: An Interview with Gwyn Campbell

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Gwyn Campbell was formerly the Canada Research Chair in Indian Ocean World (IOW) History at McGill University in Montreal, Quebec, where he founded and directed McGill's Indian Ocean World Centre (https://indianoceanworldcentre.com). He has also taught at universities in Madagascar, Britain, South Africa, Belgium, and France, was part of the sub-Saharan Africa team of the National Geographic Society and IBM's Genographic Project (2005–2010), and served as an academic consultant for the South African government in the first phase of intergovernmental meetings leading to the 1997 formation of an Indian Ocean regional association.

As well as being the author or editor of over thirty books, he is the general editor of the Palgrave Series in Indian Ocean World Studies, and editor in chief of the *Journal of Indian Ocean World Studies* (*JIOWS*). These include foundational texts in the study of slavery, migration, and diasporas in the IOW (a transnational space that reaches from East Africa to China and Japan), such as (as editor) *The Structure of Slavery in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia* (London: Routledge, 2003), *Abolition and Its Aftermath in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia* (London: Routledge, 2005), *Bondage and the Environment in the Indian Ocean World* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), and (as author) *Africa and the Indian Ocean World from Early Times to 1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

This interview was conducted by correspondence during the summer of 2021, in the depth of the pandemic, while the interviewers were trapped in Hong Kong and Tokyo, with the interviewee ensconced in his home in Canada. The interview focuses on Campbell's views on the development of IOW history and in particular the history of slavery.

You have an interesting background. Could you tell us a little bit about your early life? Where were you born and where did you grow up?

I was born in Fianarantsoa, a town in the southern highlands of Madagascar, to Welsh missionary parents, but was brought up in southwest Wales.

Do you think your background has shaped your approach to history?

Certainly. My parents were both committed radical socialists, from mining and railway stock. They were fervently anti-capitalist, anti-materialist, and anti-elitist. Their Christianity, infused with socialism, made them, and through them their children

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(I was the middle child of five) passionate about politics, the global south, political and economic exploitation, inequality, and religion. In Wales, we lived in an economically depressed area, with high unemployment and considerable poverty. Our family too was constantly forced to make economies. I was 15 years old before I received my first shop-purchased piece of clothing. And I recall my distressed mother on more than one occasion begging us children not to eat so much. These influences formed the bedrock of my perspectives on history.

You studied economic history in Wales and England. How did that affect your academic interests and later career?

I took fourteen months out between high school and university, on Voluntary Service Overseas, teaching English in a Ramakrishna Mission school just outside Calcutta, India. It was a year of massive floods and a refugee crisis due to the Bangladesh war of independence. I participated in the Ramakrishna Mission relief programme, taking food by boat to villages isolated by flood water, and handing out rice and dal to inmates of a camp for refugees fleeing the conflict.

The dire poverty was profoundly disturbing. In India, I also engaged in debate on religion and on politics, notably colonialism, neocolonialism, and international capitalism. Comparisons with Wales, the oldest English colonial conquest, inevitably arose. On returning home, I lost my Christian faith and, realising that there was no contradiction with internationalism, became a convert to Welsh independence. At university [University of Birmingham], I initially studied social work, and spent six months working with Protestant and Catholic children in working-class districts of Belfast, which was then in the midst of the Troubles. This strengthened my commitment to an independent Welsh republic, but my quest to understand the reasons for global poverty and inequality led me to change disciplines and study economic history. In this, Peter Cain and Tony Hopkins were huge influences. I took their undergraduate courses, Tony Hopkins on the economic history of West Africa and a class on British imperialism that they jointly taught. As part of my master's, I also studied theories of imperialism under Peter Cain. Hopkins's *Economic History of West Africa* and Cain's *Economic Foundations of British Overseas Expansion 1815–1914* were of major significance to me then, as later were the articles that led to their coauthored *British Imperialism: 1688–2000.*

The history of slavery has occupied you since the very beginning of your career. What drew you to that topic?

I have always been interested in the history of oppressed peoples. I therefore took the opportunity at university to follow courses about slavery. However, such courses, and all debate about slavery in the West, focussed almost exclusively on the transatlantic slave trade and slavery in the American South. This did not sit well with my experiences in Wales, India, and Belfast, and made me interested in pursuing the topic of slavery in a much wider context, situating it in a wide range of "unfreedoms" that result from politically and economically exploitative and repressive regimes.

What was the scholarly landscape like when you started?

Very much dominated by radical versus liberal versus conservative perspectives, which was exciting as it generated debate and opened up the histories of the non-European world, albeit within Eurocentric temporal, spatial, and thematic paradigms that still dominate academe.

Did decolonisation affect university life during this period?

