



Goree and the Atlantic Slave Trade

>>> Item number 465, dated 95/08/02 09:04:44 -- ALL

Date: Wed, 2 Aug 1995 09:04:44 GMT-5
Reply-To: H-NET List for African History <H-AFRICA@MSU.EDU>
Sender: H-NET List for African History <H-AFRICA@MSU.EDU>
From: H-AFRICA---Mel Page <AFRICA@ETSUARTS.EAST-TENN-ST.EDU>
Organization: East Tennessee State University
Subject: Goree and the Atlantic Slave Trade

Date: Wed, 31 Jul 1995
From: Philip Curtin, Johns Hopkins University
(curtinpd@jhu.edu)

(crossposted from Slavery list and H-CIVWAR)

Editor's Note:

Although I am unable to provide the context in which Professor Curtin drafted these comments, they clearly raise important issues for historians and humanities concerned with Africa. Not only is there the issue of the creation of tradition, but also the purposes of, and motives for, such acts of creation. Perhaps readers of H-AFRICA have comments on such issues.

mep

Goree was never important in the slave trade, which flourished in Senegambia only at the mouth of the Senegal to the north or the Gambia to the south. But Goree is an interesting nineteenth-century town that can be used to attract tourists, especially African Americans looking for their roots.

The leading figure supporting the hoax today is a man named Joseph N'Diaye, who is the curator of a house that has long been called the "House of Slaves." It was actually built in 1775-78 as the home of a wealthy trader, who may or may not have kept a few slaves on the lower floor at some time. It has been called the house of slaves at least since my first visit there in 1955, though the slave-trade shrine that N'Diaye has developed dates from the 1970s at the earliest.

The reason for calling it the house of slaves is uncertain. It is architecturally one of the finest houses on Goree, certainly not a place where slaves would be kept. It is on the shore, however, and had a first-floor door leading to the water. It may be that people began imagining that slaves could be sent to sea by that route. Slaves were not kept in traders' houses in any event.

The claim that the "house of slaves" was a slave-shipping point has been refuted as long ago as 1958 by Raymond Mauny, shortly afterward the first professor of African history at the Sorbonne. [see Les Guides Bleus: Afrique de l'Ouest (1958 ed.), p. 123.]

On slave numbers, N'Diaye used to claim that 20 million slaves were shipped from Goree, 5 million of them to the United States. At the time of my visit in February 1992, he had increased the number to 40 million. Meanwhile, the government historical museum at the end of the island of Goree gives a range of 8 to 10.5 million reaching the New World from all of Africa.

A lot of people have been taken in by the Goree scam. They even had the Pope out there in late February 1992, but scam has no following at the local university. The "house of slaves" has become an emotional shrine to the slave trade, rather than a serious museum.

Slave exports from Goree began about 1670 and continued till about 1810, at no more than 200 to 300 a year in important years and none at all in others. Thirty thousand total exports through Goree would be an outside estimate.

In short, though Goree is a picturesque place, it was marginal to the slave trade, lacking the water routes to the interior provided by the Senegal and Gambia Rivers.

>>> Item number 466, dated 95/08/02 16:29:46 -- ALL

Date: Wed, 2 Aug 1995 16:29:46 GMT-5
Reply-To: H-NET List for African History <H-AFRICA@MSU.EDU>
Sender: H-NET List for African History <H-AFRICA@MSU.EDU>
From: H-AFRICA---Mel Page <AFRICA@ETSUARTS.EAST-TENN-ST.EDU>
Organization: East Tennessee State University
Subject: REPLY: Goree and the Atlantic Slave Trade

From: Beth Buggenhagen , University of Chicago
<beth@cicero.spc.uchicago.edu>
Date sent: Wed, 2 Aug 95

I too visited Goree during my stay in Senegal and was deeply affected by the house and the Senegalese man who offered a vivid explanation of the historical role of Goree in the slave trade. The historical museum on the island provided to perfect complement to convince me of the historical accuracy of the alleged role of Goree in the slave trade.

Curtin's work in this area is extremely interesting and provides me with much to re-think. I thought you might be interested to know that in 1992 Senegal issued a postal stamp to commemorate the house on Goree.

