

5 - Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade

The Atlantic slave trade began in 1442 when African captives from the Senegal river were taken to the port of Lagos in southern Portugal and sold as slaves. After the Spanish reached the Americas in 1492, the direction of the trade became trans-Atlantic. The trade ended in 1866, when the last voyage crossed the Atlantic Ocean to Cuba.

The Atlantic slave trade was a significant part of the historical experience of West African peoples throughout this period. It influenced political change, religious practice, farm production, and other aspects of daily life. It was also a main cause of the growing European presence in West Africa; and it influenced the global connections which many West African rulers developed over the course of these four centuries.

Most areas of West and West-Central Africa were influenced by the Atlantic slave trade in this period, as well as what is now Mozambique. There were many different phases of the Atlantic slave trade. Some of the most important were the following:

1) 1442-1492: The first fifty years saw the trade almost solely from Senegambia to Portugal, Seville, and other ports in Spain and Portugal.

2) 1492-1575: The Spanish arrival in the New World under Columbus saw the beginning of a change. In this era, the trade in enslaved persons remained quite low, as Europeans were more interested in gold. Most Africans going to the New World came from Senegambia, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea and Sierra Leone, often via the Cape Verde islands [which were a Portuguese colony already]. There was a growing trade from ports of Kongo and Angola, mainly to the sugar plantations which had been founded on the island of São Tomé.

3) 1575-1640: In 1575, the Portuguese founded a colonial fort city at the harbour of Luanda, in Angola. This undermined the Kingdom of Kongo, since the major currency used in Kongo was the *nzimbu* shell, which was found at Luanda – by seizing Luanda, the Portuguese had in effect seized the bank of Kongo. Meantime, in Brazil, the number of sugar plantations near the colonial capital of Salvador da Bahia was growing, while the Native American population declined. This saw the volume of the slave trade increasing, especially from Angola; it also remained significant from the Greater Senegambia region, but was not yet important elsewhere in West Africa.

4) 1640-1675: This was a very important period. It was in these decades when the Dutch, English and French began to compete in earnest with the Portuguese for the slave trade, opening their own fortress-factories, especially along the Gold Coast, at Calabar and Bonny in the Niger Delta, and further south at Loango. Meanwhile droughts in Senegambia and the effects of decades of war in Angola saw population declines there. By 1675, the old Brazilian

connection to Angola was changing, and Brazilian traders in Salvador opened a direct trading link with the Yorubà and Ajà rulers around Hueda, Dahomey, and Lagos.

