

FROM: Africa in History  
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### The Atlantic Trade and Slavery

Passing through Cairo in the 1320s on his way to Mecca, the great Mansa Musa of Mali had told a dramatic tale of maritime adventure. He said that his predecessor had sent two big expeditions, one of four hundred ships and the other of two thousand, across the ocean in order to discover what lay on the other side, but only one of these ships and its crew had ever returned. Even if these expeditions really took place, it is clear they were altogether exceptional. The coastal peoples of West Africa were skilful in building large canoes for inshore fishing and at handling these across thundering surf; but this was the obvious limit of their need. Until the coming of the Europeans, they faced an empty ocean. In this respect, of course, they were very differently placed from the Swahili peoples of the East Coast, who had long since learned ship-building and sailing skills from the Arab and Indian sailors of the Indian Ocean.

During the sixteenth century, however, there evolved in the Atlantic a trading community that was parallel to the much older and in many ways vastly different system of the Indian Ocean. From 1500 onwards the western seas were increasingly traced by sailing ship routes linking western Africa to western Europe, and soon afterwards to the eastern seaboard of the Americas and the islands of the Caribbean. In this new trading community West Africans played almost from the first an indispensable part. This was not as ship-builders or ship-masters, for they had none of the necessary skills, experience or incentive to impel them in that

direction; and the carrying trade remained a European monopoly of skill and ownership. With rising European technological supremacy, this was the period in which the foundations for Africa's future dependence on Europe, whether economic or political, began to be laid.

Aside from unruly outbreaks here and there, European piracy along the Guinea Coast had given way to trading partnership well before 1500. But the partnership took a very different shape and meaning from that of East Africans with the Asian traders of the Indian Ocean. There along the East Coast, so far as all known records indicate, slaving remained a minor aspect of trade or one that was sometimes altogether absent. None of the Arab writers of the medieval period speaks of the slave trade from East Africa as being of any importance, and some of them do not mention it at all. If slaves were wanted, they could be needed only for household work, for there was no plantation system in the East which could absorb large quantities of manual labour; and the number required for household work or military service in Muslim armies could never be enormous.\*

At first it was the same in the West. Though the Portuguese might be taking home several thousand slaves a year, they were still only supplementing the supply of domestic labour fed by an already existing and profitable trade in European slaves. So profitable had the Venetian Republic found its sale of Christian slaves to Egypt and other Muslim countries, indeed, that its merchants had not been deterred even by Pope Clement V's edict of excommunication for this offence, nor by his authorization to all other Christian peoples to reduce the Venetians to slavery in their turn.

But this use of slaves and slave labour, familiar in medieval Europe as in Africa, became an altogether different matter once

\*A contested view. For what seem to me conclusive arguments against there having been large slave exports from East Africa before the nineteenth century on anything like the scale of the Atlantic slave trade, see B. Davidson, 'Slaves or Captives? Some Notes on Fantasy and Fact', in N. I. Huggins, M. Kilson and D. M. Fox (eds.), *Key Issues in the Afro-American Experience*, New York, 1971, and reprints.

the Americas were discovered. Only hard work could open mines and make plantations flourish; and work was the last thing envisaged by the conquerors, at least for themselves. Yet even if Portuguese and Spanish soldiers and settlers had cared to labour in mines or plantations, they were desperately short of the necessary skills. They knew nothing of tropical farming; and although they had miners of their own at home, these were few and could seldom be spared. Consequently it became necessary to find labour; and, if possible, skilled labour.