>>> Item number 498, dated 95/08/08 17:25:41 -- ALL

Date: Tue, 8 Aug 1995 17:25:41 GMT-5
Reply-To: H-NET List for African History <H-AFRICA@MSU.EDU>
Sender: H-NET List for African History <H-AFRICA@MSU.EDU>

From: H-AFRICA---Mel Page <[AFRICA@ETSU.EDU](mailto:AFRICA@ETSU.ETSU.EDU)>
Organization: East Tennessee State University
Subject: REPLY: Goree and the Atlantic Slave Trade

From: Achille Mbembe, University of Pennsylvania
<ambembe@sas.upenn.edu>
Date: Fri 4 Aug 1995

I've just read, with amusement, Professor Curtin's statement on this subject. In fact, what he says is unimportant! The "slave house" of Goree is not, in the first instance, a matter of historical record. The numbers of slaves Mr. N'diaye presents to his visitors are nothing more than decoration. To have a discussion with him about Goree would take three weeks, as he very well knows.

It isn't possible to comprehend the significance of Goree for African-Americans if one considers it only a matter of numbers. We know that all the discussion of the trans-Atlantic slave trade was misleading precisely because of this obsession with numbers.

David Henige has previously shown that one cannot truly know with precision, in spite of all the simulations, how many people perished in this deadly commerce. It is too bad that fruitful research, such as that undertaken by Orlando Patterson, Joseph C. Miller or Meillassoux--who consider the political economy, philosophical, and the cultural dimensions--no longer captures the attention of scholars.

Ralph Austen has been planning to organize a conference on the images of the slave trade. Hopefully, such a conference will take place. Statistics make up part of this image, and they are not only the representations of N'diaye.

I think the stakes underlying the dynamics of the trade are too important for us to abandon debate with some who, for more than thirty-five years, have tossed out numbers--each one more improbable than the last--to reach a final figure, an action which manifestly embroils them in a strategy of guilt and exoneration.

Editor's Note:

M. Mbembe's contribution was sent to H-AFRICA in French. As H-AFRICA is an English language list, we asked that it be presented in English. With the author's permission, the editors have undertaken this translation and offer their thanks to Shannon Vance for her assistance.

mep

>>> Item number 505, dated 95/08/11 16:55:08 -- ALL

Date: Fri, 11 Aug 1995 16:55:08 GMT-5
Reply-To: H-NET List for African History <H-AFRICA@MSU.EDU>
Sender: H-NET List for African History <H-AFRICA@MSU.EDU>

From: H-AFRICA---Mel Page <AFRICA@ETSUARTS.EAST-TENN-ST.EDU>
Organization: East Tennessee State University
Subject: REPLY: Goree and the Atlantic Slave Trade

Date sent: Wed, 9 Aug 1995
From: GLORIA EMEAGWALI, Central Connecticut State Univ.
<EMEAGWALI@CSUSYS.CTSTATEU.EDU>

Goree is certainly no less significant and deeply symbolic than the Vietnam War Memorial or other monuments in honor of the dead.

>>> Item number 512, dated 95/08/13 17:50:14 -- ALL

Date: Sun, 13 Aug 1995 17:50:14 GMT-5
Reply-To: H-NET List for African History <H-AFRICA@MSU.EDU>
Sender: H-NET List for African History <H-AFRICA@MSU.EDU>
From: H-AFRICA---Mel Page <AFRICA@ETSUARTS.EAST-TENN-ST.EDU>
Organization: East Tennessee State University
Subject: REPLY: Goree and the Atlantic Slave Trade

Date sent: Sat, 12 Aug 1995
From: Richard Lobban, Rhodes Island College
<RLOBBAN@grog.ric.edu>

I certainly agree with Gloria Emeagwali and I've been quite amazed about this discussion about Goree. It is almost like those who deny Nazi death camps.

