

Teachers Notes: HOW IMPORTANT WERE AFRICANS TO THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE?

Definitions of Africa and Africans.

The key to an understanding of the Atlantic Slave Trade is the internationalism of the commerce. However, the use of the term to Africa and more particularly 'Africans', an instantly recognisable but rather inaccurate description to describe the peoples living on the continent of Africa.

No individual living on the African continent before, during and after the era of the Slave Trade would have described themselves as 'African'. Much more likely to suggest Fon, Gun, Yoruba etc . Only with colonialism were these peoples forced into entities we begin to recognise today eg. Nigeria, Kenya, a continent riven not so much by local differences but those of their European masters. Then only with the growing Pan-African movements of the early twentieth century did a sense of 'Africa' become a more African rather than a European construct .

For an understanding of the slave trade it is necessary to rid oneself of the connotation of any African 'oneness'. The continent was made up of such a diversity of peoples, cultures, religions and languages. Diversity is the key to any understanding of both the continent and also to an understanding of how the slave trade was able to operate there.

Lesson Rationale

Current research going on in the broader field of study. For example Morgan, Coclanis and Walvin have all raised the question of why it was that slavery was deemed 'necessary' and desirable to Europeans and why it was that they focused on Africa as a source of slaves.

Key themes are:

Demand for a new world labour force

Other sources were tried but proved less than successful

Slavery was possible and indeed profitable at time

More difficult it seemed to understand was 'Why Africa?'

Again scholarship has raised some very interesting reasons:

Availability/opportunity

Racism and Religious bigotry

However, it seems that availability and opportunity were far more important in explaining why Africa than racism and religious bigotry. Indeed both the latter seem to have played a far greater part in the abolition of the slave trade than in its operation. From my reading it is clear that there are ideologies about race and religion are wholly lacking amongst the pragmatic commercial opportunism of the trade.

So why did Africa present the opportunity? Unfortunately, there frequently seems to be a 'blank canvas' approach to the Atlantic Trade which focuses on the commercialism of European nations and traders where their demands are paramount. But this wholly obscures the proactive nature of African involvement in the trade.

Why was Africa able to provide so many slaves? Its very geography was absolutely crucial, the diversity of its states, governments etc facilitated the trade. Diversity again led to the opportunity for military dispute and conquest etc.

The National Archive and the University of Virginia have some great sources from which to examine these themes. Furthermore, they also offer the opportunity for self discovery.

Some of the sources do appear 'difficult' eg. Handwriting that 's difficult to read. Etc.

However, this can be very exciting. Difficult handwriting, torn pages etc can be challenging but pupils love cracking codes. Carefully selected pieces and group work can facilitate difficult areas. Furthermore, mistakes are a learning experience. A valuable lesson is that many history books contain horrific misreading of sources.

Lessons 1:

Africa Fact and Fiction?

The geography of the African continent is vital to understanding 'why Africa'. Its accessibility to both Europe and the New world is crucial to any explanation of the Atlantic trade. There are a wealth of maps which illustrate this and explain why particularly West Africa.

European Maps such as the map used in Lesson 1 from 17th century have also been well used to demonstrate their confinement to the coastal regions and their lack of activity and knowledge in the interior.

There are a wealth of written descriptions of coastal and interior areas, which, although largely European and often reflecting the ignorance of many things they have seen, can be useful in filling in geographical features. The sources used in this lesson are from both the National Archives and from the collections held at the University of Virginia. However, there are a wealth of other examples full of descriptive detail, for example the descriptions of Richard Lander, Mungo Park etc quickly build up a picture of the rural communities and urban conurbations in the hinterland of west Africa.

Furthermore, an understanding of the physical geography lends itself to trade. Notably the inland routes and roadways along which slave caravans were transported and the inland and coastal waterways eg. The Niger Delta which enabled transportation to the coast. Furthermore, the inland lagoon system of the slave coast which enabled transportation of goods, including slaves both to the coast and along the coast. This made the transportation of slaves practical and also enabled traders to respond to demands, political conditions. For example there are lots of examples where if one state was closed to trade due to political problems/war etc, traders would transport them along the lagoons to another town which was open for trade.

This geography proved to be particularly useful after the abolition of the slave trade when it took much of the necessary movement of slaves along the coast out of range of the British patrols.

