The Slave Trade in Practice

The European demand for slaves was clearly the chief cause of this tragic commerce, and from the point of sale on the African coast to the massive use of slave labor on American plantations, the entire enterprise was in European hands. Within Africa itself, however, a different picture emerges, for over the four centuries of the Atlantic slave trade, European demand elicited an African supply. A few early efforts by the Portuguese at slave raiding along the West African coast convinced Europeans that such efforts were unnecessary and unwise, for African societies were quite capable of defending themselves against European intrusion, and many were willing to sell their slaves peacefully. Furthermore, Europeans died like flies when they entered the interior because they lacked immunity to common tropical diseases. Thus the slave trade quickly came to operate largely with Europeans waiting on the coast, either on their ships or in fortified settlements, to purchase slaves from African merchants and political elites. Certainly Europeans tried to exploit African rivalries to obtain slaves at the lowest possible cost, and the firearms they funneled into West Africa may well have increased the warfare from which so many slaves were derived. But from the point of initial capture to sale on the coast, the entire enterprise was normal in African hands. Almost nowhere did Europeans attempt outright military conquest; instead they generally dealt as equals with local African authorities.

One English merchant in 1693 reported on his negotiations with the king of Whydah, a small kingdom on the coast of what is now Benin: "We attended his majesty with samples of our goods, and made our agreement about the price, though not without much difficulty." Those goods included both European and Indian textiles, cowrie shells (widely used as money in West Africa), European metal...
goods, firearms and gunpowder, tobacco and alcohol, and various decorative items such as beads. Europeans purchased some of these items—cowrie shells and Indian textiles, for example—with silver mined in the Americas. Thus the slave trade connected with commerce in silver and textiles as it became part of an emerging worldwide network of exchange. In most places most of the time, a leading scholar concluded, the slave trade took place “not unlike international trade anywhere in the world of the period.”

If African authorities and elite classes in many places controlled their side of the slave trade, on occasion they were almost overwhelmed by it. Many small-scale kinship-based societies, lacking the protection of a strong state, were thoroughly disrupted by raids from more powerful neighbors. Even some sizable states were destabilized. In the early sixteenth century, the kingdom of Kongo, located mostly in present-day Angola, had been badly damaged by the commerce in slaves, and the authority of its ruler had been severely undermined. In 1526, the Kongo king Afonso, himself a convert to Christianity, begged the Portuguese to halt the slave trade altogether. “We cannot calculate how great the damage is,” he wrote to the king of Portugal. “[M]erchants are taking everyday our natives, sons of the land and the sons of our noblemen and vassals and our relatives.”

An incident along the so-called Slave Coast of West Africa during the final decades of the slave trade illustrates how even African slave traders themselves could be victimized. On this occasion in 1856, a “Yankee captain” bought some 500 slaves and then invited twenty-five “headmen or traders” aboard his ship for a drink. An American chaplain recounted what happened next as he heard the story from local people: “He [the ship’s captain] was profuse in his hospitality, made them all drunk, put them in irons, sank their canoes, pocketed their money, and got under weigh. Two of the twenty-five thus taken jumped overboard shortly after, and were drowned; the remainder he sold in Cuba for four hundred dollars each.”

Whatever the relationship between European buyers and African sellers, for the slaves themselves—who were seized in the interior, often sold several times on the harrowing journey to the coast, sometimes branded, and held in squalid slave dungeons while awaiting transportation to the New World—it was anything but a normal commercial transaction. One European engaged in the trade noted that “the negroes are so willful and loath to leave their own country, that they have often leap’d out of the canoes, boat, and ship, into the sea, and kept under water till they were drowned, to avoid being taken up and saved by our boats.”

Over the four centuries of the slave trade, millions of Africans underwent some such experience, but their numbers varied considerably over time. For the first 150 years (1450–1600), fewer than 4,000 slaves annually were shipped to Europe or across the Atlantic. During those years, the Portuguese were at least as much interested in African gold, spices, and textiles. Furthermore, as in Asia, they became involved in transporting African goods, including slaves, from one African port to another, thus becoming the “truck drivers” of coastal West African commerce. In the seventeenth century, the pace picked up, with an average of about 10,000 slaves
per year shipped to the Americas. By this time, the slave trade was becoming highly competitive, with the British, Dutch, and French contesting the earlier Portuguese monopoly. The eighteenth century was the high point of the slave trade as the plantation economies of the Americas boomed. By the 1730s, more than 60,000 people per year left Africa in chains, bound for the Americas and slavery.

