

Africa and the Africans in the Age of the Atlantic Slave Trade

The Atlantic Slave Trade

- The Portuguese led the way in exploring the African coast, establishing **factories** to facilitate trade, **El Mina**, in West Africa, being the most important. More interested in trade than conquest, Portuguese relations with African rulers was generally peaceable. They did seek conversion; their greatest success was **Nzinga Mvemba**, ruler in the Kongo. On both sides, attitudes to the foreign culture were mixed. As the Portuguese explored down the coast they founded **Luanda**, expanded later to the colony of Angola. Other nations followed the Portuguese, bringing competition. The trade in slaves developed slowly, as only one of many commodities. Slavery in Europe, except for Iberia, had disappeared. It took the development of sugar plantations to raise a need for slave labor.
- How many slaves were exported? The numbers are problematic, but as much as 12 million were taken across the Atlantic in four centuries. High mortality—on board and on the plantations—coupled with low birth rates, kept demand high. Brazil received about 42% of the slaves. The trade was initially in Africans from Senegambia, then from modern Zaire and Angola, and finally from Dahomey and Benin.
- The trans-Saharan slave trade was mostly in women, for concubines in Islamic lands, while the trans-Atlantic trade took men for agricultural labor.
- For much of the history of the slave trade, Portugal controlled traffic. From 1630, competition increased, and the Dutch seized El Mina in 1637. The British **Royal Africa Company** was followed by similar French enterprises. Following the Portuguese example, other nations established small outposts on the coast. Purchases of slaves were made through local rulers, although sporadic raids also occurred. A system based on a healthy male slave—the **Indies piece**—set prices on the commodity. Was the trade profitable? In itself it was probably not as profitable as it was crucial to the **triangular trade** that developed.

African Societies, Slavery, and the Slave Trade

- African traditions of slavery were deeply engrained in economic systems, and in the social hierarchy. The condition of slaves varied greatly. The practice of using slaves as concubines was part of the widespread practice of polygamy. In Islam, slavery was accepted, but not enslavement of Muslims.
- Europeans tapped into the established slave trade, but also intensified the trade. European penetration into the continent brought other changes. Endemic war-

fare typified much of Sub-Saharan Africa, with the exception of Songhay. One of the results was a constant supply of slaves. As Europeans settled along the coast they provoked a shift in the power relations of states in the interior. Ghana and Songhay were able to make use of their position as intermediaries in commerce.

- Asante and Dahomey serve as examples of the impact of the slave trade. **Asante**, composed of the Akan people in the Kumasi region, emerged in the era of the slave trade. **Osei Tutu** unified the Akan clans, taking the title **asantahene**, or supreme ruler. For nearly two centuries, ca. 1650–1820, Asante ruled along the Gold Coast. Agaja, king of **Dahomey**, made use of European firearms to establish an empire. Controlling the slave trade in its region, Dahomey remained an independent, unified state longer than most of its neighbors. Cultural development continued on the continent. Political experimentation included increasingly powerful monarchs and monarchs limited by governing councils. The arts continued to thrive, often led by artisan guilds. Demand for African crafts to suit European tastes increased Africa's contact with other world areas.
- The Swahili east coast still formed part of the Indian Ocean trading area, bringing ivory, gold, and slaves from the interior of the continent. Clove plantations using African slaves developed on Zanzibar and other islands. The interior of Africa is less well understood. Movements of Nilotic groups including the **Luo** peoples led to a network of dynasties in east central Africa. The kingdom of Bunyoro was one of the most prominent in the 1500s and 1600s. Islamization, following the breakup of Songhay, took on a more dynamic, even militant phase. **Usman Dan Fodio**, a Muslim scholar of the **Fulani** peoples of the Sudan, was inspired by Sufism. Under his leadership, the Fulani took over several Hausa states, creating the Sokoto kingdom. The expansion of the Fulani had its impact on the west African interior. Slavery in the Sudan expanded, as a result of the wars and of European pressures.