They started by impressing the 'Indians'—the native peoples whom they found—and the results were appalling. When Hispaniola was discovered, 'it contained 1,130,000 Indians', a Spaniard well placed to make his guess wrote in 1518. 'Today their number does not exceed 11,000. And judging by what has happened, there will be none of them left in three or four years' times unless some remedy is applied.' The remedy, in fact, had already been found. European slaves being in too short supply, and Amer-Indians incapable of filling the need for labour except with their corpses, recourse was had to Africa. Within a few years of Columbus's first voyage in 1492 the Spanish were taking West African captives for enslavement across the Atlantic: few enough to begin with, and yet sufficient to cause the governor of Hispaniola to complain in 1503 that too many Africans were escaping and 'teaching disobedience to the Indians'. They were also breaking away from enslavement in sudden and successful revolts, terrifying the local settlers; and it would be better, the governor thought, not to send any more. But no such counsels could prevail over the pressing need for labor, and above all for African labour skilled in tropical farming and in mining.

Two years later, in 1505, a caravel sailed from Seville with seventeen Africans and some mining equipment. Five years after that the sale of Africans in the Americas was legalized by the Spanish crown. In 1516 Spain received its first shipment of slave-grown sugar from the Caribbean; and in 1518 a ship in Spanish service carried the first cargo of Africans directly from the Guinea Coast to the Americas. With this there opened a regular slaving

system which was to endure for three and a half centuries, and deliver across the ocean some 10 to 12 million Africans, as well as killing many other millions before departure or on voyage. This peculiar form of trade, immensely valuable to western Europe but increasingly disastrous for western Africa, was to overshadow the whole commercial system of the Atlantic Ocean. It formed the major factor of difference, in so far as Africa was concerned, between the Atlantic system and its older counterpart of the Indian Ocean.

One may turn aside for a moment here and look at the conditions under which this overwhelming tide of forced emigration became so large a part of the African scene. While ashore on Grand Canary in the 1550s, John Hawkins of Plymouth heard not only that 'Negroes were very good merchandise in Hispaniola', but also that a 'store of Negroes might easily be had upon the coast of Guinea'. Why easily?

The answer lay in the social systems of Africa. Like other systems based on economies of subsistence which were qualified but not essentially changed by a certain amount of production for trade, these had no wage-labour of any regular kind at their disposal. Having no labour market, they functioned either by organizing men and women of certain 'age-sets'—men and women born at about the same time as each other—for traditionally accepted forms of labour, such as portage among forest peoples who had no draught animals; or else by imposing free-labour services on certain groups and individuals. The latter might arrive at their servile condition through conquest, capture in war or punishment for crime. More often, though, they would be peasants whose status differed little in essence from that of the serfs or villeins of medieval Europe, and who were regarded as inseparable from the land they tilled. As in Europe, it became customary to use them for household or military services, for the accumulation of food or handmade goods, and for gifts or a means of exchange. In 1493, for example, the new emperor of Songhay, Askia Muhammad, inherited from his predecessor a number of 'slave peoples' whose slavery consisted in the obligation to provide

certain stipulated goods or services. Blacksmiths had to provide spears, fishermen had to deliver fish or canoes or canoe-crews, cattle-breeders had to bring in forage or cattle, others had to perform household services.

There is no doubt that this use of tied or wageless labour increased, though for the most part only in the Muslim areas of the Western Sudan, after the fifteenth century. It was one of those aspects of Iron Age growth which steadily transformed the old equalities into new forms of exploitation and privilege. Muslim kings imposed heavier labour-services, accumulated wealth in kind through wider use of slave labour, and raised slave armies to protect their authority from lineage rivals, usurpers or popular revolt. All this, going hand-in-hand with the growth of trade and the expansion of money-currencies but generally stopping short of early forms of capitalism, occurred in the Western Sudan from at least the time of Askia Muhammad. Later it spread southward into the forest regions under the Alafins of Oyo and the powerful kings of eighteenth-century Asante.

Yet these 'wageless workers', one should note, were seldom or never mere chattels, persons without rights or hope of emancipation. They might be bought and sold, given away and accepted as gifts. Yet their condition was different from that of the African chattel slaves who would labour in the Americas. They were not, as these were, outcasts in the body politic. On the contrary, they were integral members of their community. Household slaves lived with their masters, often as members of the family. They could work themselves free of their obligations. They could marry their masters' daughters. They could become traders, leading men in peace and war, governors and sometimes even kings. 'A slave who knows how to serve', ran the old Asante proverb, 'succeeds to his master's property.'

