

# WEST AFRICA AND THE ATLANTIC SLAVE-TRADE

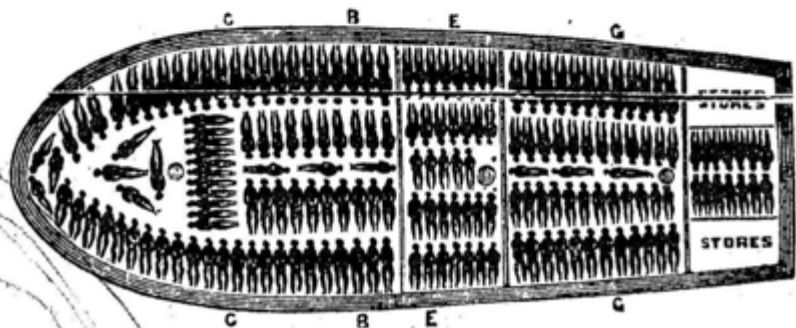
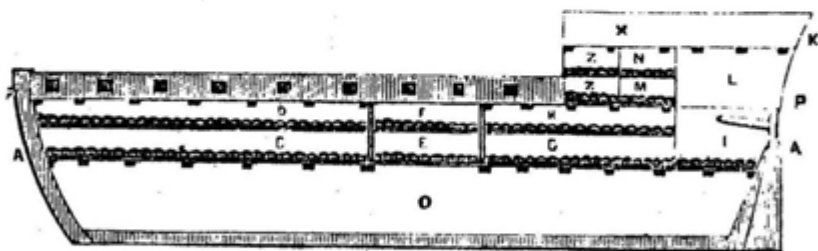
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## WEST AFRICA AND THE ATLANTIC SLAVE-TRADE

It must always be remembered that the Atlantic slave-trade was an event in world history, involving three continents — Europe, Africa and America. The people who set out to seek slaves were Europeans, coming from every country between Sweden in the north and Portugal in the south. The Portuguese arrived in West Africa shortly before the middle of the fifteenth century. Immediately, they started seizing Africans and taking them to work as slaves in Europe, particularly in Portugal and Spain. But the most important developments took place in the sixteenth century, when European capitalists realised that they could make enormous profits by using the labour of Africans to exploit the wealth of the Americas. As a result, Africans were taken to North America, Central America, South America and the Caribbean to provide slave-labour in gold and silver mines and on agricultural plantations growing crops such as sugar, cotton and tobacco. This notorious commerce in human beings lasted altogether for more than four hundred years, since the Atlantic slave-trade did not come to an end until the late 1870's.

Much can be said about the way that the Atlantic slave-trade was organised in Europe, and about the vast profits made by countries such as England and France. A lot can also be said about the terrible journey from Africa to the Americas across the Atlantic ocean. Africans were packed like sardines on the slave-ships, and consequently died in great numbers. Once the Africans landed on the other side of the Atlantic, they were really in a "New World", full of oppression and brutality, to which they replied nobly by rebelling and revolting time and time again. However, in the study of African history, we must obviously concentrate

attention on the African end of the trade; and West Africa deserves special attention because the majority of the slaves in the Americas were taken from West Africa.

Europeans who made the voyage to West Africa in search of slaves visited some particular district on the coast between the Senegal and southern Angola. Some areas, like modern Liberia and Ivory Coast, were lucky because very few Europeans arrived to buy slaves. Other regions, such as Eastern Nigeria and Angola, were always visited by slave-ships, and they supplied great numbers of slaves. At first, the victims of the slave-trade were taken from among the people living by the waterside; but, as the years went by, it was found necessary to travel further and further inland to obtain the number of slaves required by the Europeans. By the end of the eighteenth century, many of the Africans who were brought to the coast to be sold as slaves arrived in a weak and exhausted condition, for they had been forced to march from hundreds of miles inland. By that time, there was scarcely any stretch along the great Niger river from which people were not rounded up to be taken and sold to the Europeans on the West African coast. In Central Africa the slave-traders had penetrated so far inland from the Angolan coast that they were making contact with traders from the East African coast. This was the manner in which the slave-trade ate into the heart of Africa.

No one knows for certain how many Africans were taken from their homes to be sold as slaves, but it has been estimated that more than fifteen million Africans reached the American continent and the Caribbean islands as a result of the Atlantic slave-trade. Since a high percentage of people died on board the slave-ships when crossing the Atlantic, the numbers leaving Africa were much higher than fifteen million. Furthermore, many Africans were killed on African soil during the brutal process of obtaining slaves. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that many historians suggest that altogether West Africa lost forty to fifty millions of its population because of the Atlantic slave-trade.

From the time of the arrival of the Europeans until 1600, about one million Africans were carried away in slave-ships. During that period, the Portuguese were the chief slave-traders in West Africa. They either took Africans to Brazil, which they owned, or else they sold them to the Spanish settlers in Mexico, Central America, South America and the Caribbean islands. In the seventeenth century, the numbers of Africans went up at least three times; while in

the eighteenth century, some seven to eight million West Africans found their way across the Atlantic. The Dutch joined the Portuguese as the leading slave-traders in the seventeenth century, and in the following century the British were the biggest slave-traders. By the time that the Atlantic slave-trade was at its height in the eighteenth century, British ships were carrying more than half of the total of slaves, leaving the rest to be divided up between the Dutch, the French, the Portuguese and the Danes.

By the nineteenth century, there was another change of the people who took the leading role in exploiting Africa. The European countries themselves were not as active in the slave-trade, but instead Europeans who had settled in Brazil, Cuba and North America were the ones who organised a large part of the trade. The Americans had recently gained their independence from Britain, and it was the new nation of the United States of America which played the biggest part in the last fifty years of the Atlantic slave-trade, taking away slaves at a greater rate than ever before.

When the Atlantic slave-trade began on the West African coast, it took the form of direct attacks by Europeans on Africans living near the shore. When the first Portuguese sailors reached the coast of what is now Mauretania, they left their ships and hunted the Moors who lived in that region. In reality, this was not trade at all — it was violent aggression. However, after being surprised on a few occasions, the Africans on the coast naturally kept watch for their European attackers and defended themselves vigorously. Within a very short while, the Portuguese came to realise that raiding was a very unsafe manner of trying to obtain slaves. Besides, they also wanted gold and other African commodities, which they could acquire only by trading peacefully. So, instead of raiding, the Portuguese considered offering manufactured goods in order to encourage the Africans to exchange local products and to bring African captives to the European ships. Not only the Portuguese, but all other Europeans found that from their point of view this was the best way to obtain goods in Africa; and it was in this way that they laid their hands on so many million Africans.

