

THE AFRICAN (COASTAL) STATES AND THE EUROPEAN TRADE OF ENSLAVED PEOPLE, 17TH-18TH CENTURIES

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The Atlantic trade of enslaved peoples (legal then clandestine) gained momentum in the late 17th century and reached its peak between 1760 and 1830. In the North Atlantic, it existed in the form of “triangular trade” (European port, African coast, Atlantic crossing, and the return to Europe), whereas in the South Atlantic it consisted of “direct trading”, i.e., direct trade between the Congolese coast and Brazil as the winds and currents were more favourable.

The beginnings of trade

The trade routes were defined by the Portuguese in the 16th century with the “discovery” of the Caribbean in 1492 and Brazil in 1500. They landed in Ceuta in northern Morocco in 1415 and year after year, skirted the western coasts of Africa until they reached the Cape of Good Hope in 1488, and passed it in 1498. The local peoples benefitted from their caravels, with the newcomers bringing attractive goods hitherto unknown to Africa: fabrics, various “trinkets” such as mirrors or knives, as well as “trading guns” and alcohol. In exchange, the Portuguese sought to obtain gold. Since the Catalan Atlas (world map) of 1375, executed by a Jewish man from Majorca educated by the Mediterranean Arabs, the Portuguese were aware that gold did not come from North Africa, but rather from the trans-Saharan trails south of the Sahara. Therefore, the first form of “triangular trade” was an African coastal trade of captives. Installed on the coast near the Kingdom of Kongo (inner Angola) from the 1480s onwards, the Portuguese supplied themselves here with captives, whom they used to meet the demand on the Gold Coast (present-day coast of Ghana) on the one hand, but also to establish the first plantations based on enslaved labour growing sugar cane (a crop imported from India and Egypt) on the island of Saõ Tomè, towards the tip of the Gulf of Benin.

The cultivation of sugar cane required an exceptionally large workforce. Brought from the coasts of equatorial Africa, the enslaved peoples, more numerous than the settlers on the island, revolted from the mid-16th century onwards under the leadership of a dynamic leader named Amador (still praised in song by the schoolchildren of Saõ Tomè today). The plantations were set alight, and the



island ravaged by fire and bloodshed. The terrified settlers dismantled their sugar mills, and took them with them, along with their enslaved labour force, to the recently “discovered” Brazil. This explains the phenomenal expansion of the slavery-based plantations of Brazil, which spread in the 17th century to the French West Indies. The following century, the French island of Saint-Domingue had become the main producer of sugar cane, until the insurrection of the island’s enslaved peoples, which began in 1791 and culminated in 1804 with the creation of the first independent black state outside Africa: Haiti. Nevertheless, in other Caribbean regions, this crop, which had become the dominant agricultural product, continued to generate growing trade, and subsequently relied on the capture of increased numbers of enslaved Africans.

The growth of internal trade

Relations then changed between Africans and Europeans. These were initially cordial between the king of Portugal and the king of Kongo (present-day Angola) and the latter had even converted to Christianity in 1497, hoping to benefit from the technical progress (construction, iron work, etc.) imported by Portugal. However, the capture of enslaved peoples prevailed, and the Kingdom of Kongo waned, before disappearing altogether in the 19th century. Along the rest of the Atlantic coast, the coastal chiefdoms hitherto open to trade were now transformed into warehouses for captives, supplied by the systematic raids carried out in the hinterland. The Gold Coast Fanti, once gold exporters, in turn became traders of enslaved people. This was also the case for other ports, like Douala in Cameroon or Loango on the right bank of the Congo River. Gradually, the African slave trade contaminated the trade routes and interior kingdoms, extending as far as the heart of equatorial Africa and even the coast of Mozambique.

Certain small kingdoms on the coast and in the hinterland benefitted from this. Their rulers had understood that selling captives was a profitable affair, and that enslaved peoples could be exchanged for the coveted goods and guns brought by the European traders. They combined a political and economic system adapted to the circumstances. In the dry season, their soldiers travelled elsewhere to conquer captives (they did not trade their own countrymen but those of their enemies) whom they sold to the Europeans: the British and French in West Africa, and the Portuguese and Brazilians in equatorial Africa and on the Mozambican coast. In the wet season, these soldiers returned to work in the fields: in the 19th century, when oleaginous raw materials were demanded by Westerners, this complementary activity increased their wealth. Such kingdoms experienced growth from the end of the 17th century, and throughout the following century up until the first half of the 19th, according to a chronology marked by the genesis, rise, and decline of the Atlantic slave trade. These included the Kingdoms of Abomey (or Dahomey, present-day Benin) and, in the hinterland, the Ashanti Empire around its capital Koumassi (present-day Ghana) which



combined the trade of African captives to the south with trade in palm nuts to the Sahel, where they were highly appreciated by Muslims for their euphoric qualities. Inside the continent, the capture of individuals continued to grow due to the ever-increasing demand. A similar process developed (especially in the 19th century) along the eastern coast where the Sultan of Zanzibar and the Swahili chiefs, who depended in varying degrees on this form of trade, met the demand from the Indian Ocean and beyond. The Swahili also created slavery-based plantations (cultivating sisal, sugar cane, etc.) all along the coast, supplied by the caravans that raided the hinterland.