White Settlers and Africans in Southern Africa

- Southern Africa was initially little influenced by the slave trade. Bantu migrations into the area changed its economy, earlier dominated by **Khoikhoi** and San hunters and shepherders. The Bantu peoples in southern Africa were organized into small chiefdoms. Their expansion further south brought them into contact with Dutch settlers, moving inland from the Cape Colony in search of land to farm. Under British control from 1815, the colony's expansion led to warfare with the Bantu. The Boer **Great Trek** coincided with upheavals among the Bantu peoples.
- A new ruler led the Nguni peoples from 1818: Shaka, chief of the Zulu. His ruthless leadership created a powerful Zulu state that survived his death. Shaka's work was part of the **mfecane**. Swazi and Lesotho emerged at the same time, resisting Zulu expansion. All of southern Africa was involved in the turmoil of the mfecane.

The African Diaspora

- The slave trade not only brought slaves forcibly into an alien culture, it also brought foreign products into Africa.

- The **Middle Passage** was always traumatic for slaves, and often lethal.
- Africans in the Americas were typically employed in agricultural labor, but other occupations existed.
- A hierarchy developed distinguishing **saltwater slaves**—newly arrived—from their **creole** descendants. The latter could gain more skilled work in better conditions, and stood a better chance of being manumitted. Slave communities sometimes divided along lines similar to those in Africa. Their numbers grew until they were as much as 80% of colonial populations. The North American slave population had a higher birthrate and less need of newly-enslaved Africans, and thus was more cut off from Africa than slaves in other areas.
- Africans in slavery maintained as much of their culture as was possible, depending in part on whether they found themselves with other slaves from their native region. Africans were converted to Christianity, but their religious traditions—**obeah**—survived. In Brazil and Haiti, African religion survived intact in **candomble** and **vodun** respectively. Resistance to slavery was omnipresent, but rarely successful. **Palmares**, a community of fugitive slaves in Brazil was an exception, as were the Maroons of Jamaica. The Maroons of **Suriname** also established their own enclave.
- Abolition resulted from changes outside of Africa. While self-interest on the part of European countries was a possible reason, the main impulse seems to have come from European intellectuals. Influenced by such men as **William Wilberforce**, the British stopped the slave trade in 1807. Slavery was finally abolished in the Americas when Brazil stopped the practice in 1888.

Multiple-Choice Questions

1. In the beginning of the Early Modern Age, the relationship between Europeans and Africa and Africans was
 - (A) often one of relative equality in which no one power was dominant.
 - (B) one of mutual respect.
 - (C) an inferior status with Europeans predominating.
 - (D) dominated by superior European technology.
 - (E) contentious and led to constant warfare.
2. Portuguese missionaries were most successful in their activities in
 - (A) Morocco.
 - (B) Senegambia.
 - (C) Benin.
 - (D) Ghana.
 - (E) the Zaire Region (Kongo).
3. The European slave trade out of Africa arose and expanded when
 - (A) Europeans began to supply Muslim slave markets in the Middle East.
 - (B) Europe conquered the coasts of West Africa.
 - (C) gold was discovered in Iberia, necessitating greater numbers of laborers.
 - (D) sugar plantations were established on the Atlantic islands and in the Americas.
 - (E) Spain and Portugal launched their crusades against Muslim states in Africa.
4. The large numbers and high volume of Africans in the slave trade was necessary because
 - (A) most Africans escaped from slavery before arriving in the Americas.
 - (B) Muslim fleets patrolled the Atlantic coast of Africa and freed the slaves.
 - (C) the mortality of slaves was high and their birth rate was low.
 - (D) African slaves were also needed on estates in Europe after the Black Death.