These systems, then, were not 'slave-based economies' such as had existed in parts of Europe or Asia. They lacked the wholesale alienation of land into private ownership that could deprive the mass of people of their independent livelihood. If they had many forms of currency, notably the cowrie shell, these remained

marginal to economic life as a whole. While skilful in trade and trading techniques, their merchants were by no means numerous or strong enough as yet to play a dominant role in the state. Horizontal divisions in society were increasingly apparent and important; but they could exercise political and economic influence only at certain points and in certain situations, none of which was capable of transforming these economies from predominantly subsistence systems to full-blown 'money-and-market' systems.

In the context of slavery, however, these systems manifestly provided many forms of obligatory servitude. Some men had much power and status, while others had little; and those who had little were increasingly, as the process of horizontal social stratification continued, at the service of those who had much. Comparatively large numbers of men and women became 'disposable' for one reason or another, mainly by capture in war or sentence of the criminal courts. And it was out of this situation that the trans-Saharan slave trade, and afterwards the increasingly larger trans-Atlantic slave trade, were born and made to flourish. However deplorable it may appear in the light of what happened later, this 'disposing' of 'persons of inferior status' can have seemed no more shocking or immoral to 'persons of superior status' in Africa than the arbitrary sacking and starving of workers seemed to the English employers of the industrial revolution. The one form of servitude appeared as 'natural' as the other.

Neither buyers nor sellers therefore found it strange that a demand for slaves should be met whenever the balance of interest led that way: meeting this demand, indeed, became part of the traditional economies of those concerned, whether they hailed from America, Europe or Asia. Who generally bought and who generally sold was determined for the most part by the relative strengths of the economic systems in play. During the early Middle Ages the flow of slaves had gone from Europe to the Muslim states of the Near East and Egypt in exchange for the finished goods of those then more advanced regions; later, with Europe growing more developed, the flow was reversed and went from

Africa to Europe. Only with the coming of wage-labour was slaving brought to an end; and wage-labour during many of its early years, characteristically for the attitudes out of which it had grown, imposed conditions which were seldom better and were sometimes worse than the outright enslavement of old.

The point to be noticed here is that the early sale of Africans to European sea-merchants departed in no way from previous practices of exchanging servile persons within Africa, or, indeed, within Europe. The only difference was that servile persons were now sold for transport overseas instead of transport overland, a change that was of no importance (at least for many years) to the traditional economies and social systems either of sellers or buyers. And had the European demand remained at the minor level of interest where it stood before the American discoveries and enterprises, the slave trade with West Africa could never have exercised any major influence on the course of events. But the American discoveries changed everything.

Not only were Africans plentiful. They were also skilled in tropical farming and in mining, being in these respects far superior not only to the Amer-Indians but often to the Europeans as well. As the years went by, they became so valuable and their rapid replacement so necessary, because of the hardships to which they were ruthlessly submitted, that the Portuguese from Brazil were even bringing gold to the Gold Coast, during the eighteenth century, in order to purchase with it slaves who could not otherwise be had. 'There remains only to tell you', wrote an English buying agent on the Gold Coast in 1771 to his directors in London, 'that gold commands the trade. There is no buying a slave without one ounce of gold at least on it . . . Formerly, owners of ships used to send out double cargoes of goods, one for [buying] slaves and the other for [buying] gold. If slaves happened to be dearer than usual, the cargo for [buying] gold was thrown into the slave cargo in order to fill the ship. On the other hand, if slaves were reasonable the gold cargo was disposed of for gold and ivory at a profit of thirty, forty, or fifty per cent . . . How strangely things are reversed now . . . [when] we scarcely see a

ship go off with her complement of slaves, notwithstanding her cargo [is arranged to allow for payment of] eighteen to twenty pounds sterling [per slave] on the average . . .