The hunt for captives was done in several ways, either during internal wars, such as the one between the State of Borno (Chad Basin) and its neighbours, or by simple robbery, which involved the kidnapping of isolated men, women, and children working in the fields by African traders, who then resold them, in chains and in increasing numbers, to the caravans. They eventually ended up crowded into barracks on the coast where trading posts had been built by Europeans, like the Portuguese, Dutch, and British forts of Cape Coast on the Gold Coast, the Portuguese forts of Mombasa on the eastern coast, and the Portuguese and French forts of Ouidah on the coast of Benin (present-day Benin), which at that time was known as the “Slave Coast”. Here, they were housed in cramped quarters, while waiting for the trading ships to come and take them aboard. In the early 19th century, internal trafficking networks criss-crossed the continent from one side to the other. This may be illustrated in the stories of certain captives, like the female slave, Bwanika, captured somewhere on the border between the Democratic Republic of Congo and present-day Tanzania. She was resold a dozen times, and escaped twice from caravans, one destined for the Indian Ocean, the other for the Atlantic, before ending up in a Protestant mission where she told her story.

Paradoxically, in the 19th century the progressive abolition of the Atlantic slave trade by the European powers (from 1807 in Great Britain to 1831 in France) led to the intensification of the African trade of enslaved peoples. The well-established networks in the interior of the African continent no longer found takers on the seas. Unsold “stocks of slaves” accumulated, prompting the African powers in place to adapt to the situation. They did so in two ways. Firstly, they put these enslaved individuals to work in the internal production of the raw materials required by the genesis of the industrial revolution in the West: peanut and palm nut oils, sisal, etc., particularly in the south of present-day Nigeria, from the early 19th century, and in the Kingdom of Dahomey from the 1830s onwards. The other solution consisted of making them into soldiers for the imperial African conquests developing at that time: jihads (holy wars) led in West Africa by Usman Dan Fodio until 1810, by El Hadj Omar sometime later, and then by the Samori. The same was done by the non-religious empires based on the trade of enslaved peoples emerging in East Africa. One of the most formidable was that of Rabih, a former captive from Bahr el Ghazal trained in Egypt, which



extended as far as Bornu to the west of Lake Chad in the second half of the 19th century, and that of Mirambo of Tanzania and Msiri of Katanga in East Central Africa. In fact, these slavery-based empires resisted the colonial conquests of the end of the century the longest. They were supplied with increasing numbers of guns due to the decline of the Atlantic slave trade. Considering European military progress, the obsolete materials belonging to armies were periodically replaced, and certain metal producing hubs, such as Liège in Belgium, began to specialize in the transformation of rifles into the less efficient models used in slave trading. These stocks were then sold off in the Mediterranean where the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 facilitated their passage through the Red Sea. Hence, in the last third of the century, there was a boom in the trade of enslaved peoples due to the Sultanate of Zanzibar once the capital had been moved from Oman (Arabia) to Zanzibar in 1840. This port would play an important role in Indian Ocean trading. Now an independent sultanate, it dominated the entire eastern coast, and Zanzibar became a key pole in the trade of enslaved peoples, also connected to the smuggling activities linked to the British and French islands of Réunion and Mauritius. A Swahili slave trader nicknamed Tippu Tip, a one-time ally of Belgian King Leopold II, established plantations on the upper Congo River and died in Zanzibar in 1904. He even had an obituary notice in the London Times.

The end of the trade in enslaved peoples

The result was paradoxical: as slavery was gradually abolished in the Americas over the course of the century (1835, 1848, 1863, 1880, 1888), it became more and more widespread in Africa. It is estimated that around 1880, depending on the region, between one third and one half of inhabitants were of servile status, which was probably ten times more than a few centuries previously. Moreover, this African slavery system was profitable for Europeans, greedy for tropical raw materials used in industry: tropical oils, hunting treasures (ivory), and rubber from the 1880s onwards, all produced by an African labour force more or less reduced to enslavement, akin to the cotton plantations in the southern United States in the first half of the 19th century. In other words, in Africa, the slavery-based mode of production under African control continued to supply the rise of Western capitalism. It was the colonial regime, established later, at the very end of the 19th century, which gradually brought an end to “customary” servile practices (just before the First World War) replacing them with another form of forced labour, called indentured labour.