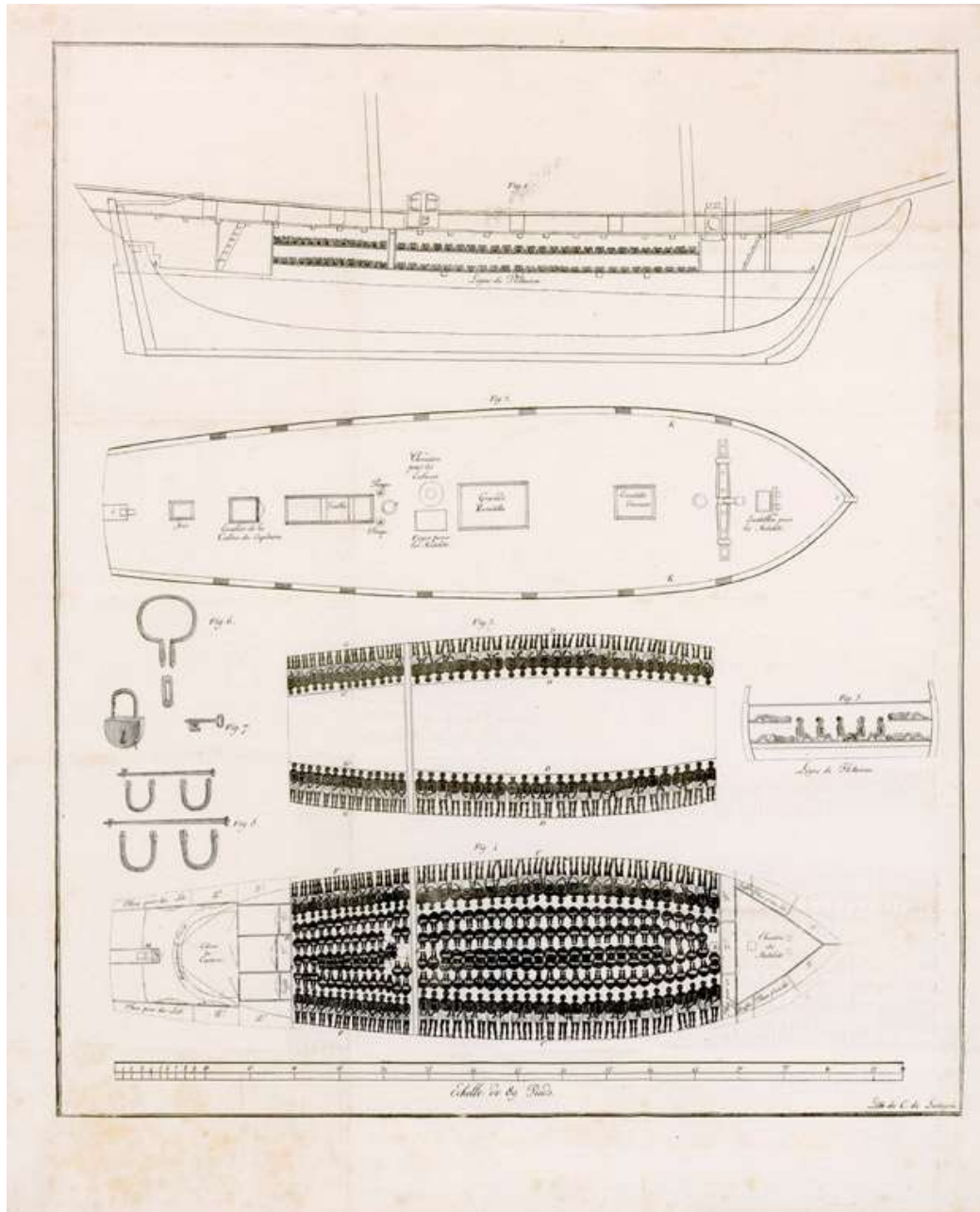


Cape Coast Castle (Ghana) in 2017, courtesy of Eric Nana Kesse.

5) 1675-1700: This period saw the consolidation of the trade in these ports, and the expansion to areas which had hitherto been unimportant in the trade, especially Benguela in southern Angola and the Gold Coast [owing to the population decline around Luanda, Benguela had grown in importance for the Brazilians, and developed a direct link to Rio de Janeiro in the 18th century].

6) The long 18th century (c. 1700-1807). This was the century which saw by far the largest number of enslaved Africans taken in European and New World ships to the Americas. Almost every region of Atlantic Africa was affected. Areas which saw a particular expansion included Sierra Leone [shaped in part by the rise of the theocracy of Fuuta Jaalo in Guinea-Conakry, and the slaving wars led by this polity]; the Gold Coast [influenced by the rise of the Asante empire in the 18th century, and the switch from gold exports to enslaved persons]; Loango [in what is now Congo-Brazzaville] and Benguela.

7) The era of abolition (1807-1865). The British parliament passed an Act to Abolish the slave trade in 1807, though Denmark had been the first European nation to do this in 1792. However the 19th century was still very significant in the slave trade, with the major slave trading nations being from the New World, especially Brazil, Cuba, and the United States of America. The areas worst affected by this time were Angola and Mozambique. The loss of the South in the American civil war (1861-65) and pressure from England on Brazil saw the atmosphere change, and the slave trade ended in 1865 [Brazil had finally ceased direct slave trading in 1851].