By this time the trade had become thoroughly engrained in the commercial system of the coastland. Its customs and regulations were almost a matter of tradition. From selling a few slaves in the early years, the Africans in the business—a 'business of kings, rich men, and prime merchants', as Barbot rightly called it in the 1680s—found themselves gradually edged and pressured into providing more and more. Far outstripping the early demand for household servants and porters, the business now called for enormous numbers. These could be provided, as we shall see, only by warfare and capture, so that from the middle of the seventeenth century it is almost always more accurate to speak of this trade as dealing in captives and not in slaves. Increasingly, the victims were prisoners-of-war whose enslavement began only with their sale to Europeans: few, any longer, had been in any servile status before they were sold. What had happened, as Walter Rodney has observed, was that the African 'ruling class [had] joined hands with the Europeans in exploiting the African masses': at first light-heartedly and without any notion of the consequences, and then, after the American discoveries, with an eye to their own increasing personal profit and power. It was not long before thriving coastal polities were founded on the sale of captives to the Europeans.

Some of the 'kings, rich men, and prime merchants' who had thus embarked on selling 'common folk' to the Europeans soon found reason to hesitate. The Kongo king Nzinga Mbemba, baptized soon after 1500 as King Affonso I, had welcomed the Portuguese, who came with promises of trade and useful knowledge, and made them many gifts of household servants and other persons of servile condition. But he found the Portuguese appetite for slave labour, whether for growing sugar on the offshore African island of São Thomé or for transport to Brazil, entirely insatiable. Portuguese agents rode roughshod over his authority among the coastal chiefs, dealing separately with each rather than through

his own agents, and carrying off anyone they could get their hands on, including members of the king's own family. They spread such 'corruption and licentiousness', this Kongo king complained in a letter to Lisbon of 1526, 'that our country is being completely depopulated'. Two centuries later a king of Dahomey even offered to allow Europeans to establish plantations along the coast if they would cease to carry men away.

There were other such attempts at reducing human exports, but none of them availed. To obtain European goods, especially the firearms whose use was now spreading through West Africa, it was necessary to meet the European demand for captives; and if one local chieftain or 'prime merchant' should refuse, his rival or neighbour would undoubtedly comply. Only a major shift in European demand could have brought the traffic to a close.

No such shift came until the early years of the nineteenth century, and even then only with the British and the French. On the contrary, the trade repeatedly expanded with the invention of new techniques of exchange. Crucial among these was the so-called 'trade ounce'. The early chartered companies of the seventeenth century had all failed financially for one reason or another of bad management, but mainly because they were obliged to buy goods in Europe for cash, and to sell them in Africa by processes of barter. It proved extremely hard, and often impossible, for a captain to assure himself of a profit, since the costing of a barter deal, involving many items of unfixed monetary value, often defeated even the most cautious calculations of self-interest.

To meet this difficulty the trade ounce was invented. It had nothing to do with an ounce in weight, except that its value in goods was related to the price of an ounce of gold in England (the French worked to a different system). What was done, as nearly as possible, was to assemble a package of goods, which might consist of a mixture of iron bars, copper basins, cheap cottons, muskets, ammunition, gunpowder, that was known to cost, *in toto*, about half the value of an ounce of gold. This 'ounce' was then exchanged for a captive or captives (their price

in trade ounces varied widely according to place and time) whose approximate selling value was also known. Together with the 100 per cent 'mark up' on the gold value of the goods exchanged— notionally costing an ounce of gold, but actually only half an ounce—this allowed a captain to 'see his profit' in a barter deal, as well as allowing for the death of slaves during the voyage across the Atlantic.