Translated by Emma Lingwood



About the author

Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, professor of history, specializes in the history of sub-Saharan Africa. Her work focuses on Africa, the political issues of colonization, and the concept of imperialism and capitalism in Africa. Her 1970 state thesis explored the establishment of a colonial economy by France in equatorial Africa between 1898 and 1930. She is also interested in women in the colonial context, and in her work, attempts to highlight their role and function in society. Her research has also focused on the history of African urbanization since its beginnings.

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For further information:

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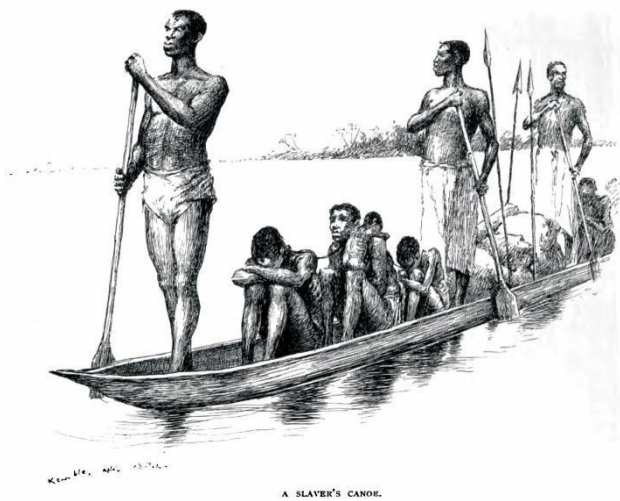


Abraham Cresques, Excerpt, *Atlas de cartes marines*, also known as *Atlas catalan*, 1370-1380, © Bibliothèque Nationale de France

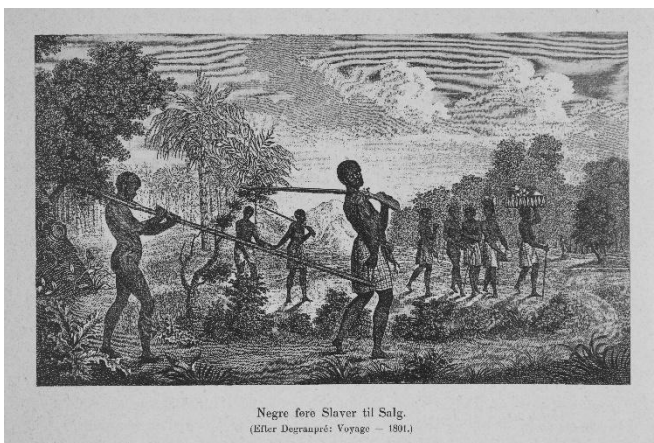


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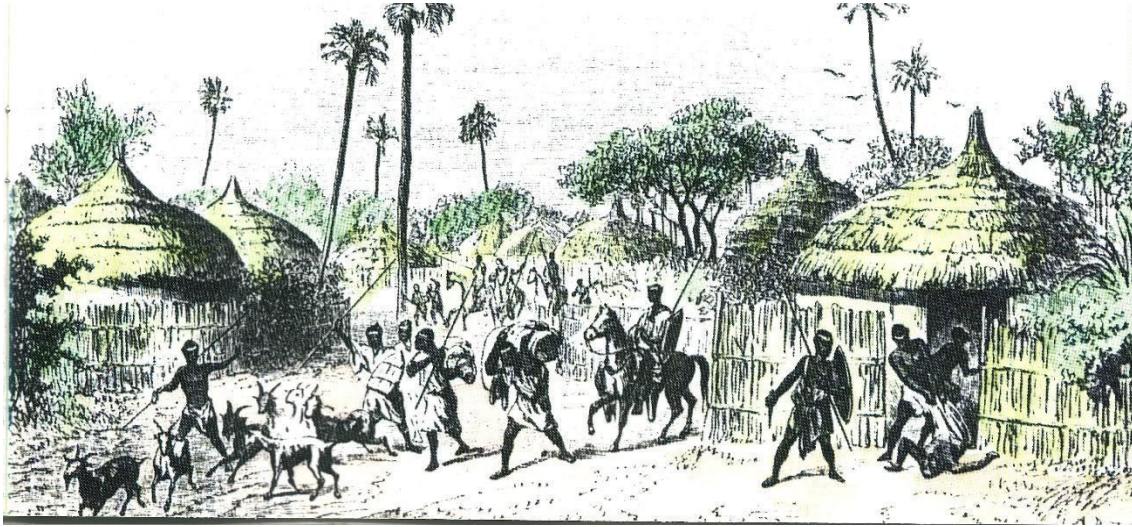
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A slaver's canoe in the Congo Basin, 1890, © Slavery images.



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A raid at Barea (Mosgou), drawing by Rouargue after Barth, *Le Tour du Monde (The World Tour)*, 1860, Wikisource.



Tippu Tip (Ḥamad ibn Muḥammad ibn Jum‘ah ibn Rajab ibn Muḥammad ibn Sa‘īd al Murjabī), anonymous, 1890, Wikipedia.