Plan of the Slaver 'Vigilante'. The Brig 'Vigilante' was a French slaver captured in the River Bonny, at the Bight of Biafra, on April 15th, 1822. She departed from Nantes, in France, and carried 345 slaves from the coast of Africa, but she was intercepted by anti-slave trade cruisers before sailing to the Americas and taken to Freetown, Sierra Leone, 1822, *Affaire de la Vigilante, bâtiment négrier de Nantes* (Paris, 1823), following p. 8, <http://slavevoyages.org/resources/images/category/Vessels/1>

When considering this chronological overview of the slave trade, some important factors should be noted, though of course there are many others of great relevance:

1) Historians have often emphasised what they call a “triangular trade”. Ships would leave Europe with textiles, manufactured goods made of copper and iron, cowries, alcohol and

weapons; would sell these in Africa, and travel to the New World with a cargo of enslaved persons; and then exchange these for colonial produce (sugar, coffee, tobacco, etc.). However there was also often a direct trade from the Americas, especially from Brazil, Cuba, and the United States.

2) The effects of the slave trade became especially important from around 1675 onwards. Until then, it was mainly Greater Senegambia that was affected in West Africa.

3) Historians often disagree as to the impact of the slave trade on West African societies. Some aspects of history are worth noting, and were relevant to the slave trade, especially:

:- Migration of communities to better-defended areas such as hilltops, forests, creeks

:- Development of buildings and town designs which saw good defences and a maze of streets; this made it hard for hostile outsiders to find their way out.

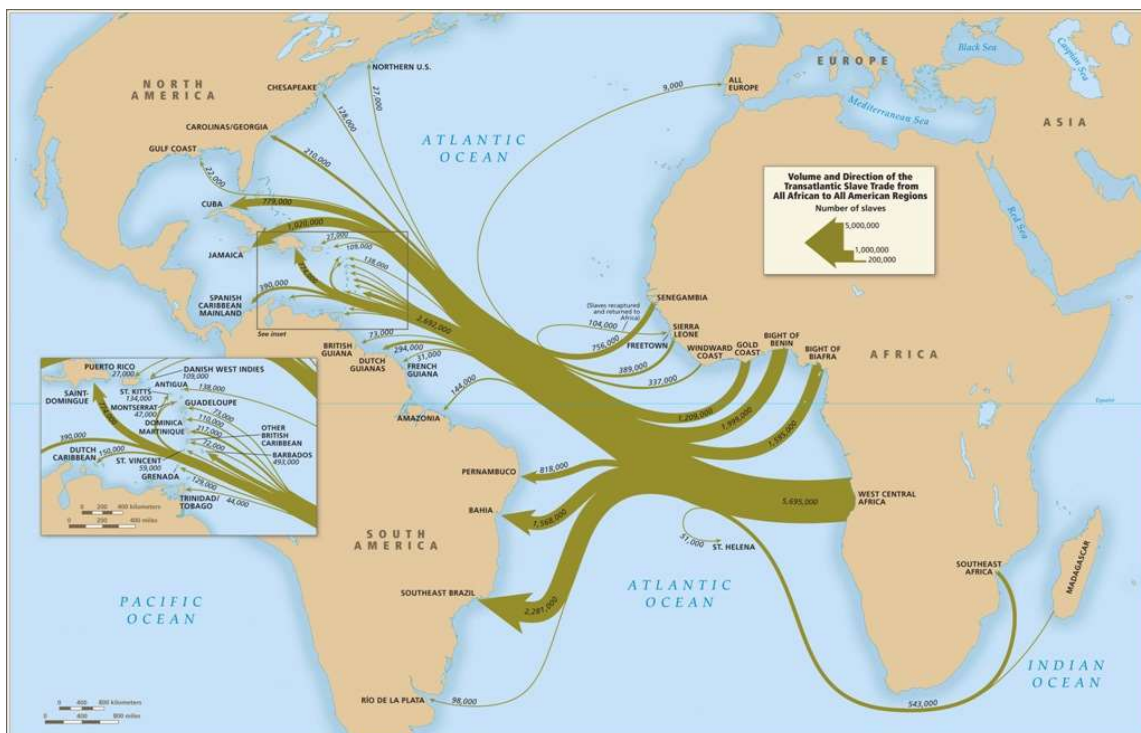
:- Formation of powerful armies and states; this was also the case of course in Europe, where the growth of organised armies and states also depended on economies connected to the slave trade

:- Changes in religious practice; some shrines required offerings of goods which could only be acquired through trade, and kings' association with the trade and with shrines made people in some areas more willing to adopt other religions, such as Islam and Christianity.