Other techniques were invented on the African side. Those of the Fon kingdom of Dahomey are particularly interesting. Rising to power in the 1720s, the Fon secured control of most of the ports in the 'Benin Gap', the stretch of open scrub country which divides the forests of southern Nigeria from those of southern Ghana. Their kingdom was peculiar in that it was based on an extreme centralization, so that there are certain ways in which Dahomey may be said to have been the first nation-state in tropical Africa. Like some other kingdoms in contact with Europeans, the Fon developed what Polányi has called a 'port of trade' at Ouidah. Through this they successfully concentrated all dealings with Europeans, thus enabling them to make a clear division between the 'state sector', dealing in export and import, and the 'private sector', which remained, throughout most of Dahomey, one of subsistence and merely local trade. With this device the kings of Dahomey were able to profit from the European trade, especially in the import of firearms, while isolating the greater part of their country from the impact of European influence. There was no scope here for sub-chiefs to break away from royal authority, as happened in Kongo, and go into business on their own.

None of this reduced the inhumanity of the system in itself. Brutality grew worse after about 1650 when the trade got thoroughly into its stride. Coarsened by dealing in men, women and children whose value was only what they could realize for cash in the Americas, and whose fate promised only a quick death or perpetual servitude, the sailing-ship captain soon came to treat his captives like cattle. He bought them for size or strength or handsomeness, applied crude tests for ensuring that the goods



were 'as per invoice', crammed and chained them in stifling misery below decks, and sailed for the Americas with such slow speed as he could muster, hoping that losses on the way would not exceed 10 or 15 per cent.

'As the slaves come down to Ouidah from the inland country,' Barbot wrote of the familiar scene, 'they are put into a booth or prison, built for that purpose near the beach, all of them together; and when the Europeans are to receive them, they are brought out into a large plain, where the ships' surgeons examine every part of every one of them, to the smallest member, men and women being all stark naked. Such as are allowed good and sound are set on one side, and the others by themselves: these rejected slaves are called Makrons, being above thirty-five years of age, or defective in their lips, eyes or teeth, or grown grey; or that have the venereal disease or any other imperfection.

'These being set aside, each of the others passed as good is marked on the breast with a red-hot iron, imprinting the mark of the French, English or Dutch companies so that each nation may distinguish their own property, and so as to prevent their being changed by the sellers for others that are worse . . . In this particular, care is taken that the women, as the tenderest, are not burnt too hard.' A week or so later if ships were to hand, or many weeks later if they were not, these luckless captives would start the 'Middle Passage' across the ocean, and with this again there were traditions of outrageous brutality. Every ship's captain feared revolt on board, and with good reason, for revolts were many. He would normally cause all his slaves to be chained below decks, sometimes bringing them up into the air once a day and making them jump about to restore their circulation. This was thought so necessary for health, the House of Commons was told in 1789, that the prisoners were 'whipped if they refused to do it'. Anti-slavery campaigners rightly pointed to the horrors and demoralization of these terrible voyages. They canvassed seamen in the great slaving ports of England and came back with gruesome evidence. 'Men on their first voyages usually dislike the traffic', Clarkson found after researches in Liverpool and

Bristol. 'But if they went a second or third time, their disposition became gradually to be accustomed to carry away men and women by force, to keep them in chains . . . and to behold the dead and dying.'

### Slave Trade Consequences

The degradation went beyond the slaving ships and plantations. Ramifying through European and American society, it formed a deep soil of arrogant contempt for African humanity. In this soil fresh ideas and attitudes of 'racial superiority', themselves the fruit of Europe's technical and military strength, took easy root and later came to full flower during the decades of nineteenth-century invasion and of twentieth-century possession of the continent. Even men and women of otherwise thoughtful and generous disposition came to think it well and wise that Africans should be carried into slavery, since they were carried at that same time, it was said, out of an 'endless night of savage barbarism' into the embrace of a 'superior civilization'.

