

The Uncertain Geography of War, Slavery, and Migration in Nineteenth-Century West Africa, 1800-1865

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Abstract :

For most Africans forced into the Atlantic and intercontinental slave trades, the surviving record begins at the coast. Ports of embarkation are well documented, but inland origins remain one of the largest uncertainties in the field. This paper presents an interactive historical GIS that maps inland conflict across the Central Savanna and Western Bight during the nineteenth century, focusing on the collapse of Oyo and the expansion of the Sokoto Caliphate. The shifting geography warfare, raiding, and state collapse were principal mechanisms of enslavement, meaning conflict can be used to model conditional probabilities of where, when, and why large groups of people were captured before reaching the coast. By creating data for inland instances of conflict it is possible to provide estimates of the specific towns from which the people on board originated and attach ethnolinguistic configurations to individual slave ships. These reconstructions draw on slave voyages and [LiberatedAfricans.org](https://liberatedafricans.org), which documents over 340,000 people involved in these trades, including 35,000 individuals recorded in the registers of “Liberated Africans” and the interpretation of over 20,000 documented African names.

This method speaks directly to Freedom Narratives. The biographical data the project has compiled, including testimonies recording birthplaces, ethnonyms, and itineraries, can be layered over the conflict maps.

Documented life narratives ground and calibrate the probability estimates in some degree of certainty, while the spatial statistical model extends those insights to the many who left no testimony. The result helps quantify, rather than obscure, the uncertainty built into the sources, and invites collaboration linking narrative and geospatial data across platforms.