The www.slavevoyages.org database

The www.slavevoyages.org database is a powerful tool for historians who want to understand the quantities of Africans forcibly embarked on slave ships by Europeans. Historians have been systematically collecting evidence on the trans-Atlantic slave trade since the 1960s. Computing technology enabled them to gather and compare data for different aspects of the slave trade more easily. An international team of historians decided to create www.slavevoyages.org, a database giving details about each voyage recorded in newspapers, trade ledgers, ships' logs and the different sources still available at the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first century. These sources are written in multiple languages and are disseminated over three continents. This collaborative database is constantly updated and remains a work in progress.

This database is an excellent tool to analyse the number of slaves captured between 1514 and 1866 and gives the estimate of around 12,500,000 Africans who embarked on slave ships.



Volume and direction of the trans-Atlantic slave trade from all African to all American regions, www.slavevoyages.org

The database is an excellent tool to learn about:

- the number of Africans who died during the Middle Passage. The number of slaves who embarked on slave ships (around 12,500,000) is substantially larger than the number of Africans who arrived as slaves in America (around 10,700,000). Historians were able to conclude that mortality rates on slave ships were extremely high.

- the number of enslaved Africans for every slaving voyage out of a total number of 36,000. Details about the slaves themselves are sometimes vague and we rarely know their gender, age or names.
- the chronological phases of the slave trade. The database contains exact dates for many voyages. As a result, historians are now able to analyse the fluctuations of the transatlantic slave trade year by year.
- The seasonal patterns for the slave trade. Sailors followed precise patterns which corresponded to the navigation conditions of the Atlantic ocean but also to the supply of African coasts and demands of American ports.
- the ports where enslaved Africans were shipped to America. Historians were able to determine the exact location where the slaves embarked but the database does not provide the slaves' region of origin because many of them were actually enslaved inland.
- the identity of the slave-traders and their ships. In many cases, it is possible to determine the port where they sailed from. The database enables us to determine which traders, ports and countries benefited the most from this lucrative trade.
- the number of slave revolts on European ships. Historians were able to show that there were African riots on one ship out of ten.
- the destination of the ships. Many sources mention where the slaves disembarked and were sold. It does not mean that the slaves could not be sold again after their arrival in America.

However, the database has also been criticised:

- The database does not give details about the nature of the slave trade itself.
- Nor does it give the reasons behind the trans-Atlantic slave trade or the consequences it had on African societies.
- In many cases, the data is not accurate and some researchers have found notable differences with the original documents which contained the data.
- In addition, some historians criticise the database for reproducing the ideas of the slave traders themselves, in treating slaves as statistics, and because the documents used to produce it were all written by slave traders.

West African Resistance to the Slave Trade

One of major factors that led to the abolition of the slave trade in West Africa was West African resistance. West Africans resisted slavery in four major ways:

1. The resistance by everyday West Africans on West African soil
2. The resistance of the West African ruling elite
3. The resistance of West African abolitionists abroad
4. Overt resistance by West African slaves en route to, and in, the New World

1. Resistance by everyday West Africans on West African soil

A number of West African people kept out of slave trade, refusing to negotiate with Europeans at all. For instance, the Jola of Casamance (Senegal), and the Baga (modern Guinea)—who were unbeatable in battle—did not participate in the slave trade.

Other West Africans devised short and long-term mechanisms to resist the slave trade including:

- a) Resettling to hard-to-find places.

In the Sokoto Caliphate (Nigeria), the landscape of mountains, caves, underground tunnels, and marshes was cleverly used by the inhabitants for protection. They reinforced these, by building ramparts, fortresses, other architectural devices, and planting poisonous thorny bushes and trees. The peoples of southern Togo, central and northern Cameroon used mountain ranges to hide away from slave traders.

- b) Building fortresses and fortifications to protect people against the slave trade.