Decolonisation of the overseas empires had already largely occurred by the time I attended university. Major exceptions, which gained the attention of faculty and students, were Rhodesia, apartheid South Africa, and to a lesser extent the Portuguese colonies. However, student protest was then as much focussed on American participation in the Vietnam War and opposition to the Heath and Thatcher governments. But please remember that, with the exception of Eire, what the English refer to as the "Celtic fringe," the oldest part of their empire—Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales—still awaits decolonisation. We, the members of that "Celtic fringe," were at university very aware of this. Thatcher was emblematic of English capitalist colonialism. She inflicted enormous economic and cultural damage on Wales, facilitating the widespread purchase of property in chiefly rural areas by wealthy English people, most of whom admire the beauty of "their" colonised Welsh countryside, but consider the Welsh people to be on a scale from quaint to primitive, and the Welsh language to be unpronounceable and irrelevant.

You have taught all over the world. How has that shaped your approach to the Indian Ocean and slavery in particular?

At university, we were taught that slavery and the slave trade was essentially the history of the enslavement, trafficking, and exploitation of sub-Saharan Africans, and that it ended with abolition in Brazil in the 1880s. Apart from my previous experiences with various forms of "unfreedom," it came as an added shock, when I was undertaking my doctoral research and teaching at the University of Antananarivo, to realise that slavery and other forms of servile labour were alive and well in Madagascar. When teaching in South Africa, my research into labour deepened, and it became evident that the history of many oppressed peoples, even if excluded from slavery studies, was characterised by rapacious economic and political exploitation, enforced servility, and denial of human rights.

You now teach at McGill where you hold a Canada Research Chair in Indian Ocean World History. How did this come about, and has this shaped the trajectory of your scholarship too?

I held a Canada Research Chair Tier 1 for the maximum tenure of fourteen years, from 2005–19. The programme, financed by the Canadian government, is intended to attract leading international scholars to Canada. My chosen field of research, and title of the chair, was Indian Ocean World History. McGill gave me a space officially recognised in 2011 as an official research centre (the Indian Ocean World Centre, IOWC), and I won and directed in succession the two largest Canadian government research grants to the humanities, which helped finance multidisciplinary international research networks and bring students as well as emerging and established scholars to the IOWC, all of which significantly widened my research perspectives.

The dominant paradigm for the study of slavery is the so-called Atlantic model. What do you think the scholarship misses because of this? How do you think our understanding of the Atlantic can be enriched by a greater appreciation of the dynamics in East Africa and Asia?

The Atlantic slave trade and New World slavery dominates slavery studies. However, in researching IOW history it has become obvious to me that slavery and other forms of unfree labour existed, and in many parts still exist, in the IOW, and involve the exploitation of people of all skin colours and a large variety of backgrounds. These have to be taken into account in order to fully understand the core dynamics of human servility and the traffic in human beings.

What is the role of race in multiethnic slavery? Is it different in different parts of the IOW?

One of the major dangers in academe is the application of Western concepts to extra-European regions and their histories. One of those concepts is encompassed by the word "slave." Ask any student in a high school or university in the West to define "slave" and the overwhelming majority will equate it with chattel slavery experienced by Black African victims of the transatlantic slave trade. Moreover, almost all slavery scholars indiscriminately apply the term slave when describing people subject to forms of bondage in the non-European world. However, the word slave is Eurocentric. Its origin lies in the word "slav," and appears in all major European languages as a derivative of that word, e.g., *slave, esclave, escravo, sklave.* However, that word is not used in non-European languages. For example, in most regions of the Indian Ocean world outside European enclaves established in the post-1500 era, there exist multiple words for people subject to different types of bondage, many of which have changed over time. And they rarely sit comfortably with racial categories. For example, some slavery scholars conflate the Chinese term *kunlun* ("black person") with African, meaning, in the Chinese historical context, "African slave." Nevertheless, *kunlun* had multiple meanings. It could indeed refer to Africans in general, or specifically to the inhabitants of Pemba off the east African coast. However, *kunlun* was initially used to refer to Annamite islanders, and later extended to include darker-skinned peoples of the Malay Peninsula, Indonesian archipelago, Melanesia, certain Himalayan communities, and even Madagascar. Again, in nineteenth-century Somalia, terms employed to denote slaves included *jareer, bantu, mjikenda, adoon, habash, bidde, sankadhuudhe, boon, meddo,* and *oogi.* Each of these had different meanings, depending on context.

What is of the essence here is not to conflate indigenous terms for racial types of bondage and of bonded people with Western concepts of "race," "slavery," and "slave," but rather to explore the meanings of the terms as used in the original non-European language and in the contexts in which they are used.

