Part I

OUT OF AFRICA

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Chapter One

Africa, the Slave Trade and the Diaspora

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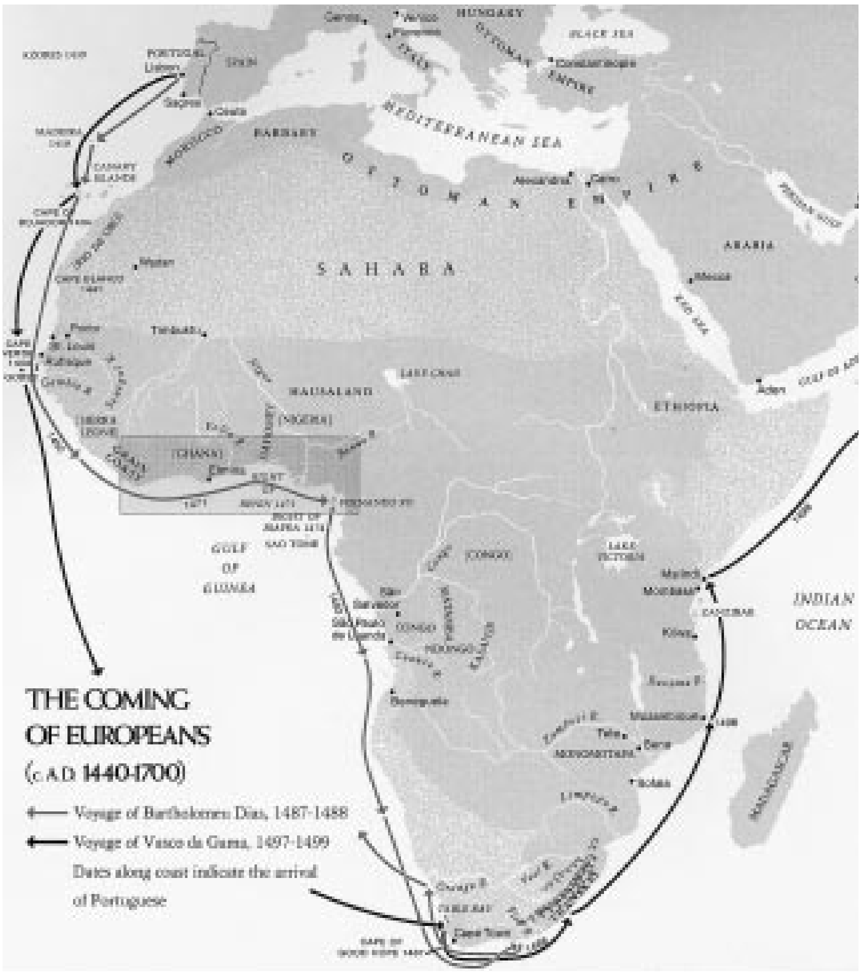
Africans brought to North America as slaves were a small minority, probably fewer than 6 percent, of some 12 million men, women, and children shoved below the decks of ships lying at anchor off Africa's Atlantic shores between the 15th and the 19th centuries. Though they all shared the humiliation and brutality of enslavement in the New World, they came from diverse backgrounds in a continent as different from north to south, and from the coast to its vast interior, as were the Americas themselves. Most — well over three-fourths — of the Africans who survived the ocean voyage, the so-called "middle passage," found themselves laboring as slaves in the sugar islands of the Caribbean or in Portuguese Brazil. A smaller number were herded ashore in the mainland colonies of Spain. Though, as African Americans, they came to bear the common burdens of racial prejudice, burdens even heavier than the subjugation to masters and mistresses effectively unrestrained by law, they created an infinite variety of new lives for themselves out of local circumstances — out of their work as miners, on sugar plantations, in tobacco fields, as domestic servants in town houses, in factories; out of their masters' cultural inclinations and economic fortunes; out of the backgrounds that their fellow slaves brought from Africa; out of timing; and out of the personal resources — wits, skills, physical abilities — with which each of them had arrived. The experiences of the Africans taken to North America, disparate as they were, converged under this peculiar combination of slavery and freedom in ways that distinguished their experiences from those of Africans in other parts of the New World.

AFRICAN BACKGROUNDS

AFRICAN VILLAGE LIFE: AGRICULTURAL BASIS

Slaves were taken to the Americas from every inhabited part of Africa's Atlantic coast, from the Sahara Desert in the north to the Kalahari Desert in the south (see map). In the 15th century, when the Portuguese bought their first captives in northwestern Africa, most Africans lived in highly localized agricultural communities, where they grew up learning farming and hunting techniques refined by their parents and grandparents who knew the delicate environment intimately and adapted to it over the years. Near the Sahara, in the desert-edge latitudes, long rainless months each year encouraged farmers to rely on drought-resistant millets that they planted in river valleys or other better-watered areas. These farmers tried to maintain cordial relations with herders who devoted their mobile lives to cattle that they grazed in the drier lands, who passed through the farmlands during the dry season each year in search of winter pastures, and who eagerly exchanged livestock products for surpluses of grain that the farmers harvested. Soils there were too sandy, fragile, and shallow to sustain deep cultivation with the plow, and the hoe was the basic agricultural implement they used. But the herders had to move their animals constantly, over hundreds of miles, as they sought fresh, sweet grasses for them, and the farmers had to remain close by water and their fields. As a result, hoe cultivators and livestock raisers both specialized in separate ways of living and traded with each other, but the fragility of the land and climate promised no gain from attempting to combine the two complementary basic economic strategies in plow agriculture powered by draft animals. Nor did carts or other wheeled transport promise to repay the substantial investment required to maintain it.



Map 1.1, Africa, ca. sixteenth century.
(Alvin M. Josephy, Jr., **The Horizon History of Africa.**
American Heritage Publishing Co., Inc. [New York, 1971], p. 306.)

Closer to the equator, in the southern as well as the northern hemisphere, more plentiful and reliable rains created broad bands of wooded grasslands, known as savanna. These supported farmers who grew a wider variety of cultigens, of which sorghums were the most widespread. Just south of the Sahara, in the savannas known as the sudan, rice also figured prominently in the wetter zones. Farmers in these moist latitudes could disperse to live in scattered homesteads next to fields that they planted in the most fertile patches, but the woods harbored disease lethal to cattle, and so they had little direct contact with herders and purchased, from outside traders who had come to settle among them, leathers and other livestock products from the drier regions at the edge of the desert. The traders also bought slabs of rock salt cut from salty deposits deep in the Sahara, commodities so valuable in these salt-deficient latitudes that people sometimes used them as a currency facilitating other exchanges.

At the edge of the Sahara a set of sahelian towns had long since grown up as centers of the inter-regional trade between the farmers in the grasslands and the herders in the desert steppes. Since the 8th or 9th century, Saharan merchants had arrived at the heads of large caravans of camels bearing desert goods for sale and distribution throughout the grasslands and even into the forests beyond — and also carrying imports that came all the way from the Mediterranean lands of North Africa. In these towns they met representatives of the diaspora of village traders. Some of these towns, like Timbuktu, on the northernmost reach of the Niger River where western Africa's largest river flowed into the desert before turning back to the south and its delta in the Gulf of Guinea, had become famous throughout the Muslim world as sources of sub-Saharan gold, which Africans panned from the headwaters of the Niger and other rivers. They had also become centers of Islamic scholarship, as well as outposts of large African imperial powers that dominated large portions of the region at that time, powers such as Mali in the valley of the upper Niger and Songhai, centered to the east along the middle course of the river. These Arabic-speaking merchants from North Africa called the desert edge *sahel* (literally "shore"), the name by which it is now often known, and these Arabic-speakers characterized the savannas as the *sudan*, or "land of the blacks", from the dark appearance of their trading partners there. In the wetter regions, the dispersed networks of sub-Saharan traders stimulated production of commodities that were in demand in the dry areas, just as they distributed products of the desert in the south.

From the latitude of the River Gambia all the way south to the mouth of the Zaire (or Congo) River, most of the coast was heavily forested, with islands, broad river mouths, and an extensive set of lagoons providing opportunities for people residing there to fish, produce marine salt from tidal evaporation pans, and transport numerous products in large dug-out canoes made from the huge hardwood trees of the tropical forests. The intricate waterways of the delta of the Niger River offered especially bountiful opportunities of this sort, and villages of specialized producers dotted the banks where traders came to buy local products for sale in markets in the interior. Farmers making their ways in the forests had opened clearings for towns and fields. Since the dimness of the light penetrating the dense canopy of trees was too little to sustain the grain cultigens of the savannas, they relied on yams and bananas as the staples of their diet. In west Africa, that is, roughly the regions from the Niger Delta to the west, peoples of the forest also harvested palm kernels (which they pressed to obtain cooking oil) and other fruits and nuts to sell to traders from the drier regions to the north. Along the vast network of waterways flowing into the Zaire River and draining the vast forests of central Africa, people fished and traded in villages linked by fleets of large canoes.

In the agricultural savannas, particularly those north of the West African forests but also those south of the mouth of the Zaire, farmers could have congratulated themselves on having achieved the highest population densities found in any of the three principal types of environment. While numerous followers and compounds filled with well-fed wives and children signalled a chief's success, they also formed the demographic base from which those who later fell into slaving would draw.

Particularly in the grasslands where people depended heavily on their relatives, clients, and associates to get ahead, communal loyalties were generally strong. Open pursuit of individual self-interest might appear to threaten the prized solidarity of the group, though personal ambition — and countervailing fears of witchcraft — inevitably strained relationships. Local environmental knowledge was so basic to agricultural success and herding that most people identified themselves — beyond the intimate, personal associations of kinship and alliance with other families through marriage — primarily by the regional cultures they and their neighbors developed to exploit the resources of the area in which they lived. Community identity thus emerged, at the most basic level, out of the distinctive habits of speech adopted by neighbors who lived and worked in close association reaching back over many generations, who married mostly among themselves, and who shared many concerns and historical experiences, all based on specializing in living in the same ecological niche. Especially in the forests, one of these ethnic communities might number only a few thousand people, all of whom shared, first of all, a common language, of which there were hundreds, or a local dialect of one language. There were thus many such groups, each intensely self-conscious but also dependent on its neighbors as buyers of its own specialized products and as suppliers of the necessities that it did not produce for itself; at the same time, each suspected its neighbors as strangers unintelligibly, and perhaps dangerously, different from themselves.

Nevertheless, all the communities living in the forests and savannas east of the Niger Delta shared a single cultural heritage through their descent from the same ancestors; their languages, known collectively to modern linguists as "Bantu," all belonged to one closely related family as a result of that common history. Looser cultural and linguistic background commonalities also linked communities in West Africa — though "united" would be far too strong a word to acknowledge the distinguishing effects of many years of distinct historical experiences for most. Modern ethnographers have abstracted these limited common tendencies to define "culture areas" of broadly similar linguistic habits and shared institutions, such as the "Igbo" in the forests east of the lower Niger River or "Benin" and "Yoruba" in those to the west, "Fon" in the extension of the southerly extension of savanna reaching the sea to the west of the "Yoruba," and "Akan" in the forests beyond the Volta River — all of these peoples living in the forests of what the Europeans later termed, in an even larger, and purely geographic, imposition, "Lower Guinea." The people of "Upper Guinea," the heterogeneous area north and west of the "Akan" (beyond Cape Palmas), had entered the forests there in small groups from several neighboring savanna regions and they had developed fewer comparably general cultural similarities. 15th-century Africans would not have attributed much significance to common cultural heritages at this high level of abstraction, nor would they have recognized many of the ethnic names by which their descendants subsequently became known to the Europeans — who tended to label Africans according to the stereotypical, and often uncomplimentary, epithets bestowed by neighbors.

AFRICAN VILLAGE LIFE: COMMERCIAL AND POLITICAL

INTERACTION AND INFLUENCE

By the 15th century, trading and political accomplishments in many places had added overlays of broader identity beyond these local groups, based on shared commercial or industrial success. The residents of the Muslim trading towns of the sahel thought of themselves as members of broader mercantile or religious communities. Families which were specialized in complex and demanding technologies. like iron- and leather-working or other skilled professions that drew people permanently out of farming, became dispersed in distinct guild-like communities, jealously marrying among themselves to protect their valuable technical knowledge, and often known by names analogous to the ethnic identities of the farmers among whom they lived; the marginality of these craft specialists to the land-holding agricultural mainstream of life, as well as their humble status relative to the warrior and commercial elites of the era, has led some later observers to liken them to ranked "castes" on the Indian model, but the parallel is limited. The traders who dispersed southward from the towns of the sahel into the far western savannas and forest fringes spoke Soninke and Mande (the latter also known as Mandingo) languages, and they had carried these and other elements of their home cultures, including Islam, with them.

In 15th-century sub-Saharan Africa, only these merchants and the military aristocrats in control of the large empires and the desert trade adhered to the Muslim religion. Farmers in the villages retained older beliefs in spirits believed to confer fertility on the land and on their women, in the powers of priests and kings to call the capricious rains on which they depended for plentiful harvests and for survival, and in the influence of ancestors in the affairs of their descendants, who could invoke common reverence for revered deceased elders in the name of preserving harmony among the living. Islam, on the other hand, appealed to the political classes and merchants, who were less directly concerned with productivity and more engaged on broader social and economic scales, scales that the literacy and universalism of the Muslim religion helped them to manage. Thus, Muslim Africans south of the Sahara found themselves suspended between the parochialism of the villages and the legal and theological refinement and cosmopolitanism of traders and clerics from the central Islamic lands, with whom they had to collaborate, economically and diplomatically. They therefore tended to combine elements of both worldviews in ways that could strike purists on both sides as suspiciously deviant.

Horse-riding warriors set the political tone of the times in the sudanic latitudes. From time to time they imposed tribute and a degree of enduring political unity over the populous regions along the upper Niger through the mobility and power they gained from their mastery of cavalry warfare in the savannas. They had created a series of political systems: an "empire" under Soninke warriors known as Ghana long before the 15th century, and its successor, Mali, led since the 13th century by horsemen and aristocrats of Mande background. These military aristocrats acquired their equine power by buying mounts from the desert merchants, paying for them mostly by selling gold. But the warrior aristocrats also used their mobility and military power to capture farmers, men, women, and children, living in outlying regions. Some of these captives they kept as slaves for themselves, to feed and staff imperial courts where they had gained luxurious styles of living and surrounded themselves with followers beyond the ability of their residents to provide for themselves. Other captives they sold to the merchants from the desert in order to buy more horses for their cavalry forces and thus to extend their political and military reach beyond what they might have managed from sales of gold alone. Literacy in Arabic added to the power they gained from their access to trading capital and to horses.

The towns, aristocratic compounds, and traders thus prospered from the coordination they achieved over great distances and brought a significant overlay of commercial and political integration to large parts of the farming villages of the sudanic West Africa. Along the major trade routes linking the middle reaches of the Niger to the river's delta, Yoruba-speaking people at Ife and Bini people at Benin had consolidated extensive, but less intensely militarized, political systems, very likely by investing the wealth they derived from taxing the trade goods moving through their lands. The land-holding families influential in the Akan area derived their prosperity from commercial interests in sources of gold developed within their territories, but in the15th century they had not yielded political authority to a single, central ruler.

Commercial and political success attracted people of many sorts to the winning ways of the wealthy and powerful. Slaves adopted the cultures and languages of their masters. Wives and children, in the large numbers assembled by lords and merchants through multiple marriages, spread the habits of their husbands and fathers back to their maternal homelands. So also did clients eager to share in patrons' prosperity, political subordinates seeking advancement, and others pursuing power and wealth by association with those who had them. By the 15th century, these patterns had allowed Mande-speakers to spread an overlay of cultural homogeneity throughout the valley of the Upper Niger and in the regions to the west. The strongly centralized kingdom at Benin united the region just west of the lower Niger and spread its political culture there. Political federation in the Yoruba and Akan parts of the forest had promoted looser sorts of economic and cultural integration.

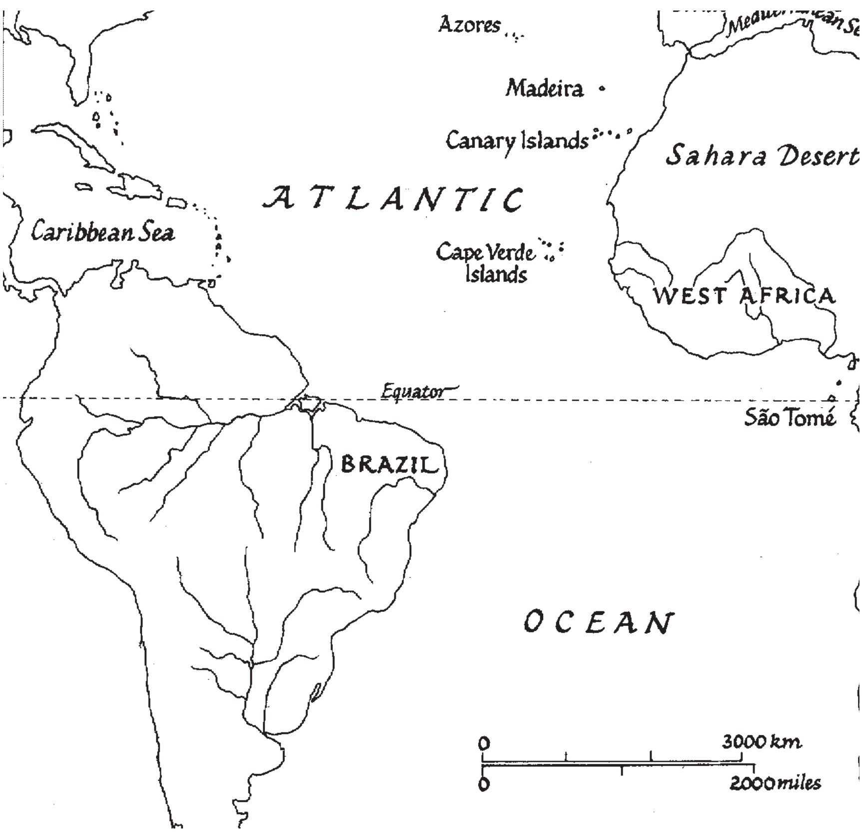
The Bantu-speaking farming and fishing communities in the central African forests and in the savannas beyond toward the south had, by the 15th century, integrated their local economies on scales comparable to the degrees achieved in West Africa and, particularly where inexpensive transport by canoe was available, produced and distributed significant surpluses. However, they did so mostly without taking on burdens such as those associated with military conquest and integration, with luxuriously appointed, slave-attended aristocratic compounds, and with feeding large towns and families of merchants. Notables — heads of land-owning communities, men wealthy from fishing or transporting goods along the rivers, owners of mineral resources like salt pans or outcrops of copper ores — formed flexible confederations on regional scales, but they lacked horses, or other military means, and incentives to concentrate power beyond a degree that might be termed conciliatory or "ceremonial." Individuals might achieve great personal authority on the basis of perceived abilities to respond to the circumstantial needs of communities — calling rains in times of drought, driving out disease or other evils that seemed to afflict them — but successors rarely could lay claim to the personal influence they had acquired. In the far south, along the margins of the Kalahari Desert, cattle were the basis of prosperity, and wealth and power derived from the possession of large herds.

Most of the Africans whom Europeans would buy as slaves thus had lived in small agricultural communities, cherished an intense loyalty to those with whom they had grown up, and as adults had become skilled in delicate techniques of exploiting the resources of the lands in which they lived. They offered respect, and usually wealth as well, to senior members of their families and to leaders of their villages. Some of them also recognized more distant, less personal forms of authority ranging from men of senior status, wealth, or spiritual authority in regional associations and confederacies to violent monarchs of exalted rank, incomparable wealth, and terrifying power, monarchs who lived hidden in sanctity, behind high walls amidst crowds of slaves and wives. The vague and general "ethnic" or cultural similarities apparent to later European observers, unable to appreciate the subtleties of Africans' lives, meant little to them. They produced surpluses — from home crafts or garden produce through staple crops and specialized and technologically refined rural industries — and exchanged their product for consumption and luxury goods, sometimes with neighbors, elsewhere in local public marketplaces, often through strangers, resident or itinerant, who traded for their livings. Although they felt loyalty to their local community very strongly, they also sought personal advancement by moving among the many other, often broader social identities available to them. Small minorities of West Africans in touch with the Islamic lands, the world civilization of the 8th through the 15th centuries, had taken advantage of its commercial capital, universalistic religion, and literacy to gain enormous advantage, uncharacteristic of village life — with Mali and Songhai, the military empires of the western Sudan, the achievements most visible to outsiders. Elsewhere, Africans awaited access to comparable wealth and power to pursue similar paths to personal gain.

THE ATLANTIC ECONOMY AND THE SLAVE TRADE

SLAVE TRADE BEFORE THE 18TH CENTURY

Europeans created a vast new trading system between the 15th and the 18th centuries, bringing the continents around the Atlantic basin together in a dynamic economic network that stimulated economic growth in all of them, including Africa. Its three poles were the fast-developing mercantile economies of western Europe, the open lands and mineral resources of the Americas, north and south, and the populations of Africa. In combination, European financial capital, rich New World lands, and African workers generated rapid growth, centered on plantation-grown tropical agricultural commodities, and on precious metals, gold and silver, produced by Africans working in the Americas as slaves and sent back to Europe. From the point of view of the people in Africa, contact with the Atlantic economy brought previously unimagined quantities of imported goods — textiles, metalwares of several sorts vital to their own economies, alcoholic spirits, firearms, and currencies. From the point of view of the Europeans, Africans were willing to sell, first of all, gold, then ivory and various tropical gums and woods, and finally — and most enduringly — slaves.



Map 1.2, *The Atlantic Basin, 16th to 18th centuries.*
(Reprinted with permission from The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex, Philip Curtin, p. 201, Cambridge University Press.)

Europe's interest in Africa originated not in tropical commodities or, particularly, in labor but rather in the sudanic gold that had been reaching the Muslim cities of the Mediterranean from Mali since long before the 15th century. The Renaissance Italians, the major southern European commercial and financial powers of the era, held dominant positions both in buying African gold from the Muslims and in the largest European slave trade of the time, which did not involve Africa but rather brought Slavic peoples from the shores of the Black Sea for sale in the Christian cities on the northern side of the western Mediterranean, from Venice to Seville. The Portuguese, who faced out away from the Mediterranean toward the Atlantic, simultaneously followed prevailing winds and currents down the barren coast of north-west Africa in search of the gold they knew to come from beyond the Sahara. To return against the winds to Europe, they had to swing far out into the open sea to the west, where they found the uninhabited islands of the eastern Atlantic — Madeira, the Açores, the Cape Verde Islands — along the way. By the 1440s, Portuguese mariners had reached the westernmost provinces of the Mali Empire, beyond Cape Verde between the Senegal and Gambia rivers, and by the 1460s they were sailing along the west-east-lying part of the West African coast, which they named Guinea. The 1480s found them at the mouth of the Zaire River, and by the 1490s their leading captains had turned the Cape of Good Hope at the very southern tip of the continent and were on their way out across the Indian Ocean toward Asia. Intending to pick up prevailing westerlies of the higher latitudes of the southern hemisphere and then ride them eastward back toward the Cape, Africa, and India, one Portuguese captain setting out for Asia followed the north-easterly trade winds far out across the Atlantic. Surprised to encounter the land-mass of South America blocking his way in 1500, he claimed this massive territory for his king and named it Brazil for the red dyewood the Portuguese found in forests there.

Although the Portuguese sailing along the coasts of Africa were able to purchase modest quantities of gold from Malian merchants and found still more of the precious metal on the Guinea Coast, along a section of the shore that they called "Mina" (that is, "mine," in Portuguese), but which was later dubbed the "Gold Coast" by the English), they competed only with difficulty against the dominant Muslim merchants of the sahel and sudan and their export routes across the Sahara. In the fragile desert-edge lands around the Senegal and the Gambia, droughts, which were frequent and sometimes devastating, periodically threw the farmers of the sahel into turmoil, forced them into violent struggles with one another, often led by militaristic kings, and created refugees and captives. Some of the people thus abandoned the Portuguese bought as slaves, to compete with the Italian-established urban markets of the Mediterranean or to populate the islands of the eastern Atlantic. Others they sold in Spain, particularly in Seville, where they became slave companions and servants of the Spaniards, then starting to claim and settle the West Indian islands of the Caribbean, in the Americas. By shortly after 1500, the numbers of the people thus taken from Africa had become significant — perhaps 2,000 or so in a typical year.