The people of Gwolu (Ghana) built a protective wall to guard against slave raiders. Their Paramount Chief Koro Liman IV describes the walls:

I am standing in front of the inner wall of the Gwolu protective wall, which protected the great Gwolu from slave raiders and encroachments into Gwolu city in ancient times. We have two walls and this is the inner wall.

In ancient times when slavery was rampant, our great, great, ancestor King Tanja Musa built the wall to ward away slave raiders and slave traders from coming into Gwolu to enslave our people.

The reason we have the inner and outer wall is that between the two walls we had ponds and farms, so that the inhabitants would be protected from being kidnapped by slave raiders.

First, there was only the inner wall. Then they realized that people who went to farm, find firewood, and fetch water were kidnapped by slave raiders. The king found it necessary to construct a second wall and that is why it is a two-walled city. And I know that in the whole of Ghana there are only two such walls.

c) Evolving new, more rigid styles of leadership.

The Kayor and Baol of Senegal aristocracy utilized mechanisms of domination and submission for their own protection by imposing new forms of habitat and land occupancy which functioned to shield the powerful.

d) Transforming the habitat and the manner in which land is occupied.

In Ganvié city (Dahomey), people built small towns on stilts on the edge or middle of Lake Nokoué. This allowed them to see approaching raiders. The city of 3,000 homes, was founded in the 16th century by Tofinu people. In the Tofinu language, Ganvié means, “we are saved.” The people built it as a refuge from Dahomey kingdom slave raiders. The lake was too shallow for European slave ships to anchor, and religious custom prevented the Fon of Dahomey from venturing across water to capture them.

The Musugu of Southern Lake Chad built dome-shaped houses, with material made of clay mixed with animal dung, dry grass, and water. These dome shaped houses, when seen from afar, looked like termite nests and created a camouflage from the slave raiders.

e) The creation of maroon societies in the Upper Guinea Coast.

f) Secret societies, women’s organizations, and young men’s militia redirected their activities toward the protection and defense of communities.

In Igboland, Nigeria, for instance, Olaudah Equiano indicates that he had undergone military training, including shooting and throwing javelins in order to become a member of local militia.

g) Children were turned into sentinels throughout West Africa.

h) Venomous plants and insects were turned into allies.

In northern Cameroon and Chad for instance, fences were created from branches of thorny and poisonous trees, and these provided effective defense against slave raiders. The people also used thorny plants to reinforce the rock walls.

The peoples of present-day Chad Republic adopted new agricultural methods to fight the slave trade. They stopped planting millet and sorghum which made them particularly vulnerable to slave raiders because these were grown in large cleared fields, visible to passersby, and signaling the presence of farmers. Moreover, the crops demanded considerable care during growing season. Thus, the people stopped growing sorghum, relying more on hunting and gathering. They also started cultivating manioc or cassava. Manioc was particularly well suited, because the tubers were buried deep within the grounds, the foliage could be chopped off, thus requiring little or no attention.

i) Priests created spiritual protections for individuals and communities.

This happened throughout Igboland, Nigeria. For instance, the Idoha community of Nsukka, eastern Nigeria, created the Efuru goddess who served to protect the community against the actions of slave raiders.

j) Resources were pooled to redeem those who had been captured and held in factories along coast. People of the Futa Jallon (Guinea's northern border with Senegal) were known to have adopted this strategy.

k) Individuals and states traded people to access guns and iron for better weapons to protect themselves. For instance, the Balanta of Guinea Bissau defended themselves by producing and selling their captives in order to obtain guns and iron bars which they needed to forge powerful weapons and tools.

l) Some free people attacked ships and burnt down factories.

For instance, in the 17th and 18th century, written records document at least 61 attacks on ships by land-based West Africans. There were several conspiracies, and actual revolts by captives which erupted in Goree Island. One such revolt, resulted in death of governor and several soldiers.

When all else failed, men and women revolted in barracoons and aboard ships. In Sierra Leone, for instance, people sacked the captives' quarters of slave trader John Ormond; and the level of the fortification of forts and barracoons attests to European distrust and apprehension.