The sort of data showcased in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database is not available for the Indian Ocean world and continental Asia. As an economic historian, what do you think about the ways scholars have tried to make up for this deficiency?

The IOW slave trade started by at least 2000 BCE and is still vibrant. It involved and involves multiple agents, sources, and destinations. Precise data is largely unavailable. Historians of the Atlantic slave trade have placed huge pressure on historians of the IOW to emulate the transatlantic slave data project. This has incited some scholars to attempt to come up with comparative data. However, most such endeavours are at best built on "guesstimates," resulting in academic castles in the air. Moreover, they ignore the environmental and climatic context, which has to form the basis for any serious investigation of forms of unfree labour and human trafficking,

Recently, scholars in the Netherlands have uncovered data relating to slavery under the VOC. What problems do you see in using exclusive European sources in what was a multiethnic and trans-imperial trade?

Most slavery scholars highlight European sources for slavery and the slave trade in the Indian Ocean world. However, Europeans only came on the scene after 1500, and were understandably most interested in commodities and institutions that generated a profit for the capitalist enterprises they represented. Moreover, until the late mid- to late nineteenth century (the exception being the British in India from the late eighteenth century), they were largely confined to coastal enclaves, and a few transoceanic shipping lanes.

However, IOW systems of bondage and human trafficking are age-old, are reflected in documentary evidence from 2000 BCE, and were chiefly land-based. European accounts and data are thus interesting but can give only partial, even fragmentary, openings onto IOW systems of bondage, and even then are subject to Eurocentric perceptions that require careful interpretation.

You have written about the African diaspora in Asia. This remains a poorly understood topic. What do you see as the main challenges and opportunities?

Most historians of Africa consider the period from 1500 to 1800 to have been characterised by the economic exploitation of Africa by external influences, most notably in the form of enslavement of sub-Saharan Africans and their export as slaves. The conventional view is that those exported from West Africa formed an "African diaspora" in the New World, and this diaspora had specific characteristics: it was cohesive, durable, racially distinct, maintained "African" cultural features, a "victim" consciousness, and retained a memory of, and longing for, the African "homeland."

Most scholars of the East African slave trade have applied the same model for the IOW. Overall, however, Africans formed a minority of enslaved and trafficked people in the IOW. Moreover, most were women and children who were more susceptible to, and in most cases sought, integration into the host "enslaver" society. Western researchers probing communities in Asia of African slave descent have discovered some cultural elements of African origin, but almost universally such communities speak local Asian languages, follow Asian religious practices, self-identify within Asian social hierarchies, and initially rejected any suggestion that they might be African. Only when paid, or politically pressured, to perform "African" dance or music did some adopt an "African" persona.[1]

This reveals the inappropriateness of applying Atlantic concepts of slavery to the IOW, and invites a thorough revision of slavery studies generally.

Your volume *Structure of Slavery in Indian Africa and Asia* was published in 2003. How did this collaboration with scholars such as Suzanne Miers come about?

While teaching at the University of Avignon, France, from 1995 to 2004, I launched a series of conferences on slavery. These were run on what became known as the "Avignon model" whereby no one read a paper, rather, participants' papers were circulated in advance, and sessions were held on distinct themes hosted by discussants who summarised the papers for that session then opened it up for debate. I needed to recruit specialists for the role of discussants, hence the presence of scholars such as Martin Klein, Suzanne Miers, Joseph Miller, William Clarence-Smith, Paul Lovejoy, Abdul Sheriff, and Indrani Chatterjee. Most of those who attended would concur, I believe, that the conference format advanced the debate and subsequently resulted in more refined publications.

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[1] Gwyn Campbell, "The African-Asian Diaspora: Myth or Reality?" *African and Asian Studies* 5:3–4 (2006), 305–24; Beheroze Shroff, "Sidis and Parsis—A Film Maker's Notes," paper presented at the Conference on Cultural Exchange and Transformation in the Indian Ocean World, UCLA (April 5–6, 2002); Beheroze Shroff, "Indians of African Descent: History and Contemporary Experience," *Souls* 10:4 (2008), 320.

Have your ideas changed since the publication of the volume in 2003?

Substantially. I have become more sceptical of the speculative numbers game used in much of the slavery studies work on the IOW, and of the continued premium given to European actors in the extra-European world. I have become progressively convinced that, in the IOW, the terms “slave” and “slavery” need to be radically challenged, and more historically and culturally accurate terms adopted. Also, that systems of bondage need to be evaluated historically within the concept of human–environment interaction, which in turn challenges Eurocentric spatial and temporal paradigms. Only then will we begin to start unravelling the complexity of historical manifestations of servitude, and the deep historical continuities between past and present forms of bondage and human trafficking.