In order to conduct commerce in West Africa, most of the European countries concerned decided to set up 'factories' on the coast. A 'factory', in the trading language of the West African coast, was a place where European and African goods could be stored, under the control of a European who lived there and conducted trade. For the

slave-trade, it was really essential to have a store-house, where a permanent supply of European goods could be left. The goods were exchanged for slaves even when no ships were in port so that there should be no unnecessary delay when a ship did arrive for a cargo of slaves. At the same time, the Europeans who lived on the coast for the purpose of slave-trading needed a large and secure compound in which to keep the Africans that they bought. A 'factory' which was mainly for the purpose of keeping slaves locked-up was known as a 'barracoon'. Along the West African coast, there were many notorious barracoons, with the reputation of always being able to supply slaves to every ship that called.

A factory or barracoon became a fort when solid outer walls were constructed, when cannons were set up on the walls, and when soldiers were hired. Each European country regarded its forts as protection against other European rivals as well as hostile Africans. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, several forts were built by different European nations along the coast of modern Ghana in order to carry on the trade in gold for which that area was so famous that it was called the "Gold Coast". Some of the best-known forts of the Gold Coast were Elmina, Axim, Cape Coast Castle and Christianburg. They were all used more and more for the slave-trade as slaves became more important than gold to the Europeans. In many other parts of West Africa, forts were built and used mainly for the purposes of the Atlantic slave-trade. Here one could mention Gorée in the Senegal, Bissau in Portuguese Guinea and Whydah on the Coast of Dahomey (which was then part of the so-called "Slave Coast").

As early as 1482 the Portuguese decided to take part in commerce with the Africans rather than try to hunt them. That was the year in which they set up Arguin in Mauretania as the first European 'factory' in West Africa. From then onwards, the Europeans generally *bought rather than captured* Africans to be used as slaves. In other words, for nearly the whole of the period of the Atlantic slave-trade in West Africa (and in East Africa also), there were many Africans who were prepared to sell their fellow men in exchange for European manufactures such as cloth, pots and pans, beads and fire-arms. With the exception of the Portuguese in Angola, the Europeans never went inland to obtain captives. In fact the Africans on the coast prevented the Europeans from going into the interior, so that they themselves could bring down the slaves and receive as many European goods as possible. It must be emphasised that the rulers in West Africa were in full political control

during the period of the Atlantic slave-trade. This was true even in areas where European forts were established, because forts were usually built with the permission of the African rulers, and the Europeans were forced to pay rents and taxes for being there. To a large extent, therefore, the Europeans conducted their slave-trading on the West African coast under conditions laid down by the Africans.

Some historians go so far as to say that the Africans took the major part in the slave-trade. Any enemy of the African people would happily take this view, as a way of excusing the inhuman behaviour of the Europeans by placing the blame and responsibility on the Africans. Nothing could be more incorrect and ridiculous, because (as mentioned above) what happened in Africa was only one side of the whole story. The Atlantic slave-trade was organised and financed by Europeans, who had already reached a capitalist stage of development. Africans had absolutely no control over the European side or the American side of the slave-trade. Only the European capitalists had such world-wide power, and they used Africans for their own purposes.

Nevertheless, for Africans looking at the Atlantic slave-trade, one of the most important things is to recognise the very painful and unpleasant fact that there were Africans who aided and partnered the Europeans in enslaving other Africans. It means that we cannot take the simple attitude that the whites were the villains and the blacks were the victims. A useful parallel which would help in understanding what took place in West Africa during the centuries of slave-trading can be found in Africa today, where many leaders join with the European and American imperialists to exploit the great majority of the African people.

Some attempt can be made to pick out those Africans who were in partnership with the European slave-buyers. As we all know, African society is divided up into tribes, and usually within the tribes themselves there are other smaller divisions, such as clans. What the Europeans did was to take advantage of the divisions in choosing their African allies. For instance, if the Europeans saw two sets of Africans at war with each other they supported one side and helped them to achieve victory so as to be able to obtain captives. Very often, the Europeans managed to gain prisoners of war from both sides. This was possible because both sides wanted the guns and ammunition which the Europeans supplied, and because there were several European nations competing with each other. As a result, one tribe might be supported by the Dutch and another by

the English. Whatever happened some unfortunate Africans were sure to be sold and carried across the Atlantic. Obviously, it did not matter to them whether they were carried in a Dutch or an English slave-ship.

The Europeans did a lot deliberately to sow the seeds of hostility among African tribes and even within tribes. However, it must be understood that Africans realised that they could exchange their captives at a profit, and this was enough to encourage them to go out and wage war. In some cases, they continued to attack peoples with whom they had previously fought. In other cases they started new wars, and sometimes they might even come together with old rivals if this was thought to be the most profitable thing to do. In such a situation, it was brute force which mattered.

On the Upper Guinea Coast, the Mande-speaking peoples, like the Mandingas and the Susus, were the main suppliers of slaves to the Europeans up to the end of the seventeenth century. They were then surpassed by the Fulani, who became Muslims and raided their non-Muslim neighbours. Further south, in what is now Ghana, the Akan-speaking peoples took a leading part in raiding for slaves; and there arose in the eighteenth century the powerful slave-trading state of Ashante, which terrorised the weaker peoples of that area. The same can be said for the Fon state which grew up in Dahomey. In the Congo and Angola the situation was more complicated. At different times, different states rose and fell, but always there was at least one state upon which the Europeans could rely to provide them with a constant supply of slaves.

Naturally, near to each great slave-raiding tribe was another group that suffered. The raids of the Mande and the Fulani meant that the Kissi tribe was hard hit. On the Gold Coast, the Akan speakers made life so difficult for the Ga people that until today the Ga remember the Atlantic slave-trade as the time when "all the world was spoilt". Most unfortunate of all were the northern Mbundu people of Angola, who were nearly wiped out by the attacks of their African neighbours and by Portuguese armies.