The extension work on the writing of Archibald Dalziel challenges perceptions about the relationships between Africans and Europeans on the coast and goes some way to explain European restrictions on the coast. Dalziel's position as Governor of Cape Coast Castle, and therefore a direct beneficiary of the Atlantic Trade should become evident and his portrayal of the African's as 'savage' and warlike, a motive for continuing the trade.

Who's Who in Africa?

Diversity was key to the operation of the slave trade on the African continent. The existence of wholly diverse political entities from the enormous Oyo Empire to the small autonomous city states like Little Popo proved a heady mix of rivalry, conquest and power.

The picture sources, supported by the account of Baquaqua attempt to offer a glimpse into the lives of African's across the era of the slave trade. The activity, based on close analysis of each picture, with minimal, initial teacher input will hopefully, draw this picture of diversity. The following notes on each source will hopefully be useful and may be used to further inform discussion.

Source A: Typical west coast village, single storey housing but with the king's palace (a more substantial building in the background). 1841. Visual image much supported by written sources such as Baquaqua, Lander etc

Source B: Metal workers in the late 17th century, engaged in war materials or farming implements?

Source C: Canoemaking in the late 17th century. The image is particularly interesting as it shows canoe construction in the foreground and the use of canoes to transport people, possibly slaves in the background. However, it is interesting to note that in the far background are porters carrying goods across a bridge, another commonly used mode of transport. The transportation of goods of all kinds is described in detail in many accounts eg. Whitford, at the end of the 19th century describes

Canoes bound for Lagos deeply laden with palm-oil in jars, kernals in bulk covered with mats, bullocks, goats, sheep, corn and various other products from the interior. In addition they are crowded with passengers, chiefly women traders, who seem to be comfortably reposing on top of the cargo.

Sources D and F

The absolutist nature of states like Dahomey which imposed a rigid regime over court, public, conquered peoples and foreigners alike allowed for a well organised if bureaucratic relationship to exist between Europeans and Africans. For example. At the port of Whydah a network of government officials ran the Atlantic trade on behalf of the King who stayed in his capital many miles into the interior. Eg. The Captain of the Sand who oversaw delivery of goods to the beach and the Captain of the Slaves who oversaw the delivery of slaves.

The complex system of legal arrangement such as passes and customs duties to be paid to the King for permission to trade, in average about the price of 11 slaves dependent on the size of ship (fraud case!) made the Atlantic trade a viable and profitable operation.

The clear divisions between slaves destined for export (foreigners) and domestic slaves, pawns etc gave protection and indeed rights to local slaves.

Interestingly the onerous administration of states like Dahomey which clearly outlined and protected the position of the monarchy pushed many Europeans to the more free marketeering ports of Porto Novo and Badagry at various times. However, even here trade was closely monitored by the ruling elite. For example, British missionary Dr Irving, visiting the West Coast in the 1850s noted that:

The toll house on Badagry beach had been set up in order to exact duty from all goods being carried along the land spit

And that this was

A very common way by which the revenues of the chiefs are raised

(National Archive FO84/951 30 May 1854 Irving)

Competition between trading states was fierce, and effected clearly supplies and prices. Even at Whydah, where the price of a slave was 'fixed' by the King was open to 'negotiation' in tough times. On numerous occasions competitors resorted to protectionism, which at its most extreme led to attacks on neighbouring states. This led ultimately to the acquisition of more states, however, it is an oversimplification to suggest that these wars were merely 'slave gathering missions'. They were often much more about taking out the opposition.

Source E:

Violence and warfare was clearly at the heart of the slave trade, whether as a method of gaining slaves or, as many historians have argued, the slave trade was a method of gaining guns!

Baquaqua's accounts of his own experiences both before and after capture suggest the sense of how armies were used to destroy and enslave neighbouring states.

Eg. They arrived safely on a Saturday, and heard that war would be waging that day, but it was not resumed until the next. The king was advised by his counsellor to go out and meet the enemy in the woods, but did not do so. He then went to the King's house and after breakfasting next morning, the guns began to boom away, and the war went on in earnest. Guns were used by them on this occasion, much more than bows and arrows. The war was too hot for the king, when he, together with his counsellor, fled for their lives...My companions and myself ran to the river but could not cross it; we hid ourselves in the tall grass, but the enemy came and found us, and made us all prisoners. I was tied up very tightly; they placed a rope around my neck and took me off with them...