>>> Item number 515, dated 95/08/14 13:09:27 -- ALL

Date: Mon, 14 Aug 1995 13:09:27 GMT-5
Reply-To: H-NET List for African History <H-AFRICA@MSU.EDU>
Sender: H-NET List for African History <H-AFRICA@MSU.EDU>
From: H-AFRICA---Mel Page <AFRICA@ETSUARTS.EAST-TENN-ST.EDU>
Organization: East Tennessee State University
Subject: REPLY: Goree and the Atlantic Slave Trade

Date sent: Mon, 14 Aug 95
From: John Saillant, Brown University
<SAILLANT@BROWNV.M.brown.edu>

I didn't conclude from any of the early postings about Goree, including P. Curtin's, that anyone was trying to undermine the importance of Goree or deny its role in the slave trade in the manner of the disbelievers in the Holocaust. I thought that some people were saying that to link the importance of Goree necessarily to the claim that millions of slaves passed through the island is actually to undermine that importance.

There's a thoughtful analysis of the importance of Goree in James Searing, **West African Slavery & Atlantic Commerce: The Senegal River Valley, 1700-1860** (1993), ch. 4., "Merchants & Slaves: Slavery on Saint Louis & Goree." The analysis has nothing to do with large numbers of slaves in transit on Goree or sold there.

In general, although historians would always like to have accurate accounting, we shouldn't, I

think, hang the significance of our studies only on large numbers of people or goods or whatever. One of my interests is in the movement of African Americans to Sierra Leone & Liberia. The number of people who moved is small, but they were involved in mighty affairs in religion, social thought, & economic relations.

We can understand Goree as important & interesting without extravagant claims about numbers.

>>> Item number 516, dated 95/08/14 13:12:04 -- ALL

Date: Mon, 14 Aug 1995 13:12:04 GMT-5
Reply-To: H-NET List for African History <H-AFRICA@MSU.EDU>
Sender: H-NET List for African History <H-AFRICA@MSU.EDU>
From: H-AFRICA---Mel Page <AFRICA@ETSUARTS.EAST-TENN-ST.EDU>
Organization: East Tennessee State University
Subject: REPLY: Goree and the Atlantic Slave Trade

Date sent: Mon, 14 Aug 95
From: Ralph Austen, University of Chicago
<wwb3@midway.uchicago.edu>

Just a quick response to Richard Lobban in particular (I really do hope to organize a conference on this issue and will inform you all when I get a bit closer to it). I think Curtin's intervention and the following discussion raise two fundamental questions about how we "remember" the slave trade (none of which involve denying it ever happened or was on a very large scale):

1. to what extent should we insist upon (or forego) "objective"

i.e. carefully documented modes of historical discourse in the case of such an explosive topic, one which still marks much of our daily life today?

2. (here is the more relevant comparison with the Jewish

Holocaust) how much attention should be given to this issue in defining African identity on the Continent and in the Diaspora?

>>> Item number 517, dated 95/08/14 13:15:11 -- ALL

Date: Mon, 14 Aug 1995 13:15:11 GMT-5
Reply-To: H-NET List for African History <H-AFRICA@MSU.EDU>
Sender: H-NET List for African History <H-AFRICA@MSU.EDU>
From: H-AFRICA---Mel Page <AFRICA@ETSUARTS.EAST-TENN-ST.EDU>
Organization: East Tennessee State University
Subject: REPLY: Goree and the Atlantic Slave Trade

Date sent: Mon, 14 Aug 1995
From: Philip Curtin, Johns Hopkins University
<curtinpd@jhu.edu>

I note a curious anti-empiricist tone to some of the recent postings concerning the slave trade from Goree. It might help to tell people on H-AFRICA how the matter came up.

It began with a posting on the slavery list, from someone presumably in US history, who asked

where he could find out about the slave-trade depot at Goree and its connection with the slave trade to the US. As a participant in that list, who has also written widely on the slave trade and on Senegalese history, what should I do?

One possibility is simply be quiet, even though I knew the answer to the question asked.

A second is to lie about the matter in deference to people's feelings about the slave trade.

A the third, which I chose, was to give the most accurate brief answer I could.

I should add that the fact that not much slave trade took place at Goree has nothing to do with the horror of the slave trade in general, and that accurate evidence is a fundamental base to all historical enquiry.