By the 1520s, the Portuguese had developed diplomatic and commercial interests in central Africa, in the kingdom that controlled the south bank of the lower Zaire River. The kingdom was known as Kongo, from the title of its monarch, the mani (or "lord") kongo. They had also started to develop the uninhabited equatorial island of São Tomé as a source of slave-worked cane sugar, a condiment then just starting to take its place as the principal sweetener in the European diet. There they began to bring larger numbers of Africans from the mainland as slaves to toil in fields laid out in large, specialized agricultural enterprises built around the crushing mills needed to press the sweet, sugar-yielding juices from the fresh cane. São Tomé planters needed so many enslaved Africans to cultivate and cut the cane on these plantations that their demands exceeded the ability of the Kongo kingdom to supply them. By the 1560s the Tomistas found more slaves farther south, among the Africans living in the valley of the Kwanza River, where they bought them principally from their dominant war-lord-ruler, from whose title, the ngola, they named the area: Angola. Sailing short routes from the mainland to nearby islands like São Tomé, the Portuguese developed techniques of transporting larger and larger numbers of captive people on the open ocean and methods of stocking and carrying the substantial quantities of food and water necessary to keep them alive — though frequently in appalling conditions, and often at the cost of numerous deaths from malnutrition, neglect, and disease.

The Portuguese extended these early movements of Africans as slaves within the Old World across the Atlantic to Brazil during the 1570s and multiplied, by a factor of four or five, the numbers they carried to more than 10,000 per year. In the same decade, a severe drought in Angola spread chaos through the African communities in the vicinity of the Kwanza, at a moment when the Portuguese had sent troops to occupy key posts along the river and at the nearby bay of Luanda in search of rumored mountains of silver somewhere in the interior. Disappointed when they failed to find instant riches comparable to those of Spain's "Indies" — Mexico and Peru — in the New World, these armies pillaged the valleys and hills along the Kwanza. In conjunction with no-less-predatory bands of African marauders, who had joined together to survive the drought by plundering, they escalated the numbers of people seized and sold. The markets that sent Portuguese captains to Luanda to buy all these slaves appeared simultaneously in north-eastern Brazil, where Dutch investors had enabled Portuguese planters to start to assemble larger sugar plantations, and to be able to afford the rather costly slaves available from Africa, mostly Angola. Portuguese merchants, able to enter Spain's New World domains under protection they gained from the union of the Portuguese and Spanish monarchies under Philip II and Philip III (1580-1640), also began to deliver significant numbers of enslaved Africans to the cities of the mainland American colonies of Spain under the terms of special royal contracts, termed — in Spanish — *asientos*. With the development of large-scale trans-Atlantic transportation of African slaves at the end of the 16th century, these merchants extended the familiar European style of urban slavery to the Spanish cities and amplified the newer rural agricultural slave labor system of the sugar plantations of São Tomé in the Americas. They also worked out techniques of finance, loading, and carrying large numbers of people in small spaces, and feeding them that became the basis on which later merchants built a massive trans-Atlantic trade in slaves.

The Dutch, whose mercantile wealth and commercial interests in sugar refining underwrote the growth of the Brazilian plantations, then began a wide-ranging military assault on Portuguese interests on both sides of the Atlantic. The assault grew out of Protestant Dutch efforts to throw off Catholic Spanish rule in the Netherlands and was mounted under the leadership of a large company financed by mercantile interests, the Dutch West India Company. Its ships interfered with Portuguese trading all along the African coast after 1621, and by the 1630s its armies took control of the sugar-producing portions of Brazil. Company commanders then turned to the African possessions of Portugal that supplied the slaves required to work the American plantations they had seized. Beyond capturing the Portuguese fort at Mina, and its trade in gold, during the 1640s they occupied Luanda, in Angola, and its sources of slaves. They soon lost both the sugar plantations of Portuguese America and the slaving colonies in Africa to a determined counter-attack by the Brazilians and so turned their attention in the 1650s to the Caribbean, where numerous islands held promise as plantations able to compete with Portuguese-controlled sugar from Brazil. There they helped English interests on the small leeward island of Barbados to convert the local economy from marginal smallholdings producing cotton, tobacco, and indigo, worked by European family labor and indentured servants, into plantations of substantial scale, producing sugar and holding Africans as slaves to cultivate the cane by the 1680s. When the English captured the much larger island of Jamaica from the Spaniards in 1671, they acquired the base from which they, followed by the French in Saint Domingue, who had taken control of the western end of the large Spanish island of Santo Domingo, would build the huge slave-worked West Indian sugar plantation complex of the 18th century.

Spain, with its huge territories in mainland Central and northwestern South America, controlled enough Native American peasants and workers — as their numbers started to grow again after the huge human losses, perhaps 90 per cent of the pre-contact population, that had followed the introduction of European diseases there in the 16th century — that its New World cities, plantations, and mines relied only secondarily on Africans as laborers; the silver and commodity produce of the mainland allowed it to leave its remaining island possessions in the Caribbean, principally Cuba (but also Santo Domingo and Puerto Rico), outside the quickening race to grow sugar there. The English in North America had relied until the 1670s largely on settler families and indentured servants from home, although a few Dutch ships headed for New Amsterdam (later: New York City) and local shipping between the mainland and the Caribbean had brought a few Africans, some of them as slaves, to Virginia and to Charleston, in Carolina.

Sugar everywhere in the New World, however, depended entirely on slave labor from Africa. The Portuguese, attempting to restore the prosperity of their Brazilian plantations in the wake of the Dutch occupation, and the English, French, and Dutch in the Caribbean, used trading companies, protected by the award of monopoly trading rights in Africa, to finance the first phases of the transition to this classic era of sugar and slaves in the New World in the 1670s. The Dutch West India Company, which had led the attack on the possessions of the Portuguese in Africa and Brazil, had earlier demonstrated the efficacy of pooling the assets of many merchants in the form of a trading company, protected by government-chartered commercial privileges, to bear the costs and risks of transporting goods and people among three, or four, continents and over the thousands of miles of ocean separating them, under the hazardous conditions of piracy, naval conflict among the European powers, and the poor communications prevailing at the time. The Lisbon-based Portuguese company of that era (the Companhia de Guiné) was restricted to developing sources of slaves from Cacheu and Bissau, the old, and neglected, Portuguese trading posts on the Upper Guinea coast. The French established a Compagnie de Guinée and a Compagnie du Sénégal, which concentrated its trading at the mouth of the Senegal River to the north; a successor company, the Compagnie des Indes, provided most of the enslaved Africans delivered to French Louisiana in the 1720s. The London-based Royal African Company established its principal bases at forts it added to those of the Portuguese and Dutch along the Gold Coast and the area to the east. Prominent among the functions of these companies was the use of the considerable capital resources that they could raise to finance sales of the slaves they carried, on credit, to planters in the New World struggling through the initial, costly phases of investing in plantation-grown sugar. African slaves were, and long remained, among the largest of their investments.

SLAVE TRADE IN THE 18TH AND 19TH CENTURIES

Necessary as the size and the government protection these enterprises received were to lure wealthy European investors to assume the considerable risks of the Africa trade, they all failed by the 1720s. They collapsed in part because planters often could not repay the loans given them to buy the large numbers of slaves that they needed, and that the companies delivered. They failed also because smaller, independent merchants, with not only fewer attractive commercial alternatives in Europe, but also with lower overheads and able to operate at lower cost, intruded on the royal monopolies awarded the large companies from the beginning. By the beginning of the 18th century, planting interests in Bahia, the major sugar-producing region in north-eastern Brazil, developed a slave supply network of their own, largely independent of Lisbon, directly across the southern Atlantic to the eastern part of the "Mina" coast, where English and French traders had also begun to congregate, and which accordingly became known to them as the Slave Coast (or, in French the *Côte des esclaves*). In France, the independent merchants came from the port of Nantes, at the mouth of the Loire River, made the Côte des esclaves the principal slave-supply area on the Lower Guinea coast, opened new sources of slaves farther along the coast in Central Africa (the so-called Loango Coast north of the mouth of the Zaire, an area that the Portuguese in Angola were unable to protect for themselves), and accounted for the majority of the Africans landed as slaves in their main Caribbean island, Saint Domingue. The English "free traders" came from the smaller ports of the west of England, Bristol at first and then Liverpool, and followed the same commercial strategies as the French in supplanting the Royal African Company on the Slave Coast and moving on to Central Africa. Other British merchants had, for reasons unrelated to the Atlantic trade, established a strong position in England's intra-European commerce with Portugal.

Just after 1700 and the discovery of gold and diamonds in Minas Gerais in the Portuguese domains of south-central Brazil, two additional independent, but also relatively marginal, groups of merchants came to Angola in search of African laborers. Unable to compete with British-backed and often Portuguese government-favored traders with direct access to the precious metals of Brazil, Lisbon-based merchants entered the less protected market at Luanda to buy African captives, whom they sold for gold at Rio de Janeiro, the southern Brazilian port that developed to handle imports destined for the mines in Minas Gerais. To ensure their place in the valuable, and therefore highly politicized, market for Brazilian gold, merchants based in Rio developed a strategy of using Angolan sources of slaves. Like the Bahians active on the Mina coast, the merchants in Rio reduced costs by adding to the mix of goods used to buy slaves a cane brandy distilled from the otherwise valueless molasses drained off sugar in preparation for shipment to Europe. In North America, planters in Virginia and Carolina bought increasing numbers of slaves from the 1720s on. They acquired a few through their continuing regional commerce with the islands of the West Indies, but more arrived on English ships direct from Africa, seeking secondary destinations when their primary markets in the Caribbean were momentarily saturated, and on the small vessels of colonial merchants from Rhode Island, who employed the same strategy as the Brazilians: they carried West Indian molasses home to New England, distilled it there to high-proof rum, and took it to the parts of the African coast less dominated by large merchants from Europe (or sold it there to European merchants) to buy slaves. North American plantations were never more than a backwater beside the main currents of slaves being taken to the sugar plantations and mines of tropical America.

Table 1.1

Atlantic Slave Trade: Exports from Africa, 1450-1900

Years	Slaves
1450-1600	367,000
1601-1700	1,868,000
1701-1800	6,133,000
1801-1900	3,330,000
Total	11,698,000

From: Paul E. Lovejoy, "The Volume of the Atlantic Slave Trade: A Synthesis,"* Journal of African History 23 (1982)*, 500.

Thus, from the few thousand taken each year in the early Old World trade, the number of Africans transported across the Atlantic first became significant at the end of the 16th century, reaching more than 10,000 in the 1570s. When slave-grown sugar expanded to the Caribbean in the 1640s, the volume of the slave trade doubled and then, by the end of the 17th century, tripled. Throughout the 18th century, with the entry of new groups of independent traders and the rush to extract the gold of Minas Gerais after 1700, the numbers of slaves rose irregularly to peaks of 80,000 or more in the 1780s and 1790s, with the pace being broken from time to time by recurrent naval warfare among the competing European powers. The currency costs of the goods Europeans had to give for slaves in Africa declined until about the 1650s but then rose consistently throughout the 1700s by a multiple of five, in real terms. So great was the demand, and the costs became so high, that the French, by about the 1750s, and then the Brazilians not long after 1800, began to sail around the Cape of Good Hope into the Indian Ocean in search of lower-cost slaves from eastern Africa.

By 1800, the trade had entered a significant decline, and, after 1807, British-led efforts to abolish it reduced its volume from around 60,000 per year to below 50,000 by the 1840s, to around 20,000 in the 1850s, and to insignificance after that. No English possessions received significant numbers of Africans after 1807. Also in 1807, the United States prohibited further imports of slaves. Distracted by revolution at home, the French lost their main sugar-producing island, Saint Domingue, to a revolt by the slaves there after 1791, and their merchants dropped out of the trade. Wars and other concerns on the continent, including pressure from the British, repeatedly interrupted French efforts to resume it after 1815, and France finally gave it up in 1845. When covert and indirect participation in slave trade was forbidden for English traders under the British flag, the Portuguese and Brazilians moved into the African markets abandoned by the northern European traders, greatly intensified their activity in eastern Africa, and rushed continuing large numbers of captives to Brazil, where plantations growing coffee and cotton supplemented the old sugar industry as markets. The Spaniards, with assistance from slavers from the United States left with no other markets, promoted sugar, and later coffee, plantations in Cuba, making it the principal Caribbean destination for slaves in the 19th century and the last branch of the trade to decline, finally in the 1860s.

Overall, historians have good evidence to fix the total numbers Africans taken into the Atlantic at between 11 and 13 million people. More than half of them came in the 18th century. In the British colonies in North America arrivals numbered only about 600,000, 5 percent of the total Atlantic trade, and were concentrated even more in time, mostly between the 1720s and the 1770s.

AFRICA DURING THE ERA OF SLAVE SELLING

The opportunity to acquire the commodities that European slavers offered allowed Africans on the Atlantic side of the continent to build new trading networks, to accumulate significant political power, to replace old structures of community based on birth and affinity with more deeply hierarchical aggregations of slave dependents, to create new configurations of ethnic identification, and — broadly — to integrate an increasing area inland from the coasts into the Atlantic economy. The quantities of goods that Africans received for the people they sold increased even more dramatically, by a factor of two or three or more, than the currency prices that European merchants paid for them, as greater efficiencies in organizing their voyages lowered delivery costs, as increasing quantities of inexpensive Indian cottons decreased the average cost of the textiles they sold, and as improving efficiency in European manufacturing technology further turned the terms of trade in favor of the Africans. African buyers of these masses of imports thus gained significantly from the exchanges and were attracted by the profits available to deliver the millions of men, women, and children sent to the coast to be embarked there as slaves.

As fast as the trade increased, Europeans seldom went ashore beyond the shore and even less often participated actively in seizing the people enslaved. They generally limited their physical presence in Africa to small settlements on offshore islands or to brief visits to the beaches, where business was done at sites developed and maintained by their African trading partners. They constructed fortified positions onshore only along the Gold and Slave Coasts, and they did so there more to contain the slaves they held and to protect themselves against other Europeans than to defend themselves from Africans. The only arguable exception to the marginality of the European physical presence in Africa was the territory in Angola claimed by the Portuguese — a small area within the range of the guns of military fortresses at Luanda, along the lower Kwanza River, and at two or three isolated outposts in the interior, and at a small, secondary trading station to the south (Benguela). The inhabitants of the towns and trading posts in Angola, merchant families, a few owners of agricultural estates, militia officers, and the clergy, professed a certain limited loyalty to the crown in Portugal and to the limited complement of government officials posted there, but the dominant families in "Portuguese" Angola descended primarily from the African gentry and commercial interests in and around the colony, secondarily from immigrants from Brazil, and only in small part from immigrants from Europe; they were, in effect, locally born Africans, no more than nominally Portuguese in their political loyalties, entirely local in their economic strategies, and hardly distinguishable in appearance from neighbors recognized as "Africans."

People born in Europe who came to tropical Africa in the time of the slave trade, before modern medicine protected them from the fevers, parasites, and other afflictions that thrived in the tropics and slaughtered anyone lacking immunities to them, simply died: estimates are that no fewer than 40 percent of the European-born who arrived and attempted to stay in Africa survived the first year, and that about only about 10 percent would survive to normal life expectancies. Under these lethal circumstances, and given the ability and avidity of the Africans to deliver captive people efficiently to European merchants waiting offshore in their ships, or who landed only briefly to do business, they had no reason to involve themselves further. No doubt, had they tried, they would have been far too few in numbers to succeed; they certainly enjoyed no military advantage beyond the range of the cannon they carried on their ships. African traders and politicians, jealous of their own profitable trade routes, would have forcibly and promptly expelled them.

Doing business on the beaches, the Europeans introduced greater and greater quantities of goods over the years. While they traded in the thoroughly commercialized economies of the Atlantic and calculated their gains in terms of currency prices prevailing in Europe — milreis for the Portuguese and Brazilians, pounds sterling for the English, francs in the case of the French, florins among the Dutch, and so on — the Africans lived in economic systems that reckoned the value of things not in terms of their potential for exchange but rather in their possession, for their usefulness, or utility. The Africans calculated equivalencies directly as quantities, often without attributing mediating proxy-values in currencies: so many measures of grain equalled one chicken, so many guns given for an adult male slave. And, since the utility values underlying these equivalencies were inherent, and stable, properties of the items involved, they did not vary in quantity as demand and supplies changed. African buyers of goods and European sellers everywhere worked out a quantity, or assortment, bargaining system that allowed each side to calculate value in its own terms while simultaneously dealing with the other. The principal abstract units of exchange were thus physical quantities thought of as fixed: iron "bars," "ounces" of gold, "bundles" of goods, and so on, depending on the area of the coast. Traders increased and decreased the quantities of goods, or slaves, that made up the actual exchanges and varied the contents according to what was asked or offered; alternatively, they could alter the size of the measure employed, so that the length of the "strings" of beads in the "bundle" grew longer when few slaves were available while the number of strings remained the same. European merchants effectively learned to trade in terms set by the Africans in their utility-based value systems. The Africans also sold ivory in significant quantities, and on some parts of the coast also gold, aromatic gums, hard tropical woods, animal pelts, including cattle hides, beeswax, and other commodities in addition to slaves — perhaps 10 percent of the total.

Africans bought primarily textiles, in vast quantities including elegant French brocades and velvets and Chinese silks for elite consumption but mostly patterned English woolens and northern European linens and, increasingly throughout the 18th century, brightly colored cottons as well as a strong indigo-dyed blue-black cotton cloth from India; by European currency prices, textiles accounted for more than half the value of Africans' imports. They also purchased spirits — American rums, French brandies, and English and Dutch gin — and Portuguese and French wines; alcohol in all forms probably amounted to another 20 percent, again as the Europeans calculated worth in currencies. Still calculating in European values, "metalwares" of many sorts ranked next, with copper rods and bracelets, brass pans, actual bars of pig iron, and a great variety of knives, nails, and other finished metal hardware figuring prominently. Flintlock muskets, manufactured especially for the Africa trade, and gunpowder probably accounted for around 10 percent, by currency values, of Africans' imports; the numbers of the guns purchased — to restate this figure according to the African manner of counting — probably rose into the millions. These firearms attracted a great deal of criticism from opponents of the trade, who alleged that they exacerbated violence in Africa; some of the proponents of the trade also objected because guns in the hands of Africans also possibly endangered traders present in their lands. The remainder of Africa's imports consisted of a great variety of other manufactured wares, prominently including Venetian glass beads, and — particularly on the Slave Coast — billions of the distinctive small shells of a marine mollusk found only in the Indian Ocean, known as cowries.

Looking again at these exchanges in terms of what Africans bought, and their utilities in African systems of valuation, rather than only at the captives they sold, suggests something of their reasons for giving up human beings — the basis of all wealth and power in Africa — for what, to the Europeans, seemed like cheap, even frivolous, trinkets. Africans may have used the muskets and powder that so alarmed Europeans to capture the people they sold, and while the weapons certainly contributed frightening noise, flames, and smoke to the violence, they may also have employed them as much, or more, for hunting and for protection. If control of a large and diverse following was a pervasive economic (and political) strategy, they would have prized guns because they frightened rather than because they killed. Iron bars, in some areas, replaced African iron-smelting industries that were running low on trees of the types optimal for the charcoal they needed to maintain the high furnace temperatures necessary; imports thus protected agriculture, since the continent's metallurgical output was largely hoes and implements, and specialized the iron industry in the forging of finished tools; imported knives, particularly heavy machetes for chopping, axe-heads, and other implements put metal tools in the hands of farmers and craftsmen who would not otherwise have had them to work with. The alcohol, while abused by some, served others as controlled means of entertaining dependents, of communicating with the spiritual forces in their lives, of firing the courage of soldiers about to enter battle, and of bringing collaborating groups together in somewhat inebriated unity.

Of great underlying significance to most Africans were the humble cowrie shells, the beads that seemed only decorative to the Europeans, and the copper goods, all of which Africans treated primarily as stores of wealth and as mediums of exchange: in short, as currencies. Although many of the less distinctive imported textiles were simply worn by ordinary people and consumed, Africans also hoarded the finer textiles they bought as additional stores of wealth, wore them as objects of ostentatious display, and exchanged them for people, not only the captives they sold to Europeans as slaves but also for women whom they kept as wives and for others retained as clients and other sorts of dependents; imported cloth, too, functioned as currency in the social economy of claiming rights in people as the continent's primary standard of wealth.

In African terms, then, the Atlantic trade offered gains — beyond the material productivity of iron, or direct consumption and investment of textiles they imported; advantage consisted principally in exchanging the imports for the fundamental form of wealth in much of Africa: people, and the ability to control them. Or, to phrase the gains in more personal terms, imports allowed the people who got them first to distribute them to others in return for respect and authority. Some of these increases in power and numbers remained after disposing of unwanted individuals — captives taken on a field of battle who could not otherwise have been kept alive, troublesome or unpopular youth already at the point of being driven out of their home communities, political rivals who offended others more powerful than they, criminals judged guilty of crimes by political authorities, or poor, despised, or dependent people too weak to resist outright victimization by others — for goods that the captor or seller could use to acquire the loyalty or services of more productive replacements, or new followers in greater numbers or with needed talents to contribute. A community elder might thus contrive to dispose of an overly assertive nephew in return for cloth, copper rods, and brandy in quantities that permitted him to buy a young slave woman as a third wife, to give one illustrative example; or, a blacksmith could expand his production by selling iron for the cast-off relatives of his customers, exchanging them for textiles that he sent off with traders who would bring him young men whom he would train to provide the unskilled labor for himself and his sons who practiced the secrets of his craft.

In other cases, the forced march toward the beach started with crop failures following a season of insufficient rainfall. Villagers facing starvation after inadequate harvests would disperse to find food, some seeking shelter with relatives but others foraging alone, where they were vulnerable to kidnapping; in extreme droughts, whole communities turned to raiding to support themselves and took captives among the plunder they seized to survive. Starving families, to preserve the community, would sell children to buyers who, whatever other fate might follow from the sale, at least might feed them. It was all too easy to consider such acts as giving them up for adoption — without being able to influence how a guardian in these circumstances might treat, or dispose of, his wards; the alternatives were starvation at home, or infanticide. In the most extreme periods of drought, gangs of bandits preyed systematically on farmers living in the better-watered valleys, seizing their wives and children for sale. Quiet, domestic violence, often linked to family indebtedness, similarly left relatives, again frequently children, abandoned as slaves.

The possible hazards that could turn a daughter, an unlucky soldier, a failed trader alone and far from home, a women fetching water from the river, a youth tending his family's goats, into a captive, helpless in the hands of strangers, were endless and were multiplied many times over as individual human greed and rationalization in the face of profound moral dilemmas were stimulated by the opportunities offered by the presence of European slavers at the coast. On the one hand, people committed such acts as these in defense of the solidarity of their communities; intense loyalties at home lessened the sense of moral obligation to strangers. On the other hand, betrayal within the group also eroded the very bonds meant, or professed to be preserved. The tendency of the Europeans to offer their trade goods on credit, giving them to African buyers in anticipation of repayment in captives later on, brought men of no particular community standing, and therefore with relatively little to lose from engaging in disreputable tactics, into slaving and exacerbated the violations of conventional social and political morality.

Time after time, thugs systematically took advantage of opportunities like these, even organizing themselves as gangs that made their living from kidnappings and outright attacks on villages, particularly in the sudan, where domineering brigands surrounded themselves with gangs of slave mercenaries and used horses to gain overpowering advantage in such raiding. Elsewhere, as — for example — east of the lower Niger River, mafia-like gangs of violence-prone con men made the rounds of farming villages to offer justice, probably of the variety that was difficult to refuse, by taking local disputants before a mysterious "oracle" that they presented as a kind of supreme judicial authority in the region. This oracular operation in effect resolved such conflicts by deporting the parties adjudged guilty, often along with many of their relatives; the losers became the property of those who ran the oracle and soon found themselves being marched toward the coast. Elsewhere, warlords established themselves by sheer force and extorted people from every village within their reach. The armies of the great states occasionally met each other on the field of battle, where victors captured and sold, rather than killing, the vanquished. Some political regimes took slaving beyond such opportunistic strategies and survived by systematically raiding populations living beyond the areas they claimed as subject to their authority. The people subjected to such violence fled into defensible, but often less fertile or productive, lairs, where they found themselves unable to support the large numbers of refugees clustered there. Hunger in turn compelled them to move out to raid farmers and other exposed populations. Such conflicts as these emerged from the ongoing tensions of Africa's politics, but the goods from the Atlantic, and perhaps the firearms, added to their intensity and prolonged them, increased the numbers of their victims, saved some from assassination, and sent a portion of the survivors toward the coast. Even the droughts, though frequently stimulated by meteorological anomalies, had more a more devastating impact on populations under stresses of the sort associated with slaving.

In the long run, the people who gained most from the trade organized themselves as merchants specialized in the trade to and from the coast. In central Africa, dozens and hundreds of small traders, each accompanied by wives and younger relatives, ventured out in caravans of dozens, and eventually hundreds of people through the sparsely populated plains in search of captives to buy in remote centers of population. Specialized merchants organized their own caravans, manned by slaves, between the coast and major trading centers inland. The great waterways — the lower Niger and its delta, the Zaire in central Africa, the Senegal and the Gambia, as well as lagoons all along the coast of Lower Guinea — were dotted with huge dugout canoes filled with paddlers, supplies, commodities, and slaves. Taking their profits in the form of people, often by buying and retaining slaves, these merchants assembled whole new trading communities and invented new social institutions to control them; in the Niger Delta, for example, successful traders managed villages composed of populous wards termed "houses," largely inhabited by slaves and organized to man the large trading canoes used on the rivers. The ancestral farming communities organized around core groups of kinspeople began to add slaves, whom they put to work growing crops beyond what they would themselves consume, for sale to neighbors, or even distant markets in towns, specialized in commerce.

In the aggregate, the "profits" of the Atlantic trade in Africa thus took the human form of people uprooted, often violently, and resettled as slaves around the large, powerful courts of new states or employed in new commercialized sectors of the region's economies and societies. In a less abstract sense, one of the major changes of the era was the reorientation of people's lives toward trading with the coast. This new commercial focus not only took the form of traders organizing whole new villages and transportation networks but also led the prosperous — and therefore increasingly numerous — merchant interests to assume positions of influence in the established political systems. In kingdom after kingdom, particularly near the coast, families from the commercial sector replaced factions who had derived their power from older sources in aristocratic lineage, in agricultural land, or in control of mineral resources and techniques of working them. In the extreme cases, the new commercial groups grew large enough and became sufficiently specialized to dominate whole territories, develop their own ways of living, and sometimes speak distinctive dialects; they acquired a sense of separate identity comparable to the older ethnic communities of the continent. These shifts toward more mercantilistic regimes gathered momentum particularly as the volume of the trade peaked in the last third of the 18th century.

Map 1.3, ***Africa, ca. 18th century.***
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The rise of African traders doing business with the Europeans, the outbreaks of violence that followed, political restructuring, and the concentrations of slaves and others in new commercial institutions tended to follow a single broad pattern over the centuries of exchanges with the Atlantic. Slaving gained momentum first, at the end of the 16th and in the 17th centuries, along coasts adjacent to the sites where the earliest, commodity phases of the Atlantic trade had appeared, and then failed. Thus, in the early 1500s, the Portuguese bought malagueta pepper, kola nuts, and other forest products in the wetter parts of Upper Guinea but opportunistically began to purchase captives taken in the adjacent drier zones near the desert, where old states, weakened from years of drought there, fell into conflict among themselves. In central Africa at the end of the 16th century, European Portuguese bought a few slaves whom the kings of Kongo seized in their wars of expansion, but planters from São Tomé stimulated systematic slaving in the ecologically more fragile territories to the south along the Kwanza, in what became Angola. The principal early Atlantic commerce in Lower Guinea was gold from the Gold Coast, until slaving gathered momentum in regions to the east that lacked similar mineral resources, along what became the Slave Coast. The same pattern had prevailed centuries earlier in the Saharan trade from the sudan: the western states, like Mali, with access to gold to buy horses had stimulated less well- endowed competitors to the east, particularly around Lake Chad, to rely more heavily on slaves to import arms.

From those roots, slaving spread simultaneously outward along the coasts and into the interior in the second half of the 17th century, particularly in Lower Guinea and Angola. As the stimulus of the trade provoked domestic rivalries, raiders and traders created new states, which in turn became the frameworks around which their rulers and subjects built new ethnic identities. Typically, the trade allowed weak authorities in older kingdoms near the coast to consolidate their power internally at first, and frequently also to mount attacks on their neighbors; the state of Allada (or Ardra) near the Slave Coast grew in this way, as did several Akan-speaking kingdoms just inland from the Gold Coast. The mani Kongo south of the lower Zaire converted to Catholicism and used the support of the Portuguese to create a new Christian aristocracy in their kingdom. In every case, the peoples inland, at whose expense these first-generation states grew, armed and organized to defend themselves and then created new polities from the heterogenous crowds of refugees they attracted; they consolidated their new states by integrating still more peoples whom they then went on to conquer. The famous large military states of 18th-century West Africa, Asante behind the Gold Coast and Dahomey inland from Ardra on the Slave Coast, took shape in this way at the end of the 17th century. The warlike Ngola state appeared south of Kongo in the 16th century under similar circumstances, and even more militaristic, mobile warrior bands, known as Imbangala, roamed and raided the hills above the Kwanza River with the armies of the Portuguese from the 1580s to the 1630s. The successors of the bandit leaders settled down by the 1650s as rulers of most of the African states surrounding Portuguese Angola and became suppliers of the slaves sent down to Luanda.

The merchants who sold the slaves on which the military aristocrats in each of these polities depended had to penetrate regions still farther from the coast to find captives, once the heirs of the violent founders of such states settled in and claimed political legitimacy. Bandits thus found themselves responsible for protecting — and not selling — the people they claimed to rule. In central Africa, traders' ventures into the interior stimulated new rounds of conflict off to the east and — eventually — political consolidation to bring order out of the chaos created; the Lunda state in the center of the continent there was the principal 18th-century result. In western Africa, merchants working inland to the north of Asante and Dahomey reached the established commercial and slaving networks south of the Sahara Desert. Since towns and traders there already drew captives from existing sources, contact with the coast did not occasion immediate economic or political reorganization comparable to that south of the forest, but the added stimulus to raiding tended to discredit the political regimes involved and to drive them toward harsh forms of military domination. In Senegambia, traders from the coast tapped the long-standing north-south commodity exchanges to and from the desert and consequently did not supply large numbers of captives for sale to the Atlantic. However, in the relatively remote area along the upper Niger River, Bambara-speaking peoples organized a predatory slaving regime at Segu and became principal providers of captives sent to both the desert and the Atlantic in the 18th century. Afflicted peasant farmers from time to time sought protection beneath the banners of Muslim clerics, who drew on the religious law of Islam, which forbade Muslims from enslaving other believers, to declaim against the injustices. They occasionally roused their growing followings to revolt against existing regimes in religiously inspired "holy" wars, or *jihads.*

These sequences of local events, viewed on the largest geographical scales and over the entire three centuries of growing trade, formed moving waves of widespread and systematic, often state-sponsored, violence in both western and central Africa. The violence touched most of the western half of the continent at one time or another but in any single region lasted no more than a generation or two. It started near the Atlantic coast in the 16th and early 17th centuries, then moved inland as the volume of export rose at the end of the 17th century, and finally advanced toward the heart of central Africa and into the sudanic latitudes of western Africa as the trade reached its 18th-century climax. As raiders thrived and violence grew in any one neighborhood, most of its victims fled, forming refugee communities, and others were captured and sold; in only a few areas could populations bear the intensity of these disturbances for more than a generation or two. And so the violence died down, leaving abandoned fields and villages behind. As the wave passed, disturbances broke out anew farther from the coast, and farmers and merchants, with slaves acquired from the war zones inland, moved into the vacated territory, repopulating the land, forming new communities, and working out new ethnic identities. Where the wave had not yet reached, aristocrats of the old political order continued to rule. During the turbulence of its passing, warlords waxed powerful. In the relative calm after these storms, merchants built new states based on brokering the trade in slaves flowing from the violence then flaring farther inland and taking their profits in slaves retained from the caravans of captives moving through their domains.

All these forced movements of people had consequences that can be described in demographic terms, within Africa as well as beyond the continent. Outright depopulation — abandoned villages, human skeletons along the paths — was largely local and temporary. Overall population levels also rose and fell with climatic and epidemiological causes, and they varied as much from these causes, and sometimes inseparably from them, as from deaths attributable in direct ways to systematic slaving — in wars, among the captives being marched toward the coast, or from those finally sold and sent to the Americas. Africans responded creatively to the challenges of surviving in the midst of turmoil. They fled when times got bad, and they organized new states and created new communities in their own defense. They fed themselves by working harder, buying slaves to grow still more crops, and by adding New World cultigens — maize (Indian corn) in the grain-growing areas and manioc, or cassava, a hardy tuber adaptable to environments from the forest to the desert-edge — to their agricultural technology. In falling back on these high-calorie but less nutritious staples they sacrificed variety and balance in their diets, but eating them at least kept families alive. The demographic pressures of the export trade, although the lack of quantitative evidence as to their extent leaves them beyond any precise calculation, were stronger in Central Africa than in West Africa and may have exceeded the overall capability of populations there to reproduce themselves during the peak of slave exports at the end of the 18th century.

Further limiting the overall demographic effects on Africa, men outnumbered the women by a ratio of nearly two to one among the people herded onto the ships of the Europeans. The tendency to sell mostly men meant that Africans retained nearly twice as many females as males, and the reproductive capacities of these women in Africa would have raised overall birth rates there. The powerful African men in charge of the trade thus gained more women as wives or sexual partners and subjected them to greater control, so that they contributed children to the families and followings that constituted wealth. In this way, and through populating new states and commercial networks with slave mercenaries, retainers, clients, and workers, Africans very likely kept more of the people taken captive, as slaves, than they sold. This observation merely restates in demographic terms the economic pattern, that Africans who gained from selling people into the Atlantic trade took their profits in the fundamental form of wealth in Africa, that is, in other people held in circumstances of greater dependency and subjugation.

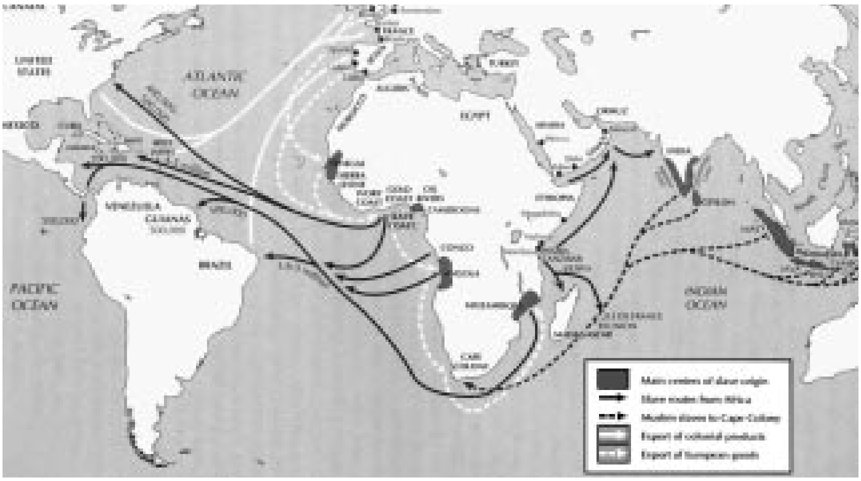
Uprootings and relocations of women and children within the continent, and their resettlement as slaves, were more significant for Africa than the aggregate losses of young men. That is to say, in still another way, that slavery increased markedly in Africa during and, in direct ways, as a consequence of, trading with Europeans; it is also to notice that the majority of the slaves in Africa were women and children, and that they were concentrated near the coast, among the mercantile-oriented communities that profited most from trade with the Atlantic. Their weakness, as isolated newcomers without kin to support them against older, powerful males, reinforced the patriarchal tendencies of African cultures. Some modern observers have attempted to contrast such slavery as "assimilative" and even benign, as against the racial exclusivity and harshness of slavery in many parts of the Americas (including the United States South), but the uprooting, domination, and dishonor of lives devoid of the community support and participation basic to self-realization in Africa made enslavement there hardly less burdensome than the captivity of those taken abroad.

With the underlying reproductive capacities of the population remaining thus established, the patrons and masters of these women were in positions to remove — by the techniques described earlier, in other contexts — teen-age males as they reached the age at which adolescent males everywhere rebel against authority at home. These "prime" youths were also the objects of greatest European demand for hard labor in the fields and mines of the Americas, and so they accounted for the majority of the slaves embarked. The girls grew up to become mothers of future slaves in Africa. Pressures on Africa's populations from slaving appeared among the people sold as growing proportions of women and, particularly in the 19th century, as steadily increasing percentages of younger girls and boys.

Some historians have painted Africa during the era of the Atlantic trade in hues much more somber than those depicted here. It is tempting to translate the offensiveness of any form of slave-trading or slavery that people feel today into exaggerations of the violence of the trade, of the numbers of people sold, or of long-term damage to Africa in the form of impoverishment or intensification of social and political hierarchies. Modern resentment at human suffering sometimes seeks outlets in interpreting the past, seeking to assign blame to one side or another; a not-uncommon example influencing uninformed images of the slave trade in Africa denies both slavery in Africa — or ignores its harshness — and the active parts that Africans played in capturing and selling people there. Even efforts to refute racial stereotypes can emphasize the hardships of the times in ways that inadvertently make Africans appear hardly more than passive victims, or as gullible people who traded their own folk for worthless trinkets. These attempts to appreciate Africa, however well-meaning, rest on the erroneous assumption that Africans then thought like Americans today, or Europeans. This essay instead seeks to explain African and European behavior, cruel and even irrational as it may have been by modern standards on both sides, as intelligible within the often tragic range of human rationality and irrationality, anywhere, or at any time.

THE 'MIDDLE PASSAGE'

Although Europeans approached the Atlantic economy as a business proposition, and purchased and transported Africans in that self-interested, even inhumane spirit, the men, and women and children, they carried experienced it in profoundly human terms of fear, suffering, and death. From the perspective of the Europeans, the profits of the voyage hinged on bringing enough of their suffering cargo across the ocean alive that sale of the survivors would cover the considerable costs they had invested in doing so. For the Europeans, the "middle passage" across the Atlantic — so-called, perhaps, because it was the second of the three long legs in the triangular voyage of a vessel out from Europe to Africa, west across the ocean to America with the slave aboard, and then back through the North Atlantic to Europe — but also, from the point of view of the captives, the passage between their march to the coast in Africa and their resettlement as slaves in the New World — was the most dangerous and chancy part of the venture, the part where survival of the slaves made, or broke, its investors.



Map 1.4, ***Main currents of the Atlantic trade to and from Africa, 16th to 18th centuries. (Copyright ©1994 by St. Martin's Press, Inc. From:*** **Africans in the Americas** ***by Conniff/Davis. Reprinted with permission of Bedford/St. Martin's Press, Inc.)***

At the 18th-century height of the trade, merchants in Liverpool, Nantes, or Lisbon prepared for the "Africa trade" by assembling partnerships that would distribute its considerable risks among several investors. Some contributed goods thought to be in demand on the part of the African coast to which the ship would be directed; others saw an opportunity of disposing of surpluses, spoiled goods, or inventories with no better market. Others might share the cost of the ship and its preparation for the voyage, or "outfit." Captains and supercargoes (that is, the business agents in charge of the cargo, trading operations, and accounting records) sometimes specialized in slaving and would hire on in return for a share in the profits of the voyage. Similar combinations of interests lay behind the voyages that sailed from American ports, Newport, Rhode Island, or Bahia and Rio de Janeiro, though with a greater interest held by planters interested in disposing of the by-products of their primary production of sugar meant for sale in Europe. In general, investors were hoping to realize their returns in Europe in cash and to put as little actual money — as opposed to goods, equipment, or personal services — into the voyage as possible; Africans, after all, paid in enslaved people, who would work without wages in the Americas, typically for planters who had ample lands and cattle and sugar and slaves but little money. The slaving voyage was a highly indirect and uncertain way of making money, with greatly delayed returns at best.

Some of the sailing ships employed in the trade were specially built for carrying large numbers of people, with low-ceilinged decks constructed between the hold (the deep, often damp space at the bottom of the hull,) and the open top deck from which the crew maneuvered the ship and its rigging. Most of the craft employed in the trade, however, were general merchantmen, two- or three-masted sailing vessels, often past their prime and sent off to the tropical waters off African shores as a way of ending their careers, since "guinea" worms encountered there burrowed into the wooden hulls and would render them unseaworthy usually after only a few voyages. Some were as small as 30 or 40 tons capacity, not large even by the standards of the time, which meant that they would be equipped to carry perhaps a hundred slaves; a few giants could board 700 or even 800 captives. The majority of ships were concentrated in the range of 150 to 200 tons and carried 300 to 400 slaves. Smaller vessels were uneconomic and dangerous on the open ocean; the largest ones took too long to complete their voyages and thus exposed crew and slaves to delays and thus to risks of disease while they lingered just offshore in Africa. Slavers carried crews larger than normal for merchant vessels of comparable size, since extra hands were needed to replace sailors who died and to control the slaves, or to defend against insurrection. Sailors knew of the deadly reputation of the African coast — the "white man's grave," as it was known — and might have to be impressed — kidnapped or shanghaied — for a voyage headed there, or their lives would have become so desperate that they found its hazards preferable to the alternatives open to them. The better-managed ships also carried "surgeons," that is medical practitioners, sometimes trained in European scientific medicine and sometimes not, and also African assistants skilled in the healing techniques of Africa that the slaves understood.

The ships sailed out from Europe, or the Americas, with their holds filled with the wares in demand in Africa. Some, particularly if food was known to be in short supply on the portion of the coast to which they were destined, also held provisions for the slaves to be carried on the second leg of the voyage. They also brought the irons needed to chain their captives and other equipment specialized for restraining reluctant, potentially rebellious passengers. Most vessels headed for well-known embarkation points, Luanda, Cabinda or Molembo on the Loango Coast, Bonny or Brass or other towns in the creeks of the Niger Delta, Ouidah (Whydah) or one of the smaller ports on the Slave Coast, any of the several forts on the Gold Coast (Cape Coast, Axim, Elmina itself, etc.), the rivers of Upper Guinea, St. James fort on Bunce island at the mouth of the Gambia River, or St. Louis or Gorée near the mouth of the Senegal. Others aimed at no fixed destination but rather "coasted" from point to point, picking up a few slaves at each stop, following rumors of advantageous trade heard from other ships that they encountered as they went.

Upon reaching the coast, the crew offloaded the bales and crates filled with merchandise, often employing skilled African canoemen to penetrate the dangerous surf that prevailed along the open coasts of Lower Guinea, and set about converting the ship to carry its intended cargo of humans. These preparations involved buying and storing the food and — particularly — the water necessary to sustain several hundred people at sea for anywhere from four to 12 weeks; these supplies were critical, and their adequacy depended on assuming that the ship would complete its passage without serious delay. Several large ships attempting to buy provisions simultaneously at the same place could strain even a large port's ability to supply food. The crew also built in the low slave decks above the hold, mounted the chains, and strengthened the hatch to prevent escapes. Readying the ship in these ways might take weeks, or months. While work proceeded on the vessel, the supercargo, captain, and other officers negotiated the purchase of their human cargo on shore, often buying slaves individually or in small groups, and made arrangements to have the people they purchased kept there in walled pens, called barracoons in English (from a Portuguese word for a temporary shelter set up to accommodate trade, a "stand" at a trade fair). Facilities of this sort were usually provided by African merchants and located where food and water were available, but European traders maintained slave pens of their own at the forts along the Gold and Slave Coasts and at Luanda.

The profitability of the voyage depended on the captain's or supercargo's skill in driving advantageous bargains, and success required great deftness and intimate knowledge of the distinctive commercial practices of the coast. Inexperienced traders found themselves badly taken by canny, and often sharp, African customers, or stuck with colors or styles of merchandise unsalable in markets that were characterized by strong and volatile consumer preferences. Captains of competing ships sometimes exchanged portions of the goods they had brought with one another, in order to complete the exacting, diverse assortments of merchandise necessary to make up the "ounce," "bar," or "bundle" defined by the changing conditions of supply and demand that they encountered. Rhode Islanders, for example, supplied British slavers with the rum they lacked in return for textiles brought cheaply direct from England; in the same way, Bahians provided tobacco that Europe-based traders on the Mina (Slave) Coast needed, and Rio ships bought textiles from traders coming to Luanda from Portugal with the cane brandy they brought from Brazil. These lengthy preparations made it important to minimize the costs of managing the slaves they held while they waited, and so conditions in the barracoons were barely adequate to sustain the lives of the slaves held in them. However, since the fundamental commercial interest of the Europeans lay in keeping the slaves alive, excessive cruelty or neglect dangerous to their survival portended failure of the voyage.

When the ship finally lay in readiness and most of the slaves were purchased, boarding began. The captives were loaded in canoes or small boats and taken out to the large vessel lying at anchor well offshore. Along parts of the Lower Guinea Coast, the dangerous surf made this operation another preserve of the skilled African boatmen, and a dangerous one for all concerned; in Upper Guinea and in central Africa, trade tended to be sheltered in bays, where the smooth surface of the water lessened the risks of a canoe capsizing, with loss of all or most of those aboard. On the ship, the crew awaited their prisoners in a state of tense alertness, since the degree of mobility allowed the slaves, as they were propelled over the high gunwales and then pushed down through the open hatch to the dark deck below, increased risks of accident or resistance. Boarding might take days, and sometimes weeks or months, in areas lacking developed onshore facilities for provisioning or for holding the slaves. Ships taking on captives in this slow fashion, or those buying at several points along the coast, found themselves delayed for long periods with holds partially filled, their slaves sickening and starting to die, and provisions being steadily consumed by the survivors.

The accent then fell on speed, since the greater the delays in boarding or purchasing the slaves, and the longer the passage lasted, the more rapidly mortality increased. Food and water spoiled and ran short. Diseases incubating in the bodies of the slaves, particularly contagious ones like tuberculosis, smallpox, or measles, could devastate a cargo. Members of the crew sickened and died as well, leaving the remaining sailors shorthanded to manage the slaves and the ship. Ships becalmed in the low latitudes of the doldrums, which all voyages headed from tropical Africa to the Caribbean or North America had to cross, not only subjected their captives to prolonged hot, fetid, humid conditions on the slave deck but also became stinking time bombs of disease. Smallpox, often brought on board by slaves captured in times of drought and distress in their homelands, could sweep through the holds of the ships with devastating effect. Chronically, dysenteries acquired from contaminated water, and then communicated through the feces that accumulated in the slave deck, struck the slaves with such force that they impressed captains as the single greatest contributor to mortality. The slavers also believed that Africans died from an inexplicable lethargy, from which even forced feeding could not rescue them; despondency, even passively suicidal resignation, and shock from the horrors to which the slaves were exposed contributed to such despair, but starvation and dehydration surely played significant roles as well. Although some vessels completed the middle passage without a single reported death (if their records can be believed), losses to mortality typically ran in the vicinity of 10 to 15 percent by the 18th century, though a small proportion of voyages on which epidemics broke out, or that encountered abnormal delays, could lose 25 to 50 percent of their cargoes, and in exceptional cases, even more.

Upon making landfall in the Americas, captains, crews, and cargo faced still further delays, while the officers of the ports where they arrived quarantined slave ships out of not entirely unreasonable fears of the contagion they harbored. While waiting in the port for permission to land, they could at least take fresh water and supplies on board. Such delays provided time to clean up the surviving slaves and to restore them to whatever semblance of health and vitality could be achieved. Still, the haggard, emaciated, exhausted, ill, and frightened people, covered with oozing sores, prodded onto the deck when clearance finally was received struck observers as often little more than living skeletons. In a few places, such as the James and other deep rivers along the Chesapeake Bay in North America, captains sold their cargoes directly to planters with lands along the rivers' banks. Elsewhere, the slaves approached their new lives through the towns of the Americas — Bridgetown in Barbados, Kingston in Jamaica, Charleston in South Carolina, Veracruz and Cartagena in the Spanish mainland territories and Havana in Cuba, Port-au-Prince in Saint Domingue, Santo Domingo and San Juan in Puerto Rico, and in Brazil Bahia, Pernambuco, and Rio de Janeiro, not to mention dozens of other smaller ports and islands.

In these towns, merchants to whom the cargoes had been consigned took possession of the slaves and handled sale of them to their initial owners in the New World. Depending on the port of arrival in the Americas, these merchants, called "factors," employed a variety of selling strategies. In some places, they announced an offering price, accepted bids at that level for the slaves in the cargo who could bring it, then set another, lower price and sold the remaining slaves they could at it, and worked on down until all the least valued of the slaves had been disposed of; elsewhere, buyers initiated offers on individuals and small lots of the slaves in competition with one another, and the merchants sold to the highest bidders. On still other occasions, the whole group of slaves was confined in a walled yard, aspiring buyers were admitted, and at a given signal they were permitted to "scramble" for the individual slaves they preferred by laying their hands on them and marching them to the gate. Whatever the commercial arrangements, merchants uniformly tended to conceal the slaves' physical defects, exaggerated distinctive characteristics of what they naively understood as biologically determined "tribal" backgrounds of the slaves, and presented them naked for intimate physical examination in the most degrading imaginable circumstances.

These sales concluded the "middle passage" of the slaving voyage, but from the point of view of its investors in Europe they left unresolved the problems of realizing the proceeds from sale of the slaves back at home. Captains and merchants in the Americas often sold their cargoes of slaves on credit, taking payment in the form of commercial notes, or "bills of exchange," given by the planters promising payment in currency in London or Paris or Lisbon or Liverpool at some specified future point in time. The planters expected to make good on these promises by selling, in Europe, months later, the sugar or tobacco or cotton that they expected to employ the slaves they had bought to cultivate and harvest. These conventional business arrangements typically meant that the ships themselves were sold in the Americas or returned in ballast to Europe with the returns from the venture carried in the form of planters' bills. It was not an easy matter to rehabilitate a ship that had carried slaves for other cargoes.

The merchant sponsors of the venture in Europe could either sell the bills they received at once, at a discounted rate, or hold them in the hope that the coming harvest, often shipped on other vessels engaged in a shuttle, that is, directly out and back, trade between Europe and America, would sell at prices high enough to enable the planter to cover their full value. Only in the Spanish colonies and in Brazil during the mining boom, where slavers could hope for payment directly in silver or gold, could they aim to take their profits in more secure, prompt forms. By the time that a ship had been outfitted in its home port in Europe, had made its way to Africa, had lingered for months on the coast, and had completed the "middle passage," and after the additional delays expectable in collecting from indebted planters, at least a year had elapsed under the best of circumstances; often two years passed, and less fortunate investors had to endure delays of three years; in the hundreds of total losses to piracy, naval war, shipwreck, disastrous mortality, or slave revolt, the returns never materialized.

Profits in a trade of this complexity, involving some 30,000 or so voyages, under greatly varying circumstances, over a span of four centuries ranged from total loss to returns well above those prevailing in less risky forms of trade. Stories of the isolated instances of slavers who struck it rich in a single voyage surely circulated more widely than did word of the more common but humiliating voyages that ended in ruin. Traders valued goods on the African coasts at 100 percent above their currency costs of purchase, but, of course, such valuations were more an accounting convention than a realizable gain, since currency rarely circulated there — although Bahians sometimes used gold to buy foreign goods they needed to complete assortments along the Slave Coast. In any case, gains of this order only started to cover the considerable expenses of the voyage. Acquisition costs of slaves in Africa, stated in terms of what traders had paid for goods in Europe, sounded low also in comparison to the nominal currency values of the same slaves in the Americas. But these optimistic expectations of gains were stated in terms of a very untypical male in prime physical condition, made no allowance for mortality, and did not anticipate losses and delays in collecting the returns in Europe. Rumored rich returns of this imaginary sort aside, the hazards were too many, Africa and the Americas too remote to influence advantageously, and captains and crews too unreliable for circumstances to turn out optimally on very many occasions. But the rumors of easy riches attracted no shortage of naive beginners, traders down on their luck and desperate for a means to recover financially, and nervy speculators; large, experienced, cautious merchants had better odds of success and, by limiting their exposure to slaving amidst diverse other, safer investments, they could earn consistently respectable returns. Overall, profits from slaving would not have exceeded what economists call "economic rent," the general rate of interest and profit throughout the economy, perhaps 10 per cent per annum in the European economy in these centuries. It would have required a fair number of very successful voyages to produce this average, balancing out the much greater number of failures and break-even ventures.

The 18th-century structures of the mature slave trade sketched here were the results of three centuries of earlier experimentation, hard lessons learned from the failures, and gradual improvements in the techniques of financing the trade and carrying its slaves. The 16th-century Portuguese, who had worked out the first ways of sustaining supporting modest numbers of captives at sea for extended periods of time, had barely managed to bring them back alive to nearby Europe; they had, fortuitously, found themselves with empty holds on the return from ventures out to Africa to sell bulky commodities for high-value but low-volume gold. Their intra-African trade before the 1570s — including São Tomé — involved distances even shorter. Mortality was nonetheless high. It had required the commercial wealth and sophistication of the Dutch to develop regular trans-Atlantic transport of slaves to Brazil in that decade. Simultaneous reductions in the cost of slaves in Angola, during the chaos of the drought and warfare there, then, and opportunities to sell slaves for Spanish silver elsewhere in the Americas may have provided the extra margin of profit, on the return voyage to Europe, needed to recover from losses to mortality in the early years of the "middle passage"; those may have regularly reached 25 percent or more. The Dutch acquired a reputation for improved sailing technique, provisioning, and discipline in the first half of the 17th century, which the English and the French then adapted to their own trans-Atlantic slaving, under the chartered companies, in the later decades of the 1600s. The free traders of the 18th century invested the gains from falling acquisition costs for goods in Europe and rising currency prices of slaves in the Americas in further improvements, though they also paid more in goods for the captives they purchased in Africa. They also worked out more efficient strategies for feeding and disciplining their cargoes, settled on the optimal size of the vessels they sent, and improved the organization of trade among themselves along the coasts of Africa; adding low-cost American cane brandies to the mix of goods sold also contributed to overall profitability, particularly in Angola, and they supplemented gains from slaving with gold bought there from Brazilians and, later, silver from ships from the New World colonies of Spain. The English began to inoculate their slave cargoes against smallpox in the 1760s, and after the 1790s they employed Jennerian vaccines to reduce the ravages of that disease aboard the ships. Mortality accordingly declined throughout the 18th century, averaging around 10 per cent by 1800 or so. It dropped to half of that in the 19th-century trade. As the slaves survived, so the slavers prospered.

Individuals carried as slaves experienced little or none of this mercantilistic rationality, applied in the interest of their survival in the aggregate, though never in ways that respected their personal being. Captives set foot on the beaches after days or often weeks of forced marches in the interior with minimal rations. They waited there, often for weeks and months, in the crowded prison-like conditions of the barracoons. They were terrified of the sea, which few of them had seen before, and which most feared — not unreasonably — as the abode of the dead. European ships, beneath their billowing white sails, they perceived as floating cloud-like on the horizon. They boarded the ships in dread, convinced that the Europeans were cannibals and meant to eat them; the huge copper cauldrons that sat on the ships' decks, meant for preparing the slaves' food, they perceived as intended to prepare the Europeans' meals from them, or to render their bodies directly into the imports that arrived in the holds of the ships. Stories recurrently circulated in Africa that centered on hellish images of boiling, baking, and rendering that, perhaps unknowingly, anticipated the fires that burnt the fields after the harvest and boiled the cane juice on the sugar plantations to which most slaves were destined. The red wines brought by the Europeans, it was said, were distilled from the blood of those who had been taken before; gunpowder, a particularly dangerous source of explosive smoke and flames, they saw as made from burning captives' bones. It was little wonder that some of those chained below decks lost their senses from fear, stopped eating or responding, and slipped in shock toward the terminal lethargy that so puzzled and enraged their captors.

Below decks, beneath securely bolted hatches, hundreds of bodies were chained in close, dark, airless proximity. Some ships had tiny bunks, really nothing more than shelves, on which slaves could recline; in others, the slaves lay side by side on the planking, rolling with the ship, bodies virtually touching, for weeks on end. The crew attempted to obscure the stench that arose from the excreta of so many human beings trapped there together by white-washing the planking and bulkheads of the slave deck with lime or with strong solutions of vinegar, or fumigated by burning sulphur, gunpowder, tar or other noxious chemicals. The unmistakable organic stink of most slave ships nonetheless trailed far downwind. The women were sometimes held in separate quarters above decks, but the crew intended this practice less to provide physical comfort than to give easy access to their bodies for sexual purposes. Discipline was thorough and rigid, partly to control the slaves and partly to keep careful accounts of the property of the venture, including taking daily rolls, or inventories, of the slaves and recording their illnesses and deaths for future reckoning to the backers of the voyage in Europe or America. The crew brought the male slaves above board regularly for exercise, and in some cases for feeding. At such times, with the slaves released from their chains, the captors watched their captives warily, whips and muskets in hand, for signs of unrest, and they dealt harshly with any who obstructed prescribed routines. It was then that they cleaned the areas below decks and removed the bodies of those who had died. Sharks, it was said, trailed the slave ships, in some cases all the way across the ocean.

Under the conditions of emotional shock, physical deprivation, and brutal treatment that slaves endured during the middle passage, mortality and sickness could hardly have been less. These occurred in spite of the slavers' earnest efforts to protect their property, though seldom — if ever — out of personal concern for the people they treated so harshly. By the 18th century, conditions beneath the decks of slave ships were not worse in terms of space and provisions than those faced by free European emigrants crowded aboard vessels headed across the North Atlantic toward the United States. The standards of food and water recommended by the end of the 18th century were comparable to those provided for soldiers and sailors in the armies and navies of the governments of Europe, and it is likely that the slaves ate better during their middle passage than they had during the previous weeks and months when they had been driven toward the coast in Africa. Medical science at that time had no remedies for most of the infestations from which the slaves suffered, and public sanitation — beyond quarantine of the afflicted — hardly existed. The Europeans, it was believed, died in Africa from miasmic poisons in the atmosphere, and the slaves under their care, as black people, were thought to die from inherent weaknesses of their constitutions. In spite of the cruelties and hardships, most of the slave survived to recover and work in the New World.

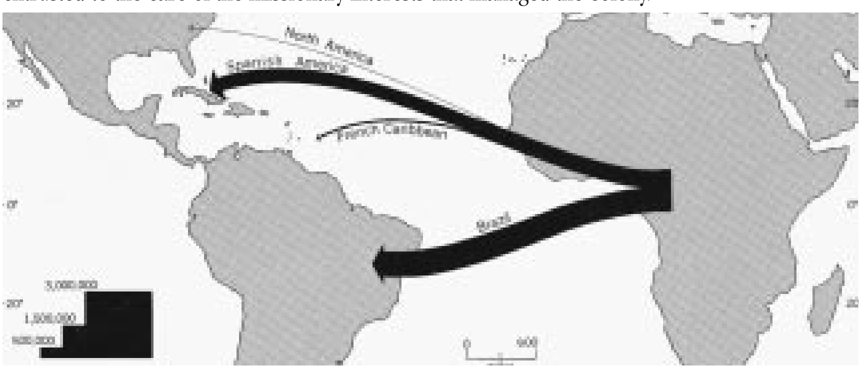
The extreme physical restraints imposed on them during the middle passage reduced the incidence of open revolt on the slave ships to scattered occasions. Cannon could be fired on threatening crowds of Africans, and a single misstep could mean a fatal fall into the sea. The crew never approached the slaves unarmed. Nonetheless, captives still mutinied from time to time, sometimes even gaining control of huge ships that they had no idea how to maneuver. The few dozen, perhaps a hundred, revolts recorded occurred often enough that the captors lived in constant fear and organized their ventures to prevent the slaves from breaking loose. Among the slaves, quiet conspiracy, biding one's time until arrival, and, surely, all manner of secret sorcery would have been the preferred strategies among those who retained the strength, presence of mind, and confidence to nurse their anger, and to plot. Communication among the captives, who often spoke diverse and mutually unintelligible languages, was difficult, and coordination of their efforts suffered as a result. The slavers attempted to separate slaves who shared the same language, and revolts seem to have broken out particularly where groups from a single home region were able to collaborate. Captives confined together on a given ship formed bonds that they later called upon as former "shipmates" for the remainder of their lives as slaves in the Americas. Slaves survived the ordeal of the middle passage on the strength of courage, moral buoyancy, and sheer physical resilience.

ABOLITION OF THE SLAVE TRADE IN THE 19TH CENTURY

Slaving continued to thrive in the Atlantic throughout the first half of the 19th century, in spite of growing British-led efforts to end a trade regarded by increasing numbers of reformers in Europe and the United States as a profound affront to human dignity. Impulses to abolish slaving in England arose from several sources. Evangelical protestants in England, with Quakers and Methodists in the lead, agitated publicly from the middle of the century to recognize the humanity of the victims of the trade and urged the Parliament to prevent British subjects from participation in it. Other, secular Enlightenment streams of thought fed into growing perception of the trade as not only immoral but also ultimately unprofitable. Economists saw opportunities for drawing profit in other ways from Africans, left in Africa as consumers of British exports and producers of raw materials for Britain, also took shape. At the end of the century this largely intellectual and religious movement became a vehicle for broader political currents tending toward opening politics in Britain to mass participation. Religious fervor generated petitions signed by hundreds of thousands of ordinary people, who could not then vote for members of Parliament but who discovered principled protest as a means of making their voices heard. Those in power listened, on an issue that did not directly challenge significant established interests uncomfortably close to home.

It was also recognized, and lamented, that British seamen on the Africa voyage died in large numbers. Some critics feared that the sugar islands of the West Indies had become unprofitable with the loss of the North American colonies after 1776 and were therefore no longer worth sustaining with continued infusions of new slaves from Africa. The 1791 revolt of the slaves in French Saint Domingue — renamed Haiti by the victorious former slaves there — all but removed France from the trade cast further doubt on the future of slavery itself in the British West Indies. War in Europe after 1793 disrupted the African trade further and brought additional, allegedly cheaper sources of sugar in the Indian Ocean under British rule. In Britain, Parliament itself remained deeply divided on the issue, but the domestic pressures, combined with changing assessments of Britain's national interest in the context of the war against Napoleon on the continent, produced a moment in 1807 when the abolitionists were able to advance their bill outlawing slaving on a favorable vote. From the first of January, 1808, British subjects could no longer legally buy or carry slaves.

Abolition of the British trade, with the French temporarily driven out of slaving by the revolt in Saint Domingue and by naval blockade of France's continental ports, left the Portuguese and Brazilians temporarily as the principal slavers active in the Atlantic. England enjoyed substantial diplomatic influence over Portugal and her American colony and used it in the 1810s to conclude a series of treaties restricting slaving to the Atlantic south of the equator: essentially, the Angolan slave trade to Brazil, supplemented by the slaving then spreading around the Cape of Good Hope into the Indian Ocean. The British navy despatched a squadron to the coasts of West Africa, once peace in Europe in 1815 had lessened its responsibilities there, and attempted to limit the activities of the dozens of slavers — Brazilians, renewed French voyages to resupply their remaining possessions in the Caribbean with labor, growing numbers of Spanish ships seeking slaves for sugar plantations that had begun in Cuba to thrive after Saint Domingue sugar disappeared from the market — still buying captives there. The United States had abolished its trade in slaves also in 1807, partly as a result of moral and intellectual concerns like those fuelling the movement in Britain and partly owing to a surplus of slaves then living in Virginia and elsewhere in the states of the Atlantic seaboard. But U.S. slavers nonetheless entered the Cuban trade of this era, under various legal subterfuges. The old English slaving interests in Liverpool found similarly indirect ways of supporting their slave-consuming customers in the Americas, particularly in Brazil. The Royal Navy established a West Africa Squadron to report on the movements of these ships, in violation of their nations' treaty commitments to Britain, and captured a few of them. The "recaptured" slaves on board the vessels seized were landed in Sierra Leone, the so-called "Province of Freedom" in Upper Guinea centered on the port of Freetown. There they were formally freed and entrusted to the care of the missionary interests that managed the colony.



Map 1.5, ***Main currents of the 19th-century trade in slaves.***
(Curtin, Philip D., **The Atlantic Slave Trade. ©** ***1969. Reprinted by permission of The University of Wisconsin Press.)***

The West Africa Squadron remained active and intrusive into the 1840s but barely inconvenienced the traders and certainly did not limit the overall volume of the trade. Meanwhile, the British government worked intermittently to pressure the slave-importing nations and colonies of the Americas to end their imports and, after British emancipation in 1834, to free their slaves as well. The French conceded the issue in 1848. The Brazilians, independent of Portugal since 1826 and much more dependent than the French on slavery, withdrew reluctantly after 1850. The United States, engaged with deep political concerns of its own with slavery in the 1840s and 1850s, cooperated only irregularly. The Spaniards in Cuba, with U.S. support, continued to import slaves until 1865. Thereafter, only a scattering of ships attempted to transport Africans to the Americas, under the pretense of signing them on under voluntary contracts of indenture. Free immigrants from Portugal, the Atlantic islands, and Italy replaced the slaves as low-paid, nominally free labor in Brazil. The British introduced Asians, as indentured laborers, to toil on the sugar plantations of the West Indies. In Angola, the Portuguese continued to buy people, employing most of them in the mainland colony but sending thousands as nominally indentured laborers off to São Tomé, which returned to a modest prosperity for the first time in 300 years as source of slave-worked, plantation-grown cocoa, until the eve of World War I. The Atlantic slave trade thus ended where it had begun, moderate numbers of central Africans being taken to a tiny plantation island in the Gulf of Guinea.

Through abolition, the aggregate volume of the trade dropped only slightly, and irregularly, until the 1840s, when it entered a precipitous and effectively terminal decline that lasted through the 1850s and 1860s. The traders reorganized to elude the surveillance of the Royal Navy, improving their onshore facilities and working closely with the Africans who supplied the slaves to provision ships and assemble their cargoes in a matter of hours rather than days or weeks. They were able to use larger, more efficient vessels as a result of the improved supplies of slaves in Africa. Their captives included more women and, particularly, more children and youths than during the height of the trade in the 18th century. They landed their captives in the Americas at small ports, or along abandoned beaches, in order to avoid detection by spies and British consuls positioned to report back to London on their activities. The slavers easily thus assumed the increased costs of illegality, or of the British pressure on their business.

As slaving declined irregularly during the 19th century, what remained of it was increasingly concentrated along Africa's Loango Coast, at Angolan ports south of the equator, and in the maze of waterways in the Niger Delta. Indian Ocean slaving in south-eastern Africa became a significant contributor of captives, particularly for southern Brazil. The violence of the slaving in those regions was intense. Some of the river traders and fishing communities along the Zaire became major suppliers for the Loango Coast and the Zaire mouth. The interior of Angola, while adding beeswax and ivory in anticipation of the ending of the trade, remained a major supplier of people for the trade; people there involved in the trade devoted themselves to the extractive techniques of generating commodities for export, including warfare and raiding for human captives. Only a few found much advantage in productive agriculture amidst the disruptions prevailing.

Ivory hunters had led the turn to systematic slaving in south-eastern Africa at the end of the 18th century, particularly when a severe drought subjected farmers and cattle-raisers there to severe ecological pressures in the 1790s. The slaving that developed then expanded to disrupt farming communities from the Limpopo in the south all the way north and east to basin of the upper Zaire. Conflicts associated with the opening stages of slaving there, as throughout the history of slaving elsewhere in Africa, flared until the end of the 19th century. A particularly potent African form of military organization, employed to steal cattle and to capture women and children, emerged during the 1810s in Natal, the area south of the Limpopo

River on the Indian Ocean coast. The people who took it up first thus became Zulu, famous for their military power. Many of their victims then imitated the Zulu to form other new, militarily dominant, highly mobile hordes of men, women, and their children and their herds of cattle. These groups dispersed outward from the Natal area and eventually settled as new ethnic groups, sometimes known as Ngoni but also by many other names, throughout the entire south-eastern quarter of the continent. The wars of the 1820s and 1830s, exacerbated further by renewed drought, produced numerous captives, many of whom the Brazilians bought at the ports of Mozambique to carry across the Atlantic.

Map 1.6, ***Africa in the 19th century.***
(Alvin M. Josephy, Jr., **The Horizon History of Africa.** ***American Heritage Publishing Co., Inc. [New York, 1971], p. 402.)***

In West Africa exports of slaves ended, though very gradually, and left most kingdoms and trading networks of the region holding growing numbers of captives whom they could no longer sell for imports from abroad. Rulers of the large, and costly, slaving states there had lost the fundamental means by which they supported themselves. Supplies of slaves available increased at the same time, from Muslim-inspired holy wars that spread after 1800 through the sudanic latitudes along the fringes of the Sahara. A large Islamic state system north of the lower Niger River, centered at Sokoto, styled itself a caliphate (with rulers claiming succession from the prophet, Muhamed, himself) and became a new, major source of slaves. The governors of its provinces systematically raided the region to the south with their horses, taking captives, keeping many for slavery on plantations at home, sending others north across the Sahara toward growing markets in the Ottoman Empire in North Africa, Egypt, Turkey, and Arabia, and selling still others off to the forested areas near the Atlantic. Similar wars fought in the name of Islam generated captives all the way west to the headwaters of the Senegal River. The states and other communities in the forest region bought these captives and kept those they could no longer sell to Europeans to tend groves of palm trees, harvesting the red-orange nuts they bore, and pressing out the oil contained in them to sell to a new generation of "legitimate" traders, British and others, that appeared on the coast.

Palm oil of this sort had long been an important cooking oil in West Africa, but the British and other Europeans became important buyers of it in the 19th century, as they sought vegetable oils throughout the world to lubricate the machinery of their industrializing economies. The Muslim clerics becoming dominant in Senegambia employed slaves taken in their jihads to grow peanuts ("groundnuts" in British English), also for export as a source of vegetable oils for processing and consumption in Europe. British abolitionists touted the commerce in peanuts and palm oil as "legitimate," in contrast — as they thought — to the condemned trade in slaves, and only gradually realized that Africans produced the new export commodities through intensified raiding and slaving of the very sort that they meant to eliminate. As the Atlantic trade declined, slavery and slave-dealing spread even more widely in West Africa and underwrote the beginnings of a peasant economy there based on commercial agriculture.

As slaving wound down during the 1850s in the Atlantic, slave-capturing and the employment of slaves in Africa expanded from the roots sunk in the 18th century until the entire continent suffered its disruptions. Wars producing captives who ended up in the hands of European buyers sent slaves as well across the Sahara, and also from the Indian Ocean coast, to the north African and Asian markets of the Ottoman Empire. More modern weapons, principally rifles, enabled warlords in West Africa to raid and capture for purposes of their own, including Islamic reform. Similarly effective Zulu military tactics produced equally devastating effects in south-eastern Africa. Slaving had become so much a way of life in Africa that it no longer rose and fell from the direct stimulus of foreign buyers, although commodity exports — vegetable oils, ivory, beeswax, and so on — depended on it. As always, it arose from circumstances in Africa and advanced the purposes of powerful Africans, even as it also served the interests of foreigners. In this age of emancipation in the Americas, nations turned to other sources of immigrant labor, European and Asian, who worked under forms of control deemed less onerous by the capitalist ethos of the time.

IMAGES OF AFRICA, FROM AMERICA

Slaveholders in the Americas realized little of the history of Africa, slaving, and the diaspora now recovered in an age of reduced racial pretension and vastly increased knowledge. At the time, masters saw only strange dark faces and imagined the thoughts in the slaves' heads through their own stereotyped fantasies of a savage continent. They substituted invented "tribal," almost racial, identities and characters, based on the ethnic and cultural differences that

African brought with them from their communities at home, as substitutes for understanding of the individuals they owned. These tribal notions held by the masters — the "Coromantees", "Eboes," "Angolans," or "Mandingo" — only crudely approximated the subtle and complex realities of Africans' lives, at best. Some, like "Mina," really reflected only the port where the Europeans had purchased the slaves. Others referred generally to the region from which slaves came, and even then not always in terms on which even the Europeans could agree; for the Portuguese, "Angola" meant the coast south of the Zaire River, while for the English it meant the Loango Coast to the north. Other labels, like "Eboe" (Igbo) or "Mandingo" (Mande), referred only to linguistic and cultural backgrounds much broader and vaguer than the actual communities in which the people designated by them had in fact been raised. Attributed "ethnic" identities of this sort reflected the evolving history of Africa at the time, including the new communities forming around the currents of trade, rather than a permanent, inherent character of the people to whom they were applied. They were also products of European and American needs to categorize, though incomprehendingly, the African strangers in their midst, and thus to calm the fears they aroused.

Most of the Africans landed in the Americas had been forcibly removed from home and community and experienced enslavement as profoundly lonely and isolating. But by the time they set foot on shore in the New World they had already started to draw on these same general similarities of origin as the only means available of finding common ground with their fellow slaves, at the start no less strangers to them than to their masters, through sharing ships' holds during the Middle Passage, time spent together in merchants' barracoons, and then common experiences in mining camps and plantation barracks. From beyond the trauma of capture, the march to the coast, the middle passage, and sale, they drew on various recollections of home, along with the intensely shared experience of slavery, to start to build new lives together, in the New World.

Where the trade continued to provide a stream of new arrivals from Africa, they must have heard news from home and found it easier to replenish traditions from the past. Large concentrations of slaves, in towns or on plantations of substantial size, enabled them to live more in worlds they created for themselves than did isolation among Europeans on small farms or in the big houses of the plantations. Where European slavers concentrated heavily on one or two ports in Africa, the slaves came from similar backgrounds and they added identifiably specific ethnic flavors to their lives. Conditions favored preservation of such identifiably African practices more in the islands of the Caribbean, particularly those of the French, and in north-eastern Brazil than in North America. The English brought slaves from many parts of Africa, and so Africans in their colonies tended to develop cultures of vaguer ethnic quality. They also terminated their trade earlier than the continental European nations, thus cutting off the sources of cultural renewal from Africa. In the British North American colonies, later the United States, slaves managed to establish families of their own early in the 18th century, lessening the need for further imports, and eventually — certainly by the 19th century — raising their children more and more as Americans. They thus lost touch with their roots in Africa more than did their counterparts in the Caribbean or Brazil.

American images of Africa, particularly in the United States, divided into white racist stereotypes of a primitive land, largely unchanging until the imposition of European colonial authority at the end of the 19th century, and African-American dreams of lives less beleaguered than their own. Both sides of the racially defined societies of America thus created memories that lost much basis in the realities of the Africa their ancestors had known, during the era of the continent's integration into the merchant capitalist economy of the Atlantic. There, in fact, ordinary people, often trapped in the insoluble dilemmas of human life everywhere, made what they could of tragic circumstances they could not control. They thought in terms very unlike those prevailing later in the modern "West," and decisions that made sense to them are not always immediately intelligible today. To a lesser degree, the Europeans who bought captives there also lived in a world unlike our own and committed deeds that, today, would bring universal condemnation. Beyond the feelings of outrage that the sufferings of that era can evoke in the present age of human rights, there lived human beings whose contributions to them we can understand, even if we do not approve.

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