But other men and women disagreed. British and French abolitionists played an admirable part in bringing the trade to an end. Often treated by their opponents as subversive revolutionaries who should be hounded from society because, in wishing to destroy a valuable national trade, these abolitionists had clearly 'sacrificed their national feelings', they undoubtedly hastened the day when slaving was declared illegal. Men like Sharp, Clarkson and the Abbé Grégoire deserve the more honour because their task appeared so hopeless. In 1775 the British secretary of state for the colonies, a certain Lord Dartmouth, could still tell Parliament that his government was unable to allow a check or discouragement 'in any degree' to a 'trade so beneficial to the nation'.\* Thirty-two years later, all the same, another British

\* Polemicists will not fail to note that the British (and indeed United States) governments were still using this same argument in defending their refusal during the 1960s to impose effective sanctions or other measures against *apartheid* rule in South Africa.

government forbade any British ship to carry slaves; and the abolitionists could rightly claim that the victory was theirs.

Yet it was not, of course, only theirs or essentially theirs. Great changes in society may be hastened by good will; they have their origin in deeper pressures. The truth was that predominant British interests were no longer the same. The times had passed, as Eric Williams has explained in his classic study of this subject, when



## Negroes for Sale.

*A Cargo of very fine stout Men and Women, in good order and fit for immediate service, just imported from the Windward Coast of Africa, in the Ship Two Brothers.—*

*Conditions are one half Cash or Produce, the other half payable the first of January next, giving Bond and Security if required.*

*The Sale to be opened at 10 o'Clock each Day, in Mr. Bourdeaux's Yard, at No. 48, on the Bay.*

May 19, 1784.

JOHN MITCHELL.

## Thirty Seasoned Negroes

*To be Sold for Credit, at Private Sale.*

**A**MONGST which is a Carpenter, none of whom are known to be dishonest.

*Also to be sold for Cash, a regular bred young Negroe Man-Cook, born in this Country, who served several Years under an exceeding good French Cook abroad, and his Wife a middle aged Washer-Woman, (both very honest) and their two Children. Likewise a young Man a Carpenter.*

*For Terms apply to the Printer.*

*American advertisement for the sale of slaves in 1784.*

King Sugar could rule the day at Westminster. Having embarked on manufacturing industries at home, the British were more interested in their own labour market than in any that might exist elsewhere. By the final years of the slave trade in British bottoms, its main work was finished. The capital it had helped to accumulate and nourish by the triple profits of the 'triangular trade'—cheap goods to West Africa for the buying of captives, slaves to the Americas for the buying of sugar and tobacco, and these in turn to western Europe for cash—had gone far to float the industrial revolution off the shoals of doubt and speculation. Europe changed. And when the British and the French next looked for adventures overseas, they went in search of raw materials, prestige and military advantage, and not in the least for slave labour.

A massive aid to the founding of mechanical industry: such was the main result of the overseas slave trade for western Europe. What the African chattel slaves had begun, the European wage slaves of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries continued.

Across the Atlantic the results were very different, but in any case so great as to be knitted deeply into the fabric of daily life in every American land or island except Newfoundland in Canada. By 1800 half the population of Brazil was of African origin. There was not a single Latin American or Caribbean community without its numerous black or partly black component. Many of the more prosperous North American states relied on black labour. And such was the rate of replenishment from Africa, following the rate of mortal wastage of the slaves, that these Negroes were for the most part much more than 'Africans by descent'. They were often Africans *tout court*. At any rate up to 1800 the rate of mortality was such that whole 'slave populations' had to be replaced every few years. More than half the soldiers of Toussaint Louverture and Dessalines, those rebels who carried through the anti-slavery revolution in Saint Domingue and defeated the armies of France and afterwards the armies of Britain, had made the Middle Passage and were 'first generation Americans'.

Just the same may be said of those Africans, mostly from

Angola, who had fled in earlier times from captivity in north-eastern Brazil, and had established their own free republic of Palmares in about 1605. Palmares was defended successfully against repeated Dutch and Portuguese attacks for nearly a hundred years, and was governed by methods and customs that were drawn from the native land of its inhabitants, and even provided, according to Freyre, a Brazilian, a 'forerunner of the diversification of crops in contrast to the predominant monoculture of the white planters'.\* And the same could be said of many lesser bids for trans-Atlantic freedom by men and women who, whether in the Caribbean or on the mainland of the Americas, built or tried to build other republics of the same kind. To omit these peoples from the scope of African history would be like excluding the early New Englanders, Australians, Canadians and New Zealanders from the history of Britain.