In looking at West African society, the Europeans saw differences not only between one tribe and another, but also between the rulers and those who were ruled. The captains of the slave-ships always insisted that they would trade only with the "great men" of the country. By this they meant the kings, chiefs, sub-chiefs, headmen, nobles, priests, clan leaders and individuals of this sort who already had power and positions of importance within the tribe. Normally, these "great



men" ruled in the interest of the people as a whole. They administered justice, and enforced rules for the efficient economic and social functioning of the community. Spiritually, they maintained the goodwill of tribal ancestors, sought divine guidance for the people, and protected them against the evils of witchcraft. With the coming of the Atlantic slave-trade, however, it was noticeable that the rulers acted more like a separate class which had no sympathy for the common people. Certainly, in most of the states of the West African coast, the rulers were unscrupulous in selling their own subjects to the Europeans. In many respects the class division was more fundamental than the tribal division, as can be seen from an examination of the methods of getting slaves in West Africa. Warfare was one of the principal means by which Africans were captured and sold as slaves. On the whole, these wars took place between well-organised tribal groups, all of which were directed by a ruling class. But many of the people of West Africa lived in what are termed "stateless societies", that is to say they had no central government or ruling elite. It is very significant that these "stateless societies" did not attack their neighbours in order to acquire captives for the benefit of the Europeans. It means that where there was an African society without a ruling class the Europeans had no one who would be their accomplices in the slave-trade.

The African ruling class took such a leading role in the slave-trade that often within their own tribes they prevented anyone else from trading with the Europeans, so that all commerce was in their hands. Because the slave-trade became the main business of West African society, there arose a number of professional slave-hunters. They worked together in large bands, usually led by one of the "great men", and they concentrated their efforts on raiding for slaves. Obviously, raiding and warfare are associated with attacks by one people on another, so that here the factor of tribal divisions was present. It should also be pointed out, however, that the ruling class normally managed to evade being captured and sold. Alternatively, if they were captured they could be ransomed, by offering common people to take their place. One of the things the Europeans in West Africa learnt to avoid was to sail away with an African noble in their slave-ships, so long as that noble had not been voluntarily given up by his fellows. Such action would endanger the lives and property of the Europeans in the area from which the noble was taken. Instances were known of nobles being sold as slaves and carried away across the Atlantic, and even then efforts were made to

rescue them for the sake of peaceful relations with the other rulers of the home country of whichever "great man" was involved.

Evidence shows that the African ruling class, who were helping the Europeans with the Atlantic slave-trade, paid little attention to looking after their own subjects. For instance, though a chief might know that his own subjects were stolen and sold by a neighbouring chief, he would not raise any objections, because in turn he expected to be able to seize and sell the ordinary people in that neighbouring chiefdom, and he did not want his fellow chief to protest. Sometimes the conspiracy of the ruling class went further than that. Kings and chiefs were known to raid the outlying parts of their own territory during the night — selling their own subjects in order to gain European goods. Naturally, such deeds had to be done under cover of darkness, so that the ruling class would not lose all respect among their subjects. It must have been for the same reason that neighbouring chiefs were at times said to have come to an agreement to raid each other's territory. This meant that the ordinary people were being fooled into thinking that their neighbours were their enemies, when in fact all the common people were being exploited by all the rulers, no matter to what tribe they belonged.

The ordinary people, therefore, were always the ones to be sacrificed. If they were captured, no one came to their aid; and even if they escaped from the Europeans before they could be placed in chains on the slave-ships, it was extremely difficult to avoid being captured once more by the chiefs through whose territory they had to pass. What happened was that the African rulers made treaties with the European traders, guaranteeing them that all escaped slaves would be captured and returned in exchange for a small payment.

The greatest weapon in the hands of the African ruling class was their control over legal and religious matters. Because the nobles, chiefs and kings were the judges and the lawyers in all court cases, they abused their powers and wrongfully convicted large numbers of people, who were then sold to the Europeans. Many of the court cases involved disputes over women, and were known as "woman palavers". These included charges of adultery, which was a very popular accusation during the period of the Atlantic slave-trade. A noble who had several wives could easily arrange for them to encourage the attentions of other men, and then have them charged in court. Another kind of "woman palaver" was when a man was accused of assaulting a woman.

Here again, false evidence was very often brought by the very people who were supposed to hand out justice. Another important set of cases had to do with financial matters. Where a person was unable to repay a debt within the time promised he was likely to end up as a slave in the hands of the Europeans, even if the goods which he had borrowed were of little value. Of course, the poor suffered most from actions of that kind.

One of the charges on which people were most often tried was 'witchcraft', and that was where the priests and other spiritual authorities came into the picture. Whenever a person died or was injured in an accident, investigations were made by the priests to find out whether that person had been the victim of witchcraft or whether the person was a witch. Either interpretation led to several people being sold as slaves, because the way in which the matter was handled was completely corrupt. If the person who was injured or killed was considered to be a witch, then his whole family would be sold into slavery. This view was the one most frequently taken when death was accidental, like drowning or falling from a tree, since it was believed that such deaths were God's way of punishing evil witches. When a man died from natural causes, it was usually assumed during the period of the slave-trade that someone else had practised witchcraft to bring about his death. The priests then chose the one they suggested was guilty, and made him drink poisoned water. Very seldom did anyone live after drinking the poison. His death was considered proof of his guilt and his family was then sold into slavery.

Witchcraft is really the use of magic for evil purposes, and, normally, it was the duty of the African priests to discover and punish those who dealt in witchcraft. Africans did believe that accidents and deaths could be due to witchcraft, and they did believe in trial by ordeal, both by poison and by fire. The important thing to remember is that such activities were carried out on a small scale and they were aimed at the welfare of the community. But customs which were for the protection of individuals and of society were corrupted during the Atlantic slave-trade, and many individuals were falsely accused so that they could be sold as punishment, to the profit of the rulers. When a whole family was judged guilty, for example, this was obviously to increase the number of people sold and the amount of European goods obtained in exchange. It is true that apart from the influence of the Atlantic slave-trade, a whole family could be judged guilty because of the actions of one of its

members. But the main punishment which the family suffered would have been one of disgrace. They would then have had to take greater care in consulting their ancestors, leaving food at their graves and following in the best traditions of the ancestors and elders of the family. Therefore, the fact that the whole family was held responsible was in its own interest, and each member was helped to live a better life. An African certainly did not have a better life as a slave in the Americas.

