“DARK HORSES”:
THE HORSE IN AFRICA IN THE SIXTEENTH AND SEVENTEENTH CENTURIES

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The wild desert horses of the Sahara were admired by the Renaissance era Moorish diplomat, al-Hasan ibn Muhammad al-Wazzan al Fasi, who travelled under the sobriquet ‘Leo Africanus’. He described how Muslim horsemen trapped these elusive creatures near their water source with snares concealed in the sand. The meat of captured horses was sometimes eaten – the younger the foal, the sweeter the meat – but the horses usually escaped capture in the vastness of the wilderness. Feral horses haunted other liminal and inaccessible areas from the Sudan to the upper Niger. Travellers reported sightings on the outskirts of human habitation, from free-roaming herds in the desert to curious inbred dwarf ponies dwelling deep in the forests of West Africa. Some reports can be dismissed as the embroidery characteristic of travellers’ tales but enough evidentiary fabric exists to suggest a long shared history of horses and humans. This chapter wishes to shed some shafts of light onto these ‘dark horses’. The first point is that the horses of Africa are dark in the sense of being largely unknown, cast in the shade of global histories of the horse. Evidence of these horses is sparse and mystery surrounds them, which has engendered lively debate. Secondly, it suggests that these horses are dark in that they have been historiographically caricatured, too often seen as instruments only of Muslim or later European imperialism and external aggression, as will be highlighted in the case study of the Oyo Empire. Finally, the horses’ role is examined in a dark chapter, as instruments

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1 Many thanks to Pete Edwards for the inspiration and scrupulous editing.
2 Africanus Leo, The History and Description of Africa and of the Notable Things therein contained, ed. R. Brown (London: 1896), III 942–943. Muslims in Africa rarely ate horsemeat, as it was purportedly taboo under Maliki law.
3 As Legassick has cautioned, neither ‘state’ nor ‘empire’ are perfect descriptions of many regimes. However, ‘empire’ is used to mean a relatively large regime which included peoples of diverse cultural traditions. Legassick M., “Firearms, Horses and Samorian Army Organization 1870–1898”, Journal of African History 7, 1 (1966) 95.
in slaving, as part of a history of violence and terror, in which both humans and the horses themselves suffered.

The Fellow Passengers

In West and Central Africa, horses always had three sets of passengers: humans, tsetse fly and the trypanosomes they carried in turn. The first rode them to probable peril in battle but the second two rode them to certain death. Tsetse flies (*Glossina* sp.) carried the parasites or trypanosomes that transmitted ‘sleeping sickness’ (also called *nagana* or trypanosomiasis) to the victim. These were transmitted by the bite of infected flies and then multiplied in the blood and tissue fluids of their hosts, both human and animal. In wild animals, which had co-evolved with the disease, these parasites caused relatively weak infections but in domesticated animals they caused severe, often fatal reactions. There was an unseen but palpable ‘tsetse frontier’. In places of heavy *T. brucei* infestation, horses could succumb immediately, and in regions infested by the less virulent *T. vivax* and *T. congolense*,

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4 The always endemic disease periodically flared up vigorously because of population changes in its vector, the tsetse fly. For example, *nagana* in Sierra Leone in the mid-nineteenth century extinguished the equine population, rendering re-establishment almost impossible. The explorer Mary Kingsley noted that imported horses died quickly, fuelling rumours that the hammock-carrying porters had poisoned them, although she gave more credence to parasites as more likely cause of death. Kingsley M., *Travels in West Africa* (London: 1904) 19. See Dorward D.C. – Payne A.I., “Deforestation, the Decline of the Horse, and the Spread of the Tsetse Fly and Trypanosomiasis (nagana) in Nineteenth Century Sierra Leone”, *Journal of African History* 16, 2 (1975) 239. See also Fyfe C., *A History of Sierra Leone* (Oxford: 1962) 294.