On Africa itself, the home and source of all this slave labour, the long-range effects of the Atlantic trade remain harder to evaluate. They were undoubtedly very great, and far transcended the effects of other slave trades. The trans-Saharan trade in human beings never achieved a volume that could have any large consequence for West African society, however painful might be the individual consequences; while the Indian Ocean or East Coast trade in slaves was of even smaller significance up to the 1840s, though its influence for evil in the relatively brief but disastrous period of about 1840–80 became frequently extreme. In contrast with these, the Atlantic trade had grown to such a size by 1650 that for at least two centuries it did unquestionably bring a major influence to bear on many coastal and near-coastal peoples from the mouth of the Senegal to the southern borders of Angola, a territory of varying and generally narrow width but more than three thousand miles in length.

Although depopulation might seem the most obvious effect of a trade which probably involved the deportation or death of several tens of millions of Africans over three or four centuries—

\*G. Freyre, *The Mansions and the Shanties*, New York, 1966, p. 40.

even if captives 'safely landed' in the Americas may not have exceeded some ten millions\*—a good deal of evidence suggests otherwise. It is perfectly true, as Hrbek has argued, that African populations (so far as anyone can guess) seem to have grown by 1900 much less rapidly than European, American or Asian populations. But to infer conclusions about the slave trade from this is to overlook two objections: first, that colonial population estimates (as counting in Nigeria and Ghana strikingly confirms) have probably been far too small, and second, that a number of African populations suffered disastrously from the upheavals and invasions of the years 1800–1920.

Some peoples must certainly have lost much of their strength to the slave trade. Wherever slaving struck at a people who were comparatively few or economically weak, it left an empty land; here the right comparison is with the forced migration of peasants from the Scottish Highlands during the nineteenth century, an operation from which the population and economy of that region have never been able to recover. But the parallel with emigration from Europe can also be extended to more populous countries and stronger societies; and the conclusion will be different. It seems unlikely, for example, that there was any more serious effect on the birth-and-survival rates of Iboland, through the forced emigration of the slave trade, than on those of southern Italy, Ireland, or England itself through an emigration forced not by outright violence but by hunger and unemployment.

Depopulation of Africa there undoubtedly was; yet the main damage lay elsewhere. Essentially, the Atlantic trade was a large and long-enduring exchange of cheap industrial goods, mainly cottons and metalware and firearms, for the 'raw material' of African labour. (The quotation marks are also necessary because the labour was in fact often skilled in those very techniques most required in the Americas: tropical farming and metal-working.)

\*A total arrived at by P. D. Curtin, in his important *The Atlantic Slave Trade, A Census*, 1969, but probably an underestimate by a few millions. For discussion, see J. E. Inikori (ed.) *Forced Migration*, Hutchinson, London, 1982.



Every question of humanity apart, this trade struck at Africa in two ways, both of which spelt impoverishment.

By providing Africa with cheap substitutes, the Atlantic slave trade undermined the local production of cotton goods and metalware; against this partial benefit of cheaper imports, it discouraged expansion from the handicraft stage. In the sixteenth century the Portuguese had imported the cotton stuffs of West Africa for sale in Europe; now the flow was reversed. Secondly, the Atlantic trade deprived a large number of African societies of many of their best producers, the youngest and strongest of their men and women; and it did this not spasmodically but continuously over several centuries.

One may therefore regard the overseas slave trade as an early type of colonial economy: of the exchange of European goods for African raw material and, by extension, as one of the reasons why a prelude to capitalism failed to develop in Africa until the latter part of the nineteenth century. No one can say how far African societies could or would have moved into cash economies and industrial methods of production if their early partnership with Europe, the partnership of the sixteenth century, had continued into later times. Yet there are some interesting pointers to an answer. When living in Kano a century ago, Heinrich Barth observed that handicraft production of textiles had reached such a high degree of 'cottage industry' as to be able to supply the whole of the Western Sudan from Senegal to Lake Chad. Far outside the slaving network of the Atlantic trade, Kano had clearly developed to the point where a new economic development could begin to unfold.