Many examples can be brought to show how the laws and the religions of West Africa were made into the tools of the Atlantic slave-trade, and in every instance the ruling group (which included the priests) were on the side of the Europeans. They forgot their duties and obligations to their people and instead made slaves of them. This can be seen very clearly in the area of Liberia, Sierra Leone and the Republic of Guinea, where the coastal people were ruled by powerful secret societies. The highest offices in those societies were held by nobles and chiefs who came from several kingdoms, and who normally worked in the interest of the people as a whole. They were responsible for political, economic, educational and religious policies, and they took charge of serious matters like initiation, circumcision and the guarding of secret oaths and religious objects. The secret societies provided the highest court of law, in which even the chiefs and nobles could be brought to justice. As the slave-trade continued, these powerful and benevolent organisations lost their real purpose, and were taken over by slave-raiding chiefs.

Another well-known example of the abuse of spiritual authority in West Africa because of the Atlantic slave-trade is provided by the Ibo people who live near the estuary of the Niger river, in the region now called Eastern Nigeria. The Ibo lived in "stateless societies" when the Europeans arrived. They had no kings or chiefs who could unite the tribe or even large sections of it; but they shared a common religion, and in particular they believed strongly in an oracle which they called Chukwu. The Ibo and other peoples of that area made pilgrimages to the Chukwu oracle, and they consulted the oracle in the settling of disagreements among themselves. A small section of the Ibo people, named Aro, had charge of the Chukwu oracle and used it fraudulently to enslave thousands of their fellows. Persons were accused of offending the oracle. The offenders were then told to provide human beings as sacrifices to Chukwu, but in fact the people whom they supplied were sold to the Europeans. Because of the slave-trade, a number of trading cities grew up at the several mouths of the Niger and along

the banks of the river. Their rulers kept the Europeans supplied with slaves who were obtained by the misuse of the Chukwu oracle, backed up by force when necessary.

The way in which Africans were actually sold to the Europeans is something we know a lot about, because many of the Europeans who were present in West Africa at that time described how they bought slaves. Both sides drove a hard bargain. The African sellers demanded as many European goods as possible, and in particular they wanted items which they considered most valuable, such as guns and ammunition. They also tried to make an extra profit on every sale by insisting that the Europeans should give them a present of alcohol before they started business. Needless to say, the Europeans were just as determined to keep prices down, and on the whole they succeeded. On the one hand, it is true that Europeans paid more for their slaves during the later stages of the Atlantic slave-trade than they did in the earlier years, but the figures involved were always small. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Europeans obtained slaves at give-away prices. One small piece of cloth was often sufficient payment for a slave in those early years. As late as the eighteenth century, a European could buy an African with goods valued at a hundred shillings and even less. When the slave-ships crossed the Atlantic they could sell their cargo at ten times the price they paid in Africa.

Europeans demanded the most robust Africans to use as slaves. They asked for young people between the ages of 15 and 25, and they would have liked at least two men to one woman. It was also said that people from some tribes were preferred to people from other tribes, because one set worked harder than another, or because slaves from certain tribes were more violent and rebellious than those from other tribes. It was also felt that some Africans were better as house-slaves and others as labourers in the fields. On the whole, however, all these viewpoints were irrelevant on the West African coast. Europeans took more or less whatever was offered them. For instance, thousands of children were taken on the slave-ships, sometimes as young as 9 years of age. Older men and women were also accepted, though it was known that they would not live long in the hard conditions of the slave plantations across the Atlantic. What the Europeans did insist upon was that the price had to be cut by half when children or older people were bought, and they paid different prices according to the strength and physical fitness of each person offered for sale.

Bargaining was usually done in special coastal languages, which were basically African but had a large

number of foreign words. These languages developed during the period of trade, just as Swahili developed because of trade between the Arabs and the Africans of the East Coast. The difference was that the vocabulary of the trading languages varied from place to place along the West African coast, depending upon which European nation traded most in a given area. Where the Dutch traded the people would know more Dutch words, as happened near the Dutch forts on the Gold Coast. Where the English traded there grew up what was called "pidgin-English", as in the towns of the Niger estuary. The most widespread trading language of all was "Creole Portuguese", which was spoken in Angola and the Congo and all along the coast between the Senegal and Sierra Leone. Besides, many Portuguese words were used on every section of the West African coast, because the Portuguese were the first Europeans with whom West Africans came into contact.

In addition to a special language of trade, many Africans spoke a European language fluently. Some chiefs sent their sons to live with the European merchants in their factories and forts along the coast, while others actually sent their sons to Europe. In 1788, a report of the British Parliament stated that there were fifty African children in the English city of Liverpool, apart from others elsewhere in the country. They were all the sons of chiefs or mulatto traders in West Africa. The truth was that the African rulers wanted to find out more about the way of life of the Europeans and hoped to obtain some of the knowledge and the skills which the Europeans possessed. Unfortunately, European knowledge (especially of technical and economic matters) was simply being used to carry on the morally evil slave-trade; and similarly African rulers wanted European education so as to be able to make more profit out of the slave-trade. When one African chief was asked why he placed a high value on European schooling, he replied that he wished "to learn to be rogue as good as white man".

Even though the Europeans required African partners to carry on the slave-trade, neither partner had any real confidence in the other, and each sought to cheat the other. The Europeans put salt-water in the alcohol, they placed false bottoms in the barrels of gunpowder and they cheated every time they had to measure anything. In fact, if they thought they could get away without paying at all, they would sail off, carrying away even those Africans who had come on board to sell slaves. The African rulers were quick to find out what the European traders were up to, and they had many crooked methods of their own. In selling a sick man, for example, they would rub his skin with oil to give

it a healthy look. Another practice was to force the Europeans to buy slaves in groups, so they could mix the weak with the strong and the old with the young. Yet another African trick which was common on the West African coast was to accuse a European of breaking a local law, carry him to the local courts and fine him heavily. Occasionally, the African leaders would even go so far as to kill a European in their country and seize his goods. This was the ruthless and crooked way in which the Atlantic slave-trade was carried on, with violence always near the surface even in the dealings of the African and European partners in the moral crime of slave-trading.