>>> Item number 518, dated 95/08/14 13:18:45 -- ALL

Date: Mon, 14 Aug 1995 13:18:45 GMT-5
Reply-To: H-NET List for African History <H-AFRICA@MSU.EDU>
Sender: H-NET List for African History <H-AFRICA@MSU.EDU>
From: H-AFRICA---Mel Page <AFRICA@ETSUARTS.EAST-TENN-ST.EDU>
Organization: East Tennessee State University
Subject: REPLY: Goree and the Atlantic Slave Trade

Date sent: Mon, 14 Aug 1995
From: John Pankratz, Albright College
<JOHNP@JOE.ALB.EDU>

Prof. Lobban has probably gone too far in likening Prof. Curtin's paraphrased remarks on the place of Goree in the Atlantic slave trade to the denial of the Holocaust. I've heard Curtin's remarks before, and his rather simple, empirical point is that this tiny island, nestled beneath the arm of the Cape Verde Peninsula, was a less likely spot for the shipment of many thousands (let alone the 10-40 million that N'diaye suggests) of human beings than were the mouths of major rivers.

Of course empiricism has its limits. The Maison des Esclaves on Goree has a potent symbolic effect. But much of that potency derives from the enormity of the slave trade, from the fact that it was not an event that occurred at one time or place, but was instead a process that evolved over hundreds of years and along thousands of miles of coastline.

The desire to fasten upon Goree as a comprehensible symbol of the incomprehensible, is surely enhanced by Dakar's proximity to the United States and Europe, by the fact that it is the entrepot for pilgrims to the Gambia, by the fact that good food and drink are there to refresh one after one's visit, and by the skill of the Senegalais in receiving visitors. I know. During my four years at the Universite de Dakar, I took dozens of American visitors to Goree.

But all that has more to do with the phenomenon of tourism than with historical understanding. As historians, we need to enhance, in our students and the public, the imagination necessary to conceive of huge tragedies that touched many places, without resorting to necessarily limited and sentimentalized symbols. On balance, Philip Curtin has surely enhanced that sort of historical imagination.

>>> Item number 519, dated 95/08/14 19:34:55 -- ALL

Date: Mon, 14 Aug 1995 19:34:55 GMT-5
Reply-To: H-NET List for African History <H-AFRICA@MSU.EDU>
Sender: H-NET List for African History <H-AFRICA@MSU.EDU>
From: H-AFRICA---Mel Page <AFRICA@ETSUARTS.EAST-TENN-ST.EDU>
Organization: East Tennessee State University
Subject: REPLY: Goree and the Atlantic Slave Trade

Date sent: Mon, 14 Aug 1995
From: Harold Marcus, Michigan State University
<ethiopia@hs1.hst.msu.edu>

What is interesting here is that one side sees Goree as strictly a factual matter, whereas the other views Goree as representational and symbolic. Quel discours!

>>> Item number 523, dated 95/08/20 20:52:45 -- ALL

Date: Sun, 20 Aug 1995 20:52:45 GMT-5
Reply-To: H-NET List for African History <H-AFRICA@MSU.EDU>
Sender: H-NET List for African History <H-AFRICA@MSU.EDU>
From: H-AFRICA---Mel Page <AFRICA@ETSUARTS.EAST-TENN-ST.EDU>
Organization: East Tennessee State University
Subject: REPLY: Goree and the Atlantic Slave Trade

Date sent: Tue, 15 Aug 1995
From: Paul S Landau
<PLANDAU@Minerva.cis.yale.edu>

I am a little disturbed by the trend of the discussion about Goree, and even by a recent posting that averred that on balance (the phrase used) Curtin's contribution was positive. We are historians: that is what H-AFRICA is about. Surely figuring out likely depots for slaves, the numbers of slaves sent across the middle passage, and the dynamics of local tourism in Goree, are all relevant historical projects when one wants to come to grips with the history of the slave trade.

It is not usually necessary to encrypt, in such discussions, the understanding that the slave trade was a crime against humanity, because it is assumed that historians know this. Just because some people in Goree say certain things about the slave trade there does not make it so. Historians should not be allowed the same freedom that local entrepreneurs in Goree have to make any claims they like. And insofar as anyone, in Goree or in a Western University, makes a claim to be an historian, his or her numbers can and will be challenged on the basis of evidence.