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- (E) European slavers also supplied Muslim and Asian markets.
5. The largest number of African slaves sent to the Americas went to
- (A) British and French islands of the Caribbean.
 - (B) Brazil.
 - (C) the slave states of the United States.
 - (D) Central America.
 - (E) the Spanish colonies along the Pacific coast.
6. Slavery in the United States differed from slavery and the slave trade to the rest of the Americas in all of the following ways EXCEPT:
- (A) the slave trade to the United States was abolished after 1807.
 - (B) the United States supported its need for slaves with second-generation slaves and internal trade.
 - (C) American plantations grew cotton and tobacco instead of sugar.
 - (D) the total slave population in the United States grew.
 - (E) the death rate of slaves to brutality was higher in the United States.
7. The trans-Atlantic slave trade differed from the trans-Saharan slave trade to the Muslim world in that
- (A) the trans-Atlantic was less brutal than the trans-Saharan slave trade.
 - (B) the trans-Saharan slave trade included women for domestic work and as concubines.
 - (C) the Atlantic route transported whole families to the Americas, whereas the trans-Saharan trade broke families up.
 - (D) the trade to the Muslim world ended before the trans-Atlantic trade began.
 - (E) more people were transported across the Sahara than across the Atlantic.
8. The slave trade out of Africa was controlled by
- (A) African trading guilds.
 - (B) key African forest kingdoms such as Benin, Oyo, Ashante, and Kongo.
 - (C) European slave traders and African rulers working jointly.
 - (D) Muslim traders.
 - (E) the Europeans, especially the Dutch and Portuguese.
9. With regard to the slave trade and slavery in Africa, contacts with the Europeans
- (A) decreased warfare between African states as Africans united against European slavers.
 - (B) increased violence and the disruption of African societies.
 - (C) led to the rise of a few, key African states that dominated the slave trade.
 - (D) led to open warfare between Christians and Muslims for the control of the slave trade.
 - (E) benefited most African states, which received high quality goods in exchange for slaves.
10. All of these popular movements affected Africa in the 19th century EXCEPT:
- (A) Europeans immigrated and settled the coasts of South Africa.
 - (B) Boer farmers migrated from the Atlantic coasts to the interior of South Africa.
 - (C) San and Khoikhoi migrated to Southwest Africa from Central Africa.
 - (D) the Nguni peoples united under the Zulus and expanded their empire.
 - (E) the Sultunate of Sokoto launched a series of jihads to spread Islam.

Free-Response Question

How did Europeans in Africa, in an era before the outright conquest of the continent, impact the African economy?

ANSWERS AND EXPLANATIONS

Multiple-Choice Questions

- 1. (A) is correct. As conquest and exploitation progressed, the relationship deteriorated from its original state of equality.
- 2. (B) is correct. The conversion of Kongo's ruler Nzinga Mvemba was one of the Portuguese's greatest successes in converting Africans.
- 3. (D) is correct. It was the high labor demands of the sugar plantations—followed later by tobacco and other crops—that led to the high demand for slave labor.
- 4. (C) is correct. Shipboard mortality was extremely high for enslaved Africans, and the birth rate was low, especially in Latin America.
- 5. (B) is correct. Brazil accounted for the largest numbers because of its size, the needs of its large mining and agricultural industries, and because of the low birth rate of its slaves.
- 6. (E) is correct. All are true, except that brutality was equally awful in all slaveholding societies.
- 7. (B) is correct. The chief difference was in the gender makeup of the slaves, and in the kind of work for which slaves were destined. A and E state the opposite of the truth. Both trades broke up families.
- 8. (C) is correct. While African rulers were responsible for supplying slaves, they linked with Europeans along the coast who transported the slaves.
- 9. (B) is correct. Disruption to African societies was partly internal, and partly as a direct or indirect result of European activities.
- 10. (C) is correct. The San and Khoikhoi peoples were not newcomers to the region.

Free-Response Essay Sample Response

How did Europeans in Africa, in an era before the outright conquest of the continent, impact the African economy?

Europeans began to transform the African economy through both supply and demand. Providing weapons to certain African nations led to disruption of the existing power structure. As European goods and currency was exchanged for slaves, they also made an impact on the economy. However, the greatest impact was in the demand for slaves. Although Africans were often enslaved as a result of internal wars, the high European demand for slaves for the New World led to massive exportation of Africans. This greatly exacerbated internal tensions, if it did not cause them.