Many stories are told of the miserable state of the unfortunate Africans who were brought to the coast to be carried away across the sea. Many of the Africans were dragged from their homes in the interior of West Africa, and had never seen the sea before. Nor had they ever seen white men, and they were terrified because they thought they were to be eaten by those strange men. Indeed, those who were sold were stripped naked and were examined as carefully as any animal that has to be killed for human food.

Our main concern is with those who remained rather than those who were taken away; and it is not difficult to understand that most West Africans suffered greatly during the Atlantic slave-trade. First of all, many of them would have lost relatives and close friends; and in the second place, everyone outside the privileged ruling class must have lived under the fear of being seized at any moment. The ways in which an African could be enslaved were so numerous that he could not feel safe. His tribe could be attacked by another tribe, or his village could be raided by a strong band of slave-hunters, or he could even be kidnapped by a small group in some lonely spot. Kidnapping of people was so common in West Africa during the period of the Atlantic slave-trade that there was one word to describe it in all the trading languages of the coasts. The word was 'panyar', taken from the Portuguese *apanhar*, which means "to seize".

Besides all the attacks by outsiders, the common man could be sold by his own chief on some ridiculous charge. With all those dangers to face, it is not surprising that many people started walking around well-armed in preparation for any attempt to catch them, while others decided to move their homes to some other area which seemed to be safer. This might require moving only a few miles into thicker forests where one could hide, but sometimes it meant fleeing

long distances. For instance, the Bapende people who today live on the river Kasai in the Congo (Kinshasa) were once on the coast of Angola, but had to flee from the Portuguese slave-traders.

It is obvious that because of the Atlantic slave-trade people could not lead their ordinary lives. The majority of the population of West Africa lived by farming, and agriculture must have suffered during that period. In the first place, the loss of so many people represented a loss of labour in the fields. In the second place, those who were left behind had little reason to plant crops which they might never be around to reap. At the end of the eighteenth century, one of the arguments used by Europeans who wanted to abolish the Atlantic slave-trade was that abolition would allow the Africans to work and produce other commodities which Europeans could buy. They pointed out that as long as the Atlantic slave-trade continued people found it extremely difficult to carry on worthwhile activities.

Changes were brought about by the Atlantic slave-trade not only in the lives of individuals in West Africa, but also in the society itself. That is to say, there were changes in the laws and the structure of the society. When the ruling class became corrupt and practised fraud in the customary courts of law, they actually changed the whole nature of the law which had previously existed to protect people, but which was instead used to trap people for sale into slavery. Before the Europeans arrived, a West African who was convicted of stealing had to restore the value of what he had stolen to the rightful owner. If a man committed adultery, he would have to repay the bride-price to the husband who was involved. These were mild punishments, especially when one considers that in Europe at that time there were dozens of ordinary crimes which were punishable by death. In fact, Europeans in West Africa themselves commented on the humane nature of the laws of the Africans in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The slave-trade spoiled all that. For stealing an object of little value a man could be sold, for committing adultery he could be sold, for not being able to repay a small debt he could be sold, and so on. All this was in addition to the fact that the charges were often false.

One of the most striking things about West Africa in the late eighteenth century and in the nineteenth century is that there were thousands of individuals living in a state of slavery or serfdom. They belonged to an African master, and though they were not as badly treated as slaves in the



Americas, they did not have all the rights of free men. Europeans went to the Gambia, Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast and Nigeria and came away saying that three-quarters of the African population were slaves. Three hundred years before, Europeans had noticed some West African kings with numbers of servants who were not entirely free, while a few persons actually belonged to a master and worked as agricultural serfs. But that was all — there was no large slave class, such as could be found in West Africa at the end of the Atlantic slave-trade. There were large numbers of slaves working in West Africa in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries because Africans who obtained captives to sell to the Europeans usually kept some for their own purposes. Naturally, it was the ruling class which came to own slaves, while among the tribes which sold the most slaves to the Europeans one also found the greatest number of slaves used for local purposes.

In the long run, not even the African ruling class were able to reap as many benefits from the Atlantic slave-trade as they had hoped. They did receive European manufactured goods provided they were useful partners of the Europeans. But in many areas they were not doing the job well enough from the European viewpoint, because they were not oppressing their own people as ruthlessly as the slave-traders wished. In several parts of the West African coast a new class of traders gained economic power, and sometimes political power also. The majority were mulattoes — the children of European fathers and African mothers — and they were extremely efficient slave-traders. From their fathers they came to understand how European commerce was carried on, while their African connection taught them how to be successful in dealing with Africans. They had no real loyalty to either Europeans or Africans, but on the whole they served the Europeans and cruelly exploited the Africans, because that was the way to make the biggest profits.

Mulatto slave-traders first appeared in the Senegambia and on the Upper Guinea Coast. Their fathers were Portuguese and they usually had relatives in the islands of Cape Verde, which had been settled by the Portuguese and were cultivated through the labour of African slaves. The mulattoes of this northern section of West Africa helped to ship thousands of Africans from that region to the Spanish settlements in the Americas during the fifteenth, sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Other Portuguese mulattoes did the same sort of job in Angola and the Congo. They were the ones who travelled far into the interior of Central Africa

in order to bring back slaves to the coast, and they are known to have crossed all the way from Angola to Mozambique. It was not until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, that the mulattoes actually gained political power in parts of West Africa. They were particularly strong in Dahomey and Nigeria where mulattoes from Brazil were advisers to the kings, and the biggest slave-traders; while in Sierra Leone, children of English fathers actually took over from the local African chiefs. The rise of this class of mulatto traders was another instance of change in the structure of West African society brought about by the commerce with Europeans, and by the trade in slaves in particular.