Later on, even within that network, a number of African societies adjusted to forms of capitalism with remarkable speed. They changed over from selling slaves to selling palm oil, cleared plantations of their own, traded enormously by credit, accumulated large reserves in cash or goods, even embarked on the business of chartering ships and crews. With Europe needing more and more soap as her factories grew in number and her

cities in filth, palm oil exports from the Guinea Coast expanded from a few tons in 1800 to several thousand tons a year by the 1830s. This was not yet industrial production. But it was certainly an approach towards capital accumulation and productive investment, the necessary parents of industrialism, such as had never been possible in slaving days. To this structural development, the colonial period then put a full stop.

If the economic effects were generally bad, some of the political effects surpassed them. Because the demand for slaves far exceeded the supply of those who actually lived under servile conditions—whether from capture in war, from sentence of the civil courts for crimes of one kind or another or from any other reason—it was necessary to supply captives. And since African kings and merchants were generally hindered by their own social norms or political expedience from supplying their own people—though they certainly sold their political rebels, as being 'criminal', in much the same way as European governments transported European rebels across the seas—they could obtain sufficient captives only by warfare or violence. Knowing that without captives they could not hope for European trade, the chiefs of the Niger Delta armed their great canoes and sent them on expeditions into the populous inland country. The lords of near-coastal states plundered their tributary peoples for the same purpose. Wars and raids multiplied. At the same time, a close-knit system of commercial interest ensured the buying of any captive who was brought for sale. If many regretted the trade which had led to this, none could long withstand its pressures. Among those pressures, the need for firearms and ammunition now became the foremost.

By 1700, if not before, few coastal or near-coastal kings or chiefs could feel safe in their country without a supply of troops equipped with firearms. Only with these could slaving wars be carried on and European trade assured; only with these could the slaving raids of their neighbours be resisted. Having no mechanical equipment that was capable of the manufacture of firearms, African kings were obliged to buy them from the Europeans. But

the Europeans would sell firearms only in part-exchange for captives. So the need for captives led to the need for firearms; and the need for firearms led to the need for still more captives, and still more firearms, in a vicious circle there seemed no means of breaking. Many of these coastal peoples became totally enmeshed in this spiral of mounting violence.

The Dutch agent at Elmina explained the roots of the system in a letter of 1701 to a friend in Amsterdam. Having described the skill with which Africans managed their 'muskets and carabins', Bosman wrote that 'Perhaps you will wonder how the Negroes come to be furnished with firearms? But you will have no reason to do so when you know that we sell them incredible quantities, thereby obliging them with a knife to cut our own throats. Yet we are forced to do it. For if we did not sell firearms, the Negroes would be easily provided with them by the English, Danes, or Brandenburgishers. And even if we [the official trading companies of these nations] could all agree not to sell firearms, still the English and the Dutch interlopers [private traders] would abundantly do so. In any case, since gunpowder and firearms have been our chief selling goods for some time now, we should have done a poor enough trade without them . . .'

But what was true of firearms on the European side was likewise true of captives for enslavement on the African side. If one king refused to supply them he knew that his neighbour might not be so delicate. Even if all the kings could have agreed against supplying them, still there would have been plenty of individual operators to fill the need. And since slaves were what the Europeans chiefly and urgently wanted, no king or merchant along the coast would have hoped for anything but a 'poor trade', as Bosman explained, without making his contribution in captives. European and African rulers and merchants were thus involved in a trade that was morally degrading for both but was also, for Africa, often economically destructive and sometimes politically disastrous. Above all, the overseas slave trade both introduced and confirmed an underlying dependency that the colonial period was going to complete.