West Africans also revolted on slave ships. Crews of several slave ships were killed in the Gambia River, while many enslaved West Africans either jumped overboard or let themselves starve to death.

2. Resistance of African ruling elite

a) In the 1530s, the King or Oba of Benin saw that slave trafficking was draining his kingdom of male manpower. He therefore banned sale of slaves, but, kept domestic slaves. By 1550, there was no slave trade in Benin. Pepper and elephant tusks became the main

exports. Even up to the 17th century, the Kings of Benin still refused to cooperate with European slavers.

b) In 1670, King Tezifon of Allada rejected French request for permission to establish a trading post in his territory. Hear his clear-sighted statement:

You will make a house in which you will put at first two little pieces of cannon, the next year you will mount four, and in a little time your factory will metamorphosed into a fort that will make you master of my dominions and enable you to give laws to me.

c) The 1670s Muslim leader and reformer, Nasr al-Din, denounced slavery to the people of Senegal. This resulted in Marabout war and the Toubenan movement (from word tuub, meaning to convert to Islam), whereby the sale of slaves to Christians was banned, thus, undermining the French trade in slaves.

d) In 1724, King Agaja of Dahomey attacked his Ouidah and Ardrah neighbors to stop trade in slaves.

e) In 1787, the Almamy of Futa Toro forbade the passage of slaves for sale through his domain. At the time, several French ships were waiting in anchor in Senegal for slaves to board. The French, as result, were not able to fill ships with human beings. They thus sent presents to the Almamy to appeal to him to rescind his order. The Almamy returned all gifts presented to him, declaring that all the riches of the Senegal company would not divert him from his design. Traders therefore had to stay away from Almamy's vicinity on Senegal River and look for another route to coast.

3. Resistance of West African Abolitionists Abroad

Many West African abolitionists were campaigning against the slave trade in Britain or in the Americas. As freed slaves, their personal experience lent poignancy to their arguments. Two ex-West African slaves, Oladauh Equiano and Ottobah Cugaono, were involved in the 18th century abolitionist movement in England. Both wrote books in 1780s publicizing the evils of the slave trade.

Quobna Ottobah Cugoano (John Stuart), was a Fante, born in present day Ghana, and captured at age of 13. He wrote, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Humbly Submitted to the Inhabitants of Great Britain by Ottobah Cugoano, a Native of Africa*. The book was published in 1787. In it, he argued eloquently and passionately for an immediate end to slave-owning and trading.

. . . kings are the minister of God, to do justice, and not to bear the sword in vain, but revenge wrath upon them that do evil. But if they do not in such a case as this, the cruel oppressions of thousands, and the blood of the murdered Africans who are slain by the sword of cruel avarice, must rest upon their own guilty heads.

He also proposed that the British naval squadron should patrol the West African waters in order to suppress the trade. It would take the British another 30 years before Cugaono's idea was put into practice.

Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa) was an Igbo of eastern Nigeria. His first name Olu uda, means, loud voice, and his surname Equiano is a short form of Ekwe anyi ino (someone who does not agree to stay). Equiano's family was from Essaka, Iseke in present-day Olu Division, Igboland. He published a bestseller in which he offers a vivid and detailed account of his life from early childhood to enslavement. The Interesting Narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa the African was published in 1789.

This produced copious perspirations, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died, thus falling victims to the improvident avarice, as I may call it, of their purchasers. This wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains, now become insupportable; and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable.



Portrait of abolitionist Olaudah Equiano (c. 1745 - 1797), by Daniel Orme (c. 1766 - 1832).
Wikipedia. Public domain.

4. Overt resistance by West African slaves en route to, and in the New World

Revolts aboard ships were common. Therefore, sailors had to be heavily armed and constantly on guard. Once in the Americas and Caribbean Islands, West Africans resisted their bondage. They seized every opportunity to escape. Some formed maroon societies, including the biggest maroon society of all, Palmares, in Brazil.

During the Haitian Revolution of 1791 in St Domingue (Haiti), over 400,000 enslaved Africans rose up against, and killed, their white French masters to establish the Republic of Haiti in 1804. They were led by Toussaint L'Ouverture who originally hailed from West Africa.