However, the following section of Baquaqua's account is perhaps more surprising and intriguing

Whilst travelling through the wood, we met my brother, but neither of us spoke or seemed to know each other; he turned another way without arousing any suspicion; and then went to a place and procured a person to purchase me. Had it been known who it was, they would have insisted upon a very great price as my ransom, but it was only a small sum that was required for my release.

It should have been mentioned that the city was destroyed, the women and children having been sent away... When the wars come on suddenly, the women and children have no means to escape, but are taken prisoners and sold into slavery.

This source makes it clear that Slave raiding wars clearly are crucial to the operation of the trade, However, the means by which Baquaqua is ransomed and the subsequent selling on of war captives is crucial and clearly demonstrates, in contrast to the assertions of men like Archibald Dalziel, that this was no anarchic violence. It is also interesting to note that Baquaqua is initially enslaved as a result of political rivalry.

Sources G and H

Dixon Denham's portrayal of fishing boats and nets of the Shary and the 17th century source showing musicians contrast nicely with the warlike and militaristic nature of the previous sources. There are many pictorial sources available (www.slaveryimages.org) which show more domestic scenes such as cooking, farming, the market, dress etc which could be used.

Sources I and J

What becomes clear is that European traders were able to tap into existing and expanding commercial networks. Coastal towns such as Lagos were established and grew due to their connections with the interior and these connections were largely commercial. Whilst its root were in violence, it flourished because of these networks. The ability to harness provisions, labour, eg. Guards, porters etc along with transport and huge outlays of finance were synchronised by 'middlemen' who smoothed the passage between slave gatherers, merchants and sea captains.

Slaves would pass through networks of interior traders, often many times before they reached the coast. To call these 'chains of supply' is ironic .

Once at the coast slaves would be collected by coastal traders. In Whydah these were traders operating on behalf of the King. In other places, as noted, there was a great deal of free-marketeering and competition between traders. In a number of places relationships were forged on the basis of nationality. In Badagy for example there were a total of trading chiefs who associated themselves with eg. Britain, France, Portugal specifically and traded only with these partners.

Brokers negotiated between merchants and Europeans. If supplies were not available, credit could be advanced to send into the interior for more. Sometimes the cost of as much as 200 slaves (enormous sums). A business relationships based on trust, risk and potential profit.

At the other end of the scale were menial jobs, often done by domestic slaves, although not always such as porters (price of a single slave took several men or journeys to carry this in cowrie shells) and canoemen such as the Kroomen of the Gold Coast who were employed all along the Slave Coast to

ferry people and goods from shore to shore through the incredibly treacherous surf. The trade was incredibly labour intensive. But there was profit to be made every step of the way.

The spirit of commercialism is one which pervades any study of African trade. It should be noted that several coastal communities were established specifically for the purposes of trading with Europeans. Interestingly a number of these communities were established by refugees from areas ravaged by war. The potential slaves therefore becoming slave traders.

Lesson 2: Why did African's trade with Europe?

The spirit of commercialism and the rewards to be reaped by participation in the trade are reflected in the diverse products which were exchanged for slaves, from hard cash (cowries), iron bars, guns, textiles, pottery etc. the goods exchanged is sometimes used as an example of Europeans 'palming off' worthless products. However, the nature of the trade suggests that these were products which were wanted, desired and needed. Indeed there is evidence of disputes between African merchants and Europeans over quality of supplies, and what is being supplied. It is important to note that with the competitive nature of the trade, the Europeans could not afford to short-change their business partners otherwise their 'partners' may swap their allegiances. Examples of eg. European traders having to leave certain areas due to business disputes were common and the Brazilian trader Francisco Felix De Souza, probably the most prominent of the resident foreigners on the slave coast had to transfer his operations on several occasions due to difficult business relationships.

The Day Book of the British Ship Africa offers an insight into the goods traded for slaves and the profits to be made. It also gives some suggestion as to the value of these products to Africans and particularly the roles that some African's played, often in a non-commercial way, in enabling the trade to continue.

Lesson 3: What effect did the Slave Trade have on Africