

CHAPTER 15 THE TRANS ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE

Objectives

At the end of this chapter, students should be able to:

- explain the circumstances which led to the demand for slaves in Europe and the New world;
- describe the circumstances which led to the introduction of the slave trade in West Africa;
- describe the organization of the slave trade in West Africa;
- identify the items of exchange for slaves;
- identify and discuss the consequences and impact of the Atlantic slave trade.

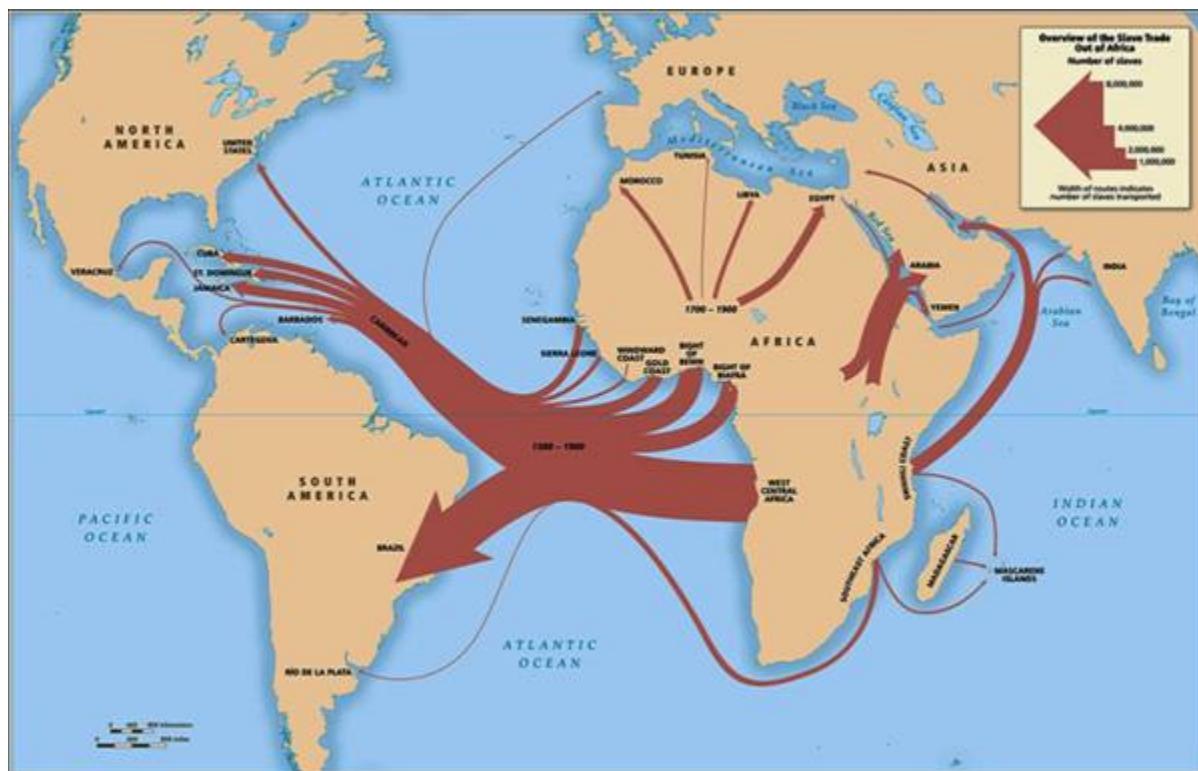


Fig. 14.1: Map showing the Trans Atlantic slave trade and its routes

Introduction

The Trans Atlantic slave trade or the Triangular Trade was an international trading relationship that existed between Africans, Europeans and the New World or the Americas. This particular trading relationship was not only degrading or exploitative in nature but also depicted the darkest episode in the social and economic history of the black world.

15.1 Origin of the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade

Certain factors or circumstances led to the demand for African slaves in Europe and in the New World. These factors are outlined below:

- (i) **The development of the art of navigation in Europe:** The demand for African slaves in the 15th and 16th centuries can be traced to the maritime exploits of Portugal and Spain. The development of the art of navigation paved the way for the establishment of colonies in West Indian Islands, the American mainlands and the Indian Ocean Islands. Modern slave trade began in 1441 when ten Africans from the Guinea Coast were shipped to Portugal as a gift to Prince Henry the Navigator from a sailor called Gonzalves. These Africans were not captured for sale but were to be shown to the Prince in the same way other rare and exotic butterflies or tropical birds might have been shown.
- (ii) **The discovery of the New World by Christopher Columbus in 1492:** The discovery of the New World by Columbus provided bountiful economic opportunities for Europe due to the presence of abundant mineral resources such as copper, gold and manganese. These mineral resources made countries like Spain, Portugal, Dutch, Britain and France to colonize the New World so that they can establish mines and plantations that will help them exploit these resources. The basic problem that confronted European countries was the absence of adequate labour force that would help in the exploitation of the natural resources in the West Indies. The initial recruitment of the native Indian peoples of Aztec and the Inca empires as plantation workers appeared very futile because these Indians were unable to work under the tropical weather.