Your work has increasingly integrated elements of environmental history. What do you think the opportunities are for integrating the history of slavery and environmental history?

In my own research, I became increasingly aware of the significance of indebtedness as a major factor propelling people into slavery. Indebtedness was, in turn, frequently the result of adverse environmental and climatic factors. Until modern times, and even up to the present day in some regions, over 90 percent of the population were engaged in agriculture, which was in turn critically dependent upon rainfall and access to water. Moreover, in Asia and Africa, elites derived most of their revenue from peasant-based agriculture. Should the monsoon rains fail, it could cause harvest failure. Should they fail several years in succession, it could cause widespread economic and political turmoil, which could push people into a degree or threat of debt that precipitated involuntary (e.g., as a punishment) or voluntary (e.g., to raise money) enslavement. Other environmental factors, such as sulphur-rich volcanism, could have a similar impact. In all, I consider that human–environment interaction, rather than human activity alone, is the catalyst of historical change, and that environmental history must form the context for serious historical studies, including that of human servitude.

Could greater cross-pollination between the history of slavery and other disciplines help us here?

Conventional slavery studies, dominated by European discourse and the Atlantic model, have hit a wall. They cannot, using the conventional approaches, make further progress in the field. Interdisciplinary collaboration and debate is of the essence in opening new avenues of research into the full gamut of historical and contemporary forms of human servitude and human trafficking.

Which disciplines do you think could contribute to this debate (e.g., intellectual history, South Asian languages and literatures, anthropology)?

To be fruitful, research into bondage and human trafficking, past and present, needs to be multidisciplinary. Not just from the arts, also from the hard sciences. So humanities and social science scholars need to open meaningful collaboration with, for example, climate scientists, geneticists, GIS experts, and data analysts.

A common turn of phrase in the scholarship is “slave societies.” Traditionally the Indian Ocean world is not considered to have featured any of these. Do you think the concept still has value for historians?

Not when the definition of “slavery” is the conventional one used in the Atlantic model, as it ignores most of the world, and most of history.

Is there a better metric to compare different societies? Was there greater "unfreedom" on the Swahili coast versus colonial Brazil?

This raises the problem of "freedom," often conflated with "liberty." Those terms are quintessentially Eurocentric, reflecting a Western intellectual tradition that has only very recently included within its scope non-elite European males, European women, and non-Europeans. Today, in Western high schools and universities, these terms refer to the "freedom" or "liberty" of an individual to do as that individual pleases. Blandly applying those terms with that meaning, and their opposite, to non-Western societies is a very dangerous exercise even today, and always in reference to the past.

What do you think the best approach is for studying slavery in the Indian Ocean world? How best to deal with the different conceptions, legal frameworks, and terminologies of Europeans and non-Europeans and the ways they interacted to create new forms?

I think it is possible to study, and to compare and contrast, human servitude and human trafficking in all historical settings provided allowance be made for the full gamut of servitude and trafficking. I tend towards the need to consider forms of human servitude on a spectrum, from chattel slavery of the Atlantic type at one end constituting an extreme form of bondage, to the theoretical condition of "individual freedom" at the other end.

Do you therefore think colonial and indigenous slaveries should be studied separately?

I see nothing wrong with case studies of Western colonial slavery, and case studies of non-Western slavery. However, the ability to critically assess in terms of comparisons to other types of bondage is highly valuable, and can only advance "slavery studies." The study of the impact of the arrival of Europeans in early modern Asia on unfreedom and labour is only beginning to open up and will be increasingly addressed, particularly by younger scholars.

There has been a lot of public interest in the long shadow cast by Atlantic slavery (e.g., Black Lives Matter), and historians in the U.S. and Brazil are particularly conscious of the political weight their research carries. How do you see this shaping the historiography of slavery in Asia?

It has had an ongoing impact on the historiography of slavery in Asia, one that needs to be constantly questioned in the light of the histories of non–New World social, political, and economic structures

Do you think unfreedom will ever be eliminated? If so, how?

Eliminated, no, but the elites and power structures that have proved so adept at maintaining forms of bondage for their own purposes and profit can and should be challenged.

Do you have any advice for young scholars starting out in the history of slavery? Should they pursue particular languages or skills, such as dendrochronology?

Relevant languages are of course important. I would also emphasise, more than strictly dendrochronology, environmental history and an emphasis on human–environment interaction rather than human action alone as the catalyst of historical change

What are you working on right now?

A number of projects, including human–environment interaction in periods of environmental crisis in the IOW, bondage in the IOW, and aspects of the history of Madagascar.

Is there anything you would like to add to conclude our interview?

I would simply plead for openness and debate.

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