CHAPTER TWO

THE ACQUISITION OF SLAVES

Portuguese exploration in the Atlantic in the fifteenth century heralded a shift in emphasis in the African slave trade from the Sahara to the West African coast. As outlined in the Introduction, the slave trade focused first on Arguin and Elmina, but during the late sixteenth century Upper Guinea developed as the main centre of the trade. Meanwhile in the early seventeenth century the conquest of Angola laid the basis for the development of the slave trade in that region. It was thus during the period of the Portuguese asientos that Upper Guinea began to lose its dominance in the trade to Angola.

Manuel Bautista Pérez acquired slaves from both Upper Guinea and Angola. He was personally involved in the acquisition of slaves in Upper Guinea on two slave-trading expeditions to the Coast between 1613 and 1618, but as far as we know he never visited Angola. Following these two expeditions he settled in the Indies and largely relied on agents in Cartagena to acquire slaves for him. Between 1626 and 1633 his agents in Cartagena purchased 2,451 slaves of which 48.4 percent came from Upper Guinea and 45.8 percent from Angola.1 Pérez’s early expeditions to the African coast were a learning process for the young slave trader and they generated a considerable volume of papers that included not only trading accounts but also many private letters. The evidence contained in these documents adds considerable detail to what is known about slave-trading operations on the Upper Guinea Coast in the early seventeenth century from the general observations of merchants, travellers and missionaries. Because of the richness of this documentation, the greater part of this chapter will discuss the acquisition of slaves in Upper Guinea. Since one of the aims of this study is to

examine how the experience of slaves in Africa, both prior to and during captivity, affected their survival in the Americas, the chapter will also provide a brief account of the way that slaves were acquired in Angola, before discussing the cost of slaves and the numbers exported from both regions.

The Upper Guinea Coast

The Portuguese did not establish slave-trading forts on the Upper Guinea Coast as they did on the Gold Coast; rather the asentistas sold licenses to acquire slaves to private traders, who obtained the slaves through contacts with resident Portuguese traders or lançados. The Portuguese residents lived in formal Portuguese settlements, which were increasingly fortified, mainly for defence against other Europeans, while the lançados, who were regarded by the Portuguese as outcasts and renegades and referred to as tangomaos, lived under the protection of African chiefs. Portuguese settlement of the Upper Guinea Coast had been pioneered by lançados, whose name is derived from lançar ‘to throw’ indicating that they had “thrown their lot” in with African society. Some lançados, became so integrated into African society that they wore African clothes and, where permitted by African social traditions such as by the Banhun, Biafada and Papel, intermarried with local women. African leaders regarded the lançados as ‘guests’ who were required to abide by their laws and had to fit in with the African way of life. In return for hospitality they were obliged to make various kinds of ‘gifts’, which in effect bought their protection and other advantages such as access to African exchange networks. This access meant that lançados played a vital role in securing slaves for export. It is worth noting that not all groups on the Upper Guinea Coast welcomed lançados, or indeed, Europeans. Societies, where power was more decentralised, such as the Djola (Folupo), Balanta and Bijagó, were generally hostile to them.

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3 Rodney, “Portuguese Attempts at Monopoly,” 320.
4 Sandoval, *Tratado sobre la esclavitud*, 146.