The desire to save the native Indians from total extermination prompted Bishop Bartholomeo de La Casas to give a fatal advice that African slaves should be made to replace the native Indian labour force. It was Bartholomeo La Casas's advice that encouraged the Spaniards to import Africans into the New World since they had been used successfully in sugar plantations in the Mediterranean areas.

- (iii) **Tropical nature of the African climate:** African slaves were chosen as a source of cheap labour for European plantations in the West Indies. This was because they were seen as hardworking Negroes who were genetically conditioned to work under the harshness of the tropical weather.

15.2 Organization of the Slave Trade

The Trans Atlantic slave trade was organized in three major fronts namely; the African front, the European front and the American front.

- (i) **Organization of the slave trade in the African region:** Most of the slaves from West Africa and the coast of Guinea were always captured at the hinterland areas. Consequently, they were chained together and marched helplessly to the coastal areas for sale to the European slave dealers. The long march to the coast was very irksome because it entailed long distances through the jungles and plains without food, water, etc. Many slaves lost their lives on the way

while survivors, who walked up to the coasts, were packed like sardines in unhygienic houses called ‘baracoons’ where they waited for the arrival of the European buyers.

The ‘Trust System’ was used where slave barons from Europe supplied African middlemen with European manufactured goods in advance or in trust, in exchange for slaves which would be supplied the following year.

- (ii) **Organization of the Triangular Trade in the European continent:** The European slave dealers used slave ships containing iron and fetters to chain up their human cargo, whip and special chisels designed to knock out the front teeth so that the slaves who tried to starve to death can be forcibly fed. Slave ships also contained such items as; metal bars, knives, enamel bowls, guns, ammunition spirituous liquors, cloths, clothing. The ships also contained trinkets, such as; minor and cheap colourful jewelries.
- (iii) **Organization of slave trade in the Americas or West indies:** As slave ships arrived in the Americas, they were taken to slave markets where they were auctioned to the highest bidders who purchased the slaves after a series of unwholesome inspections. European slave merchants, who supplied slaves to plantation owners in the West Indies, in turn bought West Indies goods, such as; gold, tobacco, rice, ginger, cotton, precious stones, sugar, rum and molasses, which they exported back to Europe.

15.3 Effects of the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade

Historians from Europe and Africa share different views about the effects of the Triangular trade on Africa, Europe and the Americas. European historians feel that the slave trade strengthened indigenous African societies by ridding them of criminals and other undesirables while sparing the lives of people that otherwise would have been lost in wars. African historians strongly believe that the Atlantic slave trade was the most iniquitous transaction of human beings ever known in history. The consequences of the Trans Atlantic slave trade can be approached from the economic, political, social, educational and psychological perspectives and these areas enumerated below.

- (i) **Economic impact:** The wide spread sense of insecurity created by the external trade was not conducive to the growth of inter-regional trade. The slave trade which caused the transshipment of the virile or youthful population of Africa to the New World retarded the growth and expansion of indigenous industries. Many lucrative industries and handicrafts, such as; weaving, shoemaking, pottery, smittery bronze and brass casting, were entirely abandoned. The fact that the slave trade encouraged a ‘one commodity economy’ brought about the decline of indigenous industries. The slave trade also brought about a serious neglect of agricultural activities in West Africa.
- (ii) **Political impact:** Many historians share diverse opinions on the effects of the Trans-Atlantic trade on the rise, expansion and collapse of kingdoms and empires in the Sudanese region. Historians, who have European backgrounds, feel that the slave trade paved the way for the growth of many Sudanese towns or kingdoms, like Benin, Asante, Oyo and Dahomey, etc. On

the contrary, nationalist historians believe that the quest for acquisition of more slaves through vicious wars, induced African kingdoms to have imperial ambitions with the sole aim of having vassal states whose population could be sold to European traders. The Trans Atlantic trade contributed to the collapse of some Nigerian empires and kingdoms, especially Oyo and Benin empires.

(iii) **Social impact:** The Trans Atlantic slave trade bred social insecurity since it encouraged slave raids and inter-ethnic wars. The slave trade discouraged proper socialization of the African child throughout the period it lasted. It gave rise to many broken homes as many African families were disorganized because parents were separated from their children and wives from husbands. The slave trade made African children of the period to be poorly socialized. Black children whose parents and guardians were enslaved, due to lack of parental care and affection, grew up as maladjusted children thereby making African communities to be a safe haven for juvenile delinquents.

The European slave trade is partly the root cause of racism which has characterized the relationship between black and white peoples of the world.

(iv) **Cultural impact:** The slave trade retarded the cultural growth of many African societies. The slave raids and wars created an atmosphere of general insecurity, which impeded orderly and progressive cultural activities. The prevalent social insecurity of the period abruptly led to the stoppage of cultural festivals, moonlight shows, wrestling competitions.