Haitian Revolution - Battle of San Domingo, also known as the Battle for Palm Tree Hill, by January Suchodolski (1844).

In mainland North America, there were a number of prominent revolts as well, including, the 1831 Nat Turner Revolt and the treks to freedom led by Harriet Tubman and her Underground Railroad.

Reparations to Subjugated Societies

Reparation is an idea that seeks for compensatory payment to suppressed group of people in a society. Most societies across the globe had fell victim of some sort of subjugation from more powerful societies/class. One can talk of situations like Colonialism, the Jewish

Holocaust in the Second World War, the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade (TAST) among others. After the Suppressed have been able to liberate themselves from the shackles of such conditions, there is always a quest for reparation. This form of reparation can be in kind or materialistic. The most known and controversial of them of is the reparation for slavery in Africa; the argument is that some form of compensatory payment needs to be made to the descendants of Africans who had been enslaved as part of the TAST.

The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade which led to displacement of Africans into the New World had commoditized humans rather than other trading items like gold and ivory among others as goods. Africans were taken by European merchants across the Atlantic Ocean after the discovery of the New World to provide the needed labour power in plantations. This trade had devastated African society at home and in the diaspora as well. African slaves were obtained through warfare, kidnapping and as sale product from the market among other sources. These slaves suffered severe conditions through the Middle passage, on the plantation system and psychological trauma after emancipation. It is based on these injustice against slaves and their descendants in the Americas that African-Americans and members of the Caribbean diaspora are increasingly questing for reparation.

WHO SHOULD BE COMPENSATED IN RELATION TO THE TAST?

Reparation for harm caused Africans both home and the diaspora as the result of the slave trade need to be considered with care. Because, the slaves suffered all sort of humiliation in the plantation system and subsequent segregation policies directed toward them, particularly in the United States, Brazil, and in the Caribbean. The nature of slavery in the New World disallowed slaves to own property. As a result, life after the emancipation was almost as the same as living in slavery. In line with this, the descendants of the former slaves in the diaspora need to be compensated sufficiently in order for them to rehabilitate themselves, especially as to this day they suffer the economic and social consequences of the enslavement of their ancestors, through the prison system, inequality of access to healthcare and education, and relative poverty compared to those not descended from the enslaved.

Also, Africans at home equally suffered the consequences of the slave trade and need reparation as well.

- For instance, resourceful human power was taken away to the New World to the detriment of the homeland. This extracted valuable labour power which could have gone in to developing African economic systems, and contributed to economic disempowerment.
- The desire for slaves by the Europeans plugged the continent into war, as guns and gun powder was introduced to the indigenous Africans to wage war against one another. This had led to displacement of people and loss of life and property. It also helped to create a predatory state model which may influence some modern problems in the continent.

Henceforth, reparation for the slavery needs to encompass both the homeland and the diaspora.

FORMS OF REPARATION FOR THE SLAVERY

Compensation through Money: The former slaves in the New World especially in the US demanded some sort of money after the liberation in order to alleviate themselves to a better condition.

Compensation through Housing: The slaves after being liberated were stranded. No place to live, hence, they demanded provision of housing facilities to accommodate themselves.

Compensation in Kind: Various countries and institutions have apologised for their involvement on the deadly slave trade across the Atlantic Ocean. On June 18, 2009, the Senate of the US passed a resolution apologizing for the institution of slavery and all sort of discrimination against the Black race.

Nevertheless, reparations have not been fully granted, and not all slave trading nations have apologised for the slave trade. Questions to be resolved may include:

- Who will make payments – direct descendants of known slave traders, or the states which allowed the slave trade?
- Who will receive the payments – is it best for this money to be allocated according to class boundaries (which might prove longstanding effect of the slave trade) or to the governments of postcolonial states?
- What role might there be for companies who benefited from the slave trade, should they also be paying compensation? A good example would be the Tate & Lyle Sugar Company, derived from Caribbean sugar plantations who founded the Tate Museums in London.

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