

Confronting The Legacy of The African Slave Trade

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Historically, West Africa is associated with the trade in gold, ivory, and most of all, slaves. The historical roots of racial discrimination in the United States today can be traced back to North American slavery and the kidnapping of more than 20 million Africans. It is easily assumed, therefore, that the African slave trade pit brutal, gun-wielding European slave traders against unsuspecting, passive African victims. While the Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese, English and French slave traders were often brutal, they were not always working alone -- many Africans were also involved in this victimization. African empires such as [Dahomey](#) and [Ashanti](#) (located in what is now Benin and Ghana) gained enormous wealth and power as a result of the trade of their fellow Africans.

In fact, Europeans often acted as lesser partners to African rulers, merchants, and middlemen in the slave trade along the West African coast from the mid-15th century on. Two factors contributed to this dependency:

The Coastal Geography

Seasonal wind patterns along the Atlantic coast of Africa, along with hazardous offshore reefs and sandbars, created dangerous waters for ships, and the land was almost entirely lacking in natural harbors. Therefore, European trade in West Africa took place most often on ships anchored well away from shore and dependent on skilled African canoe-men whose ability to travel across the hazardous stretch of water between the mainland and the waiting ships made the Atlantic trade possible.

The Diseases of West Africa

Even in places where Europeans were able to conduct trade on the mainland, their presence was limited by disease. Malaria, dysentery, yellow fever, and other diseases reduced the few Europeans living and trading along the West African coast to a chronic state of poor health and earned Africa the name "white man's grave." In this environment, European merchants were rarely in a position to call the shots.

Africans in Control

Furthermore, when Europeans first initiated a trading relationship with West Africans in the mid-15th century they encountered well-established and highly developed political organizations and competitive trade networks. Europeans relied heavily on the African rulers and merchant classes at with whose help they gained access to the trade goods they desired. European military technology was not effective enough to allow them this access by force until the 19th century. Therefore, it was most often Africans, especially those elite coastal rulers and merchants who controlled Atlantic trade.

Slavery Already Existed in Africa

Slave ownership and slave trading in western Africa existed before the late 15th-century origins of the Atlantic slave trade. Most West African societies did not recognize private property in land. West Africans, therefore, expressed wealth in terms of people, whether as family, clients, or slaves. In addition, caravan trade routes had for centuries linked sub-Saharan African peoples with North Africa and the wider Mediterranean and Middle Eastern worlds. Not only was slavery an established institution in West Africa before European traders arrived, but Africans were also involved in a trans-Saharan trade in slaves along these routes. African rulers and merchants were thus able to tap into preexisting methods and networks of enslavement to supply European demand for slaves.

Enslavement was most often a byproduct of local warfare, kidnapping, or the manipulation of religious and judicial institutions. Military, political, and religious authority within West Africa determined who controlled access to the Atlantic slave trade. And some African elites, such as those in the Dahomey and Ashanti empires, took advantage of this control and used it to their profit by enslaving and selling other Africans to European traders.

A Different Kind of Slavery

It is important to distinguish between European slavery and African slavery. In most cases, slavery systems in Africa were more like indentured servitude in that the slaves retained some rights and children born to slaves were generally born free. The slaves could be released from servitude and join a family clan. In contrast, European slaves were **chattel**, or property, who were stripped of their rights. The cycle of slavery was perpetual; children of slaves would, by default, also be slaves.

Selling Their Own People?

Fifteenth-century Africa, was not a homogenous group of people. Some African elites benefited from the enslavement of their rivals, their enemies, their poor, and other culturally foreign groups from the 15th century through the 18th and even into the 19th centuries. Class, language, religion, gender, and ethnicity divided Africans, and it was along these lines that certain Africans participated in the slave trade. Understanding the dynamics of African complicity in the slave trade is important in understanding Africans as historically active and diverse human beings. This understanding should not detract from the horrors of the slave trade or from its American legacy of inequality and racism.

1. Why was it difficult for European traders to be involved with trade deeper in Africa?

2. Who had the majority of the control over the Atlantic trade? Why did they have control?

3. Why were West African societies able to so easily supply European demand for slaves?

4. How was slavery in Africa among Africans different than slavery in the Americas?

5. Would it be correct to say that Africans enslaved "their own people?" Why or why not?