In most parts of West Africa, the Atlantic slave-trade came to an end in the 1860's, though it was not completely wiped out until about 1880. It took at least a few years for conditions to return to normal, and in some cases West African society suffered the consequences of the Atlantic slave-trade long after it had ended. For instance, those who had been made slaves of African masters in West Africa remained in that position until they were legally freed by the colonial governments. This was a very strange occurrence indeed. The Europeans thought that they were bringing progress to Africa by putting an end to something backward. They thought that there had always been lots of slaves in Africa, and that many people who were sold to the Europeans were already slaves in Africa. In fact, the opposite was true, because it was the Europeans who went to Africa to buy slaves, and helped to start and to increase local slavery. Similarly, looking at West African society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Europeans made the mistake of thinking that Africans were always enslaved for committing certain crimes. Again, the truth was that the Atlantic slave-trade was to be blamed. After the export of slaves had ended, those African societies which wanted to use slave labour kept the corrupt laws of slave-trading days, and continued enslaving people for simple offences.

As mentioned before, some areas of West Africa sold a far larger number of slaves than others, so that the effects of the trade were not equally great everywhere. For instance, the Atlantic slave-trade hardly affected the Africans living on the Ivory Coast while one can easily imagine what happened in a place like Angola, which alone supplied about three million slaves to the Europeans. Angola suffered terribly because the Portuguese sent armies inland and forced conquered chiefs to pay tribute in slaves. There was so much fighting that many people were killed in addition to those who were captured and sold as slaves. Consequent-

ly, the population of Angola was greatly reduced, and the states near the coast were destroyed. To the north of Angola lay the kingdom of Congo. This was one of the most powerful and advanced states in West Africa, but it was weakened because of Portuguese slave-trading in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and it paid tribute in slaves also. It finally broke up after being attacked and defeated by the Portuguese in 1665.

Fortunately, things did not always turn out as badly as they did in Angola and the Congo, even when there was much slave-trading. Ibo country, for example, was one of the greatest exporters of slaves, and yet that area retained a very large population. Of course, this means that the population had previously been very thick indeed, but it is still surprising that the region could withstand such heavy losses. The western portion of Nigeria also managed to avoid some of the most destructive consequences of the Atlantic slave-trade. Kingdoms such as Benin and Oyo were already in existence when the Europeans arrived in the area that is now the state of Nigeria. Both Benin and Oyo managed to survive for a long time by themselves taking part in the slave-trade and attacking their neighbours.

In a few instances, people co-operated in their own self-defence and grew stronger in spite of the slave-trade. This was the case with the Ga on the Gold Coast. They were agriculturalists who had no real political states and did not find it necessary to have armies for fighting. But after being constantly raided by Akan tribes, they borrowed the military and political organisation of their enemies and came together in towns like Accra.

On the whole, however, the new states which grew up in West Africa during the period of the Atlantic slave-trade were themselves slave-trading states. Dahomey and Ashante are best known. They concentrated their attention on supplying slaves to the Europeans, and grew powerful because of the European guns they received in exchange. The Fon people of Dahomey were so devoted to the slave-trade that their state was organised with the main purpose of making war to obtain captives. Dahomey went so far as to set up a special battalion of female warriors, who were feared by all their opponents. Dahomey paid the penalty for paying attention only to warfare. Agriculture was neglected and famines took place in the late eighteenth century. From the point of view of its economy, one of the most successful of the West African states which took a major part in slave-trading was the Fulani state of Futa Djalon. The Fulani ruling class were mainly cattle keepers, and they

kept numerous slaves to perform the agricultural work, which included the growing of food crops to sell to the slave ships. Therefore, although there was great inequality, the state of Futa Djalón was economically strong.

Looking at such examples as Futa Djalón, Dahomey and Ashante, one sees that the Atlantic slave-trade was not entirely destructive. It caused the fall of some states and the rise of others. It caused many people in Africa to become slaves in their own country, but it made a small minority very powerful. The mulattoes, for example, possessed large numbers of African slaves. Even in Angola, though the area near to the coast suffered, new states were built in the interior which benefited from taking part in the Atlantic slave-trade. Yet, it would be mistaken to suppose that the Atlantic slave-trade did enough good to cancel out its evil effects or even to allow us to go away with the feeling that "it was not so bad after all". When we weigh the positive and the negative effects of the slave-trade on West Africa, the scales show clearly that it was the worst sort of experience for people to have gone through.

There is an important comparison which shows how destructive the slave-trade was. We can look at West African societies and see the effects of trade with Europeans in products other than slaves. Europeans always had some interest in gold, ivory and other African commodities. Apart from gold, they usually wanted those products *in addition to rather than in place of slaves*, so that there was never any alternative to the trade in human beings. However, we can at least see that it was more beneficial to the society when they organized elephant-hunts rather than man-hunts. Similarly, when Africans sold Europeans an article such as beeswax, this meant that the Africans were taking part in useful activities such as rearing bees and purifying the wax. Another striking example of this sort is provided by the camwood industry. Camwood was used in Europe to manufacture a red dye for cloth, and so Europeans bought camwood logs in Sierra Leone, the Gambia and the Cameroons. This gave rise to a small timber industry, where the Africans concerned cut down the trees, took off the bark, cut the trunks into small logs and transported them long distances down the rivers to the coast. They received very small payments for all their efforts — much less than if they sold slaves — but at least this product was encouraging worthwhile activity. It is impossible to imagine any other form of commerce which could have been as harmful as the Atlantic slave-trade.

Of course, the end of the Atlantic slave-trade was followed by the "Scramble for Africa" and the period of

imperialism, so that European exploitation of Africa continued in a different and modified form. In fact, the Atlantic slave-trade should be seen as the first stage of the colonial domination of Africa by Europeans. In that period, the domination was purely economic, based on the difference between Europe's growing commercial and capitalist economy and the subsistence economy of the Africans. Because of this advantage, Europeans called the tune and made the Africans dance. Certain goods were made only in Europe. Africans were told that if they wanted those goods they would have to supply human beings.

One of the most tragic aspects of the Atlantic slave-trade as far as West Africans were concerned lay in their increasing helplessness in the face of what amounted to economic blackmail. There were a few West African chiefs who tried unsuccessfully to put an end to the slave-trade in their areas. The king of the Congo tried in the early sixteenth century, the king of Dahomey tried in the 1730s. A Baga chief in the region that is now the Republic of Guinea made efforts against the slave-traders in the middle of the eighteenth century, and the Wolof king of Cayor in the Senegal opposed the slave-trade in the late eighteenth century. But they all failed, because no single African ruler could prevail against the economic power of Europe.