As the slave trade resulted in the dispersal of black population to different parts of the world, it also brought about the diffusion of the African cultures to Europe and the American continents. For instance, some aspects of the African cultural heritage are still found today in alien countries like Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, etc. Enslaved Africans in the New World believed that the survival of their gods meant the survival of their identity. This belief influenced the importation of the gods of the Yoruba, or Fon, or Fante into the New World. There are also strong indications of African traditions in Cuba (Havana) namely the ‘Abakua secret society’ and the secret writings of the ‘Abakua sect’, the ‘Nsibidi’ of Ejagham origin.

(v) **Psychological impact:** The Trans Atlantic slave trade was evil and devastated the black race psychologically. It gave undue advantage to the Caucasian and Asiatic races at the detriment of the Negroid race. The slave trade denigrated the human dignity of the African people: it ruined and stained the African personality. Till date, the stigma of slavery and its inbuilt inequalities, injustice and pains still haunt the African continent as well as blacks in diaspora.

Conclusion

The Trans Atlantic slave remains a serious factor of under-development for the African continent. Having devastated the resources of the black world between the 15th and 19th centuries, it must be held responsible for the economic backwardness of many African countries well as the cultural imperialism that has ravaged the entire black world. The slave trade could be seen as the foundation

base of European capitalist ventures. It set a wonderful stage for the scramble for and partition of Africa as well as its inherent exploitative tendencies. The syndrome of Neo-colonialism took its form and shape from the European slave trade.

Summary

- The demand for African slaves in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries could be traced to the maritime exploits of Portugal and Spain which led to the establishment of colonies in the West Indian Islands, the American mainlands and the Indian Ocean islands.
- The Trans Atlantic slave trade was organized in three major fronts namely, the African front, European continent and the America's or West Indies front.
- The Trans Atlantic slave and its stigma of slavery has been blamed for the economic backwardness of African nations, cultural imperialism, absence of technological capacities and capabilities, as well as episodic issues like colonialism, neo-colonialism and neo-globalization.

Revision Questions

Objectives

1. One of the following circumstances led to the demand for African slaves in the 15th and 16th centuries:
 - A. Search for the sea route to India
 - B. Henry the Navigator of Portugal's love for African slaves
 - C. Desire by European countries to Christianize black people
 - D. The abundant mineral resources found in the New World
2. _____ advised the Spaniards to import African slaves to the New World because of their inability to survive the harsh tropical climate.
 - A. Christopher Columbus
 - B. Henry the Navigator
 - C. Antam Goncalves
 - D. Bartholomeo De la Casas
3. _____ monopolized slave trading activities between the European slave dealers and the African hinterland people.
 - A. Arochukwu people
 - B. Priests of Ibini Ukpabi
 - C. Coastal middlemen traders
 - D. Jaja of Opobo
4. An economic exchange system whereby European slave barons supplied African middlemen with European manufactured goods in advance for slaves that would be supplied the next year is called _____.

- A. barter system
 - B. monetary system
 - C. demand and supply
 - D. trust system
5. Which of the following statements is not true about the economic impact of the Trans Atlantic slave trade?
- A. retarded the growth and expansion of indigenous industries
 - B. discouraged local industries such as weaving, shoemaking, pottery, smithery
 - C. Encouraged growth of inter-regional trade
 - D. encouraged economic exploration of African countries
6. The _____ was responsible for the racial hatred between black and white peoples of the world.
- A. Trans Saharan trade
 - B. Trans Atlantic slave trade
 - C. Imperialism
 - D. Capitalism
7. Which of the following statements is false?
- A. The Trans Atlantic slave trade led to the building of special ships
 - B. The Trans Atlantic slave trade introduced new foodcrops (Cassava, maize and varieties of yams) to Nigeria
 - C. The Trans Atlantic slave trade brought an end of inter-group rivalries and warfare in Nigeria
 - D. The Trans Atlantic slave trade brought about a demographic change in the control areas of Nigeria
8. A powerful oracle which was used to perpetuate slave trading activities in Igbo land was called _____.
- A. Agbala of Awka
 - B. Igwe Ka Ala of Umunoha
 - C. Ibini Ukpabi of Arochukwu
 - D. Amadioha Ozuzu
9. _____ sponsored local wars in order to procure African slaves.
- A. African middlemen traders
 - B. European slave barons
 - C. European merchants
 - D. African chiefs
10. European slave dealers bought the following agricultural products from the West Indies except _____.
- A. rice

- B. cotton
- C. ginger
- D. yam

Essay Questions

1. Describe the circumstances that led to European demand for West African slaves in the fifteenth century.
2. How was the Trans-Atlantic slave trade organized before 1800 A.D?
3. Discuss five effects of the Trans Atlantic slave trade on West Africans.
4. To what extent did the Trans Atlantic slave trade encourage the migration of African people to Europe, West Indies and the Americas?
5. Is it correct to blame the economic backwardness of African countries on the Trans Atlantic slave trade?