Where did these Africans come from, and where did they go? Geographically, the slave trade drew on the societies of West Africa, from present-day Mauritania in the north to Angola in the south. Initially focused on the coastal regions, the slave trade progressively penetrated into the interior as the demand for slaves picked up. Socially, slaves were mostly drawn from various marginal groups in African societies—prisoners of war, criminals, debtors, people who had been "pawned" during times of difficulty. Thus Africans did not generally sell "their own people" into slavery. Divided into hundreds of separate, usually small-scale, and often rival communities—cities, kingdoms, microstates, clans, and villages—the various peoples of West Africa had no concept of an "African" identity. Those whom they captured and sold were normally outsiders, vulnerable people who lacked the protection of membership in an established community. When short-term economic or political advantage could be gained, such people were sold. In this respect, the Atlantic slave trade was little different from the experience of enslavement elsewhere in the world.

The destination of enslaved Africans, half a world away in the Americas, was very different. Some 80 percent wound up in Brazil or the Caribbean, where the labor demands of the plantation economy were most intense. About 5 to 6 percent found themselves in North America, with the balance in mainland Spanish America or in Europe itself (see the Snapshot). The journey across the Atlantic was horrendous almost beyond description, with the Middle Passage having an overall mortality rate of about 15 percent.

### Comparing Consequences: The Impact of the Slave Trade in Africa

From the viewpoint of world history, the chief outcome of the slave trade lay in the new transregional linkages that it generated. Both commercially and demographically, Africa became a permanent part of an interacting Atlantic world. Millions of its people were now compelled to make their lives in the New World. West African economies were increasingly connected to an emerging European-centered world economy. These vast processes set in motion a chain of consequences that have transformed the lives and societies of people on both sides of the Atlantic.

Although the slave trade did not result in the kind of population collapse that occurred in the Americas, it certainly slowed Africa's growth at a time when Europe, China, and other regions were expanding demographically. Scholars have estimated that sub-Saharan Africa represented about 18 percent of the world's population in 1600, but only 6 percent in 1900. A portion of that difference reflects the slave trade's impact on Africa's population history.
That impact derived not only from the loss of millions of people over four centuries but also from the economic stagnation and political disruption that the slave trade generated. Economically, the slave trade stimulated little positive change in Africa because those Africans who benefited most from the traffic in people were not investing in the productive capacities of African societies. Although European imports generally did not displace traditional artisan manufacturing, no technological breakthroughs in agriculture or industry increased the wealth available to these societies. Maize and manioc (cassava), introduced from the Americas, added a new source of calories to African diets, but the international demand was for Africa’s people, not its agricultural products.

Within particular African societies, the impact of the slave trade differed considerably from place to place and over time. Particularly in small-scale societies that were frequently subjected to slave raiding and that had little centralized authority, insecurity was pervasive. Oral traditions in southern Ghana, for example, reported that “there was no rest in the land,” that people went about in groups rather than alone, and that mothers kept their children inside when European ships appeared. Some larger kingdoms such as Kongo and Oyo slowly disintegrated as access to trading opportunities and firearms enabled outlying regions to establish their independence. However, African authorities also sought to take advantage of the new commercial opportunities and to manage the slave trade in their own interests, as the contrasting experience of the neighboring kingdoms of Benin and Dahomey illustrates.

The Kingdom of Benin, in the forest area of present-day Nigeria, was one of the oldest and most highly developed states in the coastal hinterland of West Africa, dating perhaps to the eleventh century C.E. Its capital was a large, walled city with wide avenues, a lavish court, a wealthy elite, and a powerful monarch, or oba, who strictly controlled the country’s trade. Benin’s uniqueness lay in its relatively successful efforts to avoid a deep involvement in the slave trade and to diversify its exports with which it purchased European firearms and other goods. As early as 1526, the oba began to restrict the slave trade and soon forbade the export of male slaves altogether, a ban that lasted until the early eighteenth century. By then, the oba’s authority over outlying areas had declined, and the country’s major exports of pepper and cotton cloth had lost out to Asian and then European competition. In these circumstances, Benin felt compelled to resume limited participation in the slave trade. But even at the height of the trade, in the late eighteenth century, Benin exported fewer than 1,000 slaves a year.

Among the Aja-speaking peoples to the west of Benin, the situation was very different. There the slave trade had thoroughly disrupted a series of small and weak states along the coast. Some distance inland, the kingdom of Dahomey arose in the early eighteenth century, at least in part as an effort to contain the constant raiding and havoc occasioned by the coastal trade. It was a unique and highly authoritarian state in which commoners and chiefs alike were responsible directly to the king and in which the power of lineages and secret societies was considerably weakened.

For a time, Dahomey tried to limit the external slave trade, to import European craftsmen, and to develop plantation agriculture within the kingdom, but all this failed. In view of hostile relations with the neighboring kingdom of Oyo and others, Dahomey instead turned to a vigorous involvement in the slave trade, under strict royal control. The army conducted annual slave raids, and the government soon came to depend on the trade for its essential revenues. Unlike in Benin, the slave trade in Dahomey became the chief business of the state and remained so until well into the nineteenth century.

I. Not all African societies were weakened by the slave trade. Dahomey was an exception. How did it become a powerful African state in this era?