In the long run, West Africans were reduced to the state of "sell or be sold". Here the question of firearms was particularly important. To be strong, a state needed firearms; but to get firearms from the Europeans, the Africans had to offer slaves. African rulers found themselves selling slaves to get guns to catch slaves to buy more guns. This can be described as a "vicious circle". It does not entirely excuse the African rulers who helped the Europeans, but it explains how in the end they were not so much the partners of the Europeans but rather their servants or lackeys.

Some historians say that African rulers often outsmarted Europeans and used them as their tools. They would argue that Africans knew of the rivalries between various European nations, and played one off against another. On the Gold Coast, for example, no single European nation owned two or three forts in a row. Instead, a Dutch fort would be next to a Danish fort which would be next to an English fort, and so on. This pattern grew up because once a European nation built a fort on any given section of the Gold Coast, the neighbouring Africans called in a rival European power to build a fort in their territory. The Gold Coast chiefs were also very skilful in getting the Europeans to help them fight local wars. But the Africans

were outsmarting only themselves, because more Africans were being sold, which was exactly what the Europeans wanted. Even when one European country did not do as well as another, no harm was done to the capitalist system.

Nowadays, historians no longer debate whether slavery was right or wrong. They are in agreement that it was a great moral evil. But it is easy to go on discussing the political, social and economic effects of the Atlantic slave-trade, and to forget the great sufferings of the human beings who were sold, as well as the great inhumanity of those who carried on the trade. The whole affair was possible because people were concerned only with private profit. This includes the African ruling class. They knew that they were taking part in evil practices, but they wanted European manufactured goods, which were riches in a society which did not use money. The Europeans were already using money. They traded so as to make more money, which they could invest as capital in their own countries and become even wealthier.

Because there was so much profit to be made by taking slaves from Africa, Europeans refused to listen to their consciences. They knew about the suffering that was inflicted upon people in Africa, on the slave-ships and on the slave-plantations of the Americas; and they were aware that to sell their fellow human beings could not be morally justified. Yet the Christian church came forward with excuses for the slave-trade. Many priests themselves carried on slave-trading, especially in Angola, and many others owned slaves in the Americas. The only reason the Catholic Church could give for its actions was that it was trying to save African souls by baptising the slaves. The Protestants were worse, for they did not even make it clear that they accepted that the African had a soul. Instead, they supported the view that the African slave was a piece of property like furniture or a domestic animal. There is no part of the history of the Christian church which was more disgraceful than its support of the Atlantic slave-trade.

There were always a few individuals who protested against the Atlantic slave-trade right from the start but, governments and traders paid no attention to them during the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It was not until the late eighteenth century that serious attempts were made to put a stop to this trade. Groups were organised in America and Europe to persuade governments to abolish the trade, and in order to achieve that they usually set out to bring public opinion around to their side. The members of such groups were known as humanitarians, those in England being the most famous. They included Granville

Sharp, a lawyer who fought for the rights of slaves in the courts of England; Thomas Clarkson, a very determined man, who did more than anyone else to win the support of the British public; and William Wilberforce, who was a member of the British Parliament, and took charge of persuading the government to pass a bill making it illegal for British subjects to carry on the slave-trade. Such a bill was passed early in 1807.

The majority of the individuals in England who took part in the abolition movement were evangelical Christians, who were at last taking a proper stand against the treatment of Africans like beasts. In France, the opponents of the slave-trade were the same sort of people who carried out the French Revolution, based on the idea that all men were equal and had a right to be free. However, looking at things carefully, it can be seen that the Europeans (and the British in particular) did not abolish the slave-trade simply out of the goodness of their hearts. They had already made huge profits out of exploiting Africa in that manner, and by the late eighteenth century commerce on the Atlantic was no longer as profitable as it used to be. It was this fact which made the abolition of the Atlantic slave-trade possible.

Denmark was the first European country to tell its citizens to give up the slave-trade. The Danish West Indian colonies needed only a couple of thousand slaves every year, and the Danish government thought it better to carry enough female slaves to the plantations so that the population would increase by natural means. By 1802 Denmark felt that it could afford to discontinue its own part in the slave-trade. The British abolition in 1807 was the most important step, because Britain took the greatest part in the Atlantic slave-trade at that time. Over a period of nearly twenty years, there followed similar abolition laws in the United States of America, Sweden, Holland, France and Brazil. Portugal and Spain at first refused to pass legislation to ban their subjects from taking part in the trade, but in 1815 and 1817 they agreed to restrict the slave-trade to the area south of the Equator.

Once laws had been passed by so many nations making it illegal for their subjects to carry on slave-trading, the problem was how to make sure that the laws were obeyed. Several of the countries never made any serious attempt to put the laws into practice. France, the United States of America, Brazil, Portugal and Spain were all guilty in this respect. Britain was really the only state which made a determined effort to stop ships from getting slave cargoes in West Africa. The British government acted partly because of strong humanitarian influences and because British slave-

owners and former slave-traders wanted to see the whole slave-trade ended, after they themselves had been forced to stop taking part. Britain, therefore, used its navy to patrol the coast of West Africa in an effort to stop the Atlantic slave-trade.

When a ship was seized off the West African coast by a British warship, the Africans on board were carried to Sierra Leone and given their freedom. A few eventually returned to their own homes in various parts of West Africa but most of them remained in Sierra Leone, which had been started as a settlement for Africans who had once been slaves in America and England.

Apart from helping to build up the population of Sierra Leone, naval patrols off the coast of West Africa were not very effective. Although Britain had the world's largest navy in the nineteenth century, it could not afford enough ships to guard the West African coastline, which is thousands of miles long. There were numerous places where a ship could load slaves and sail off without being seen by a British warship. Since the use of force in such circumstances was not having encouraging results, it became essential to persuade the Europeans to stop coming to Africa to seek slaves and also to convince the West African chiefs that they should not sell if a European ship asked for slaves. Unfortunately, in both cases the story was disappointing. There was always at least one government in Europe or in America which was prepared to give help to slave-traders and consequently defeat the plans of Britain and other countries willing to end the Atlantic slave-trade. The fact that the trade flourished during the nineteenth century and did not come to an end until about 1880 means that there was still a demand for slave labour in the Americas and that Europeans were still determined to make slaves of Africans. Equally, the circumstances indicate that the ruling class on many parts of the West African coast continued to respond fully to the European demand for slaves.