Scholars of the holocaust also discuss numbers. That does not determine the extent of their discussion, but it is important. Raul Hilberg reckoned with numbers in his massive book *The Destruction of European Jewry*. Then, there is room for Primo Levy, too. There is room for all sorts of scholarship about the slave trade. Historians have to be able to evaluate and discuss awful and traumatic things in the past, and quantification does not substitute for such discussion. But it serves a purpose.

It represents a commitment to methodology that is, ideally, unassailable on the basis of its ideological or moral bent. That is vitally important, because it gives those who wish to educate us all about the horrors of the past, a firmness, a toughness, in the face of racist or reactionary challenge. If, in other words, there was no Census of the slave trade or similar works, no notion

that 12 million is a reasonable number and 3 million, or 50 million, is not, then what would be the attitude of those persons, like Newt Gingrich and Pat Buchanan, who now wish to "reform" American education? What would they say about the history of oppressive violence in general?

That there are numbers does not foreclose debate on those numbers. But if people are not satisfied with them, there is no shortcut to refiguring the data. It just won't do to condemn the discussion itself as unsatisfactory.

>>> Item number 536, dated 95/08/22 09:47:48 -- ALL

Date: Tue, 22 Aug 1995 09:47:48 GMT-5
Reply-To: H-NET List for African History <H-AFRICA@MSU.EDU>
Sender: H-NET List for African History <H-AFRICA@MSU.EDU>
From: H-AFRICA---Mel Page <AFRICA@ETSUARTS.EAST-TENN-ST.EDU>
Organization: East Tennessee State University
Subject: REPLY: Goree and the Atlantic Slave Trade

Date sent: Mon, 21 Aug 1995
From: John Boldrick
<jlb47@columbia.edu>

I agree with Paul Landau completely. I am also disturbed by the ongoing tendency of historians to choose a side, thus creating a quantities--versus--ideas debate. How can we function as scholars without a commitment to both a quantitative rigor and a willingness to listen to and argue any proposal, no matter how distasteful (not that I have detected anything distasteful in this thread)? When we reject, for instance, the quasi-historical rants of holocaust revisionists as beneath our notice, their ideas simply go out into the world unchallenged, to pick up converts where they may.

>>> Item number 551, dated 95/08/30 12:59:05 -- ALL

Date: Wed, 30 Aug 1995 12:59:05 -0400
Reply-To: H-NET List for African History <H-AFRICA@MSU.EDU>
Sender: H-NET List for African History <H-AFRICA@MSU.EDU>
From: Harold Marcus <ethiopia@hsl.hst.msu.edu>
Subject: Re: REPLY: Goree and the Atlantic Slave Trade

- Forwarded message ----- Date: Wed, 30 Aug 1995 From: RLOBBAN@grog.ric.edu

Dear Ralph et. al:

You've raise some very significant issues indeed. The numbers game and slavery is both essential yet very dangerous and in my experience it seems that the reluctance to objectivize the slavery epoch is because it is more akin to rape than murder and therefore causes a different psychological reaction. Hence holocaust survivors can have anger and no shame where survivors of slavery can have both. Also the issue of African roles in slavery is not an issue to be silenced by P.C. but needs to be discussed as an essential part of the slave trade process. There is much that needs discussion here, and you your proposed conference is much needed.

Richard Lobban

>>> Item number 552, dated 95/08/30 13:04:48 -- ALL

Date: Wed, 30 Aug 1995 13:04:48 -0400
Reply-To: H-NET List for African History <H-AFRICA@MSU.EDU>
Sender: H-NET List for African History <H-AFRICA@MSU.EDU>
From: Harold Marcus <ethiopia@hsl.hst.msu.edu>
Subject: Re: REPLY: Goree and the Atlantic Slave Trade

Date: Wed, 30 Aug 1995
From: RLOBBAN@grog.ric.edu

Dear Friends:

I just got back from West Africa to find lots of messages about Goree. It seems that this was really a sensitive/stimulating issue. I much appreciate your comments. Certainly Goree was far from alone and there are still many standing monuments to the multi-faceted trade.

I was in Cape Verde actually, and lots of slaves passed through there, but that is not really the point in this discussion. It is clear that much needs to be aired on this unfinished business and that numbers are needed, but there is much more to this story.

All best wishes,
Richard Lobban

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