It may seem surprising that Africans should have resisted bitterly when some Europeans tried to end the slave-trade, but this is exactly what happened, with very few exceptions. African chiefs found new ports from which to ship slaves, they made plans with the slave-traders to outwit the British warships, and they were very hostile to any persons who came telling them to stop trading in slaves. The position of the African slave-trading chiefs was in reality quite straightforward. Capturing and selling people as slaves was their main function ever since the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. If they wanted Europeans goods the only



way to get them was by offering human beings, because the Europeans would accept nothing else in place of slaves, with the exception of gold, which was found in a few places. And the African chiefs certainly wanted European goods, which had ceased to be luxuries and were regarded as necessities in West Africa.

One idea that was discussed by the British officials in West Africa as a solution to the problem was to offer the African chiefs a large amount of goods as a gift or compensation if they would stop supplying slaves. For example, in 1839, the king of Bonny, one of the leading states of the Niger estuary, agreed to abolish the slave-trade, provided he obtained from the British government every year for five years goods valued at 2,000 dollars. The British government did not support the promise of their representatives in Bonny, so that the agreement was never put into practice. It is quite certain, however, that it would not have worked. The gift that was offered was no better than the small amounts which the imperialists are prepared to lend African states today. What was needed was a different kind of trade which would allow Africans to sell their own products at reasonable prices. Therefore, after the Atlantic slave-trade was prohibited, the most sensible policy was the one of searching for new African commodities which could be sold in Europe.

Because of the development of industry in Europe during the late eighteenth century and in the nineteenth century (usually called the "Industrial Revolution") there arose a great demand for oil to lubricate the parts of the equipment in various factories. The building of railways in Europe also meant that oil was needed for the engines and wheels. The supply of oil in Europe came from animal fats, and there was not enough of it. Besides, animal fats were not always the best thing, and in those cases vegetable oils were preferred. For instance, one of the ingredients for the making of soap was vegetable oil, and the manufacture of soap increased greatly during the nineteenth century. In answer to this demand in Europe, West Africa began in the nineteenth century to produce vegetable oils, which are still important African exports today. The two main sources of oil were the groundnut and the Guinea palm, with the latter being the more valuable of the two, since that was the product which was required by the soap manufacturers.

The Guinea palm, from which the oil was obtained, is to be found along most sections of the West African coast, but it had to grow in sufficient quantities to be a profitable alternative to the Atlantic slave-trade. The best areas for palm-oil were Dahomey and Nigeria. The Niger delta was one of

the biggest centres of the Atlantic slave-trade in West Africa, but by the middle of the nineteenth century it was exporting so much palm-oil that the several outlets of the Niger came to be known as the "Oil Rivers" — a most remarkable change. It was not easy to move from a slave economy to a palm-oil economy. A few chiefs decided to place their full confidence in the export of palm-oil very early in the nineteenth century. A few others carried on with slave-trading and ignored palm-oil completely. But the majority of the African ruling class was very cautious, and preferred to introduce palm-oil while still holding on to the slave-trade. Altogether it was a hard fight before the peaceful and legal palm-oil trade replaced the slave-trade, which was as nasty as ever and which had been made illegal early in the nineteenth century as discussed above.

In a sense, the substitution of other commodities for slaves was a revolution. It led to a complete break with old destructive ways of getting slaves, and instead encouraged constructive organisation and labour. In the case of palm oil, for example, the palm nuts had to be picked from the trees, broken open and the kernels treated in a certain way to extract the oil. Containers had to be obtained for the oil, and more labour went into transporting the heavy product to the coast, since the palm forests were some distance inland. It was said in 1857 of the palm-oil trade in Sierra Leone: "The habit of industry has gained so much on the people that during this past year 150,000 bushels of kernels were collected and brought to market, to procure which at least 350,000 bushels of palm nuts must have been boiled and stripped of the sarcocarp [the fleshy outer covering] by the human hand, and subsequently broken and the kernels separated from the shell, and then carried to a market many miles distant, thus giving a most emphatic denial to the often repeated assertion that the Negro will not labour except under compulsion".

An even greater amount of work was required in planting and reaping groundnuts. The people of the Senegambia and Upper Guinea showed that they had initiative and a pioneering spirit, because they had not known the groundnut before, and yet they found the right way of cultivating it. During the colonial period, the British government tried to start growing groundnuts in Tanzania. They had a capital of thousands of shillings and all their scientific knowledge, but the scheme was a big failure. West Africans had displayed much more common sense and skill when they were recovering from the Atlantic slave-trade.

A short list of recommended reading  
on the Atlantic slave-trade

- (1) J. D. Fage, *Introduction to the History of West Africa* (2nd edition, 1959). This book was meant especially for secondary schools, and contains a very good account of the Atlantic slave-trade in relationship to West Africa. Since it was written several years ago, it is a little out of date in some parts.
- (2) B. Davidson, *Black Mother* (1961). This book has many interesting comments on the Atlantic slave-trade. The author was one of the first Europeans to give a sympathetic view of African history and make it available to general readers.
- (3) D. Mannix and B. Cowley, *Black Cargoes: a History of the Atlantic Slave-trade* (1962). As the title indicates, this is one of the very few books which is directly concerned with the whole history of the Atlantic slave-trade. Unfortunately, it does not go deeply into the African side of affairs.
- (4) R. Coupland, *The British Anti-slavery Movement*. Sir Reginald Coupland is no doubt well-known to East African readers as the author of *East Africa and its Invaders* and other books on East Africa. He was a strong supporter of the old-fashioned view of the great idealism and kindness of England in putting an end to the slave-trade. It would be best to look at the 1964 edition, which has a useful introduction.
- (5) E. Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*. This book was written in 1944 and is now available in a paperback edition. It shows how British capitalists made huge profits from Africa and the West Indies, and argues that in the end the slave-trade was abolished for economic reasons.
- (6) K. O. Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta, 1830-1885* (1962 edition). This is an outstanding Nigerian historian looking at his own history in the period when palm-oil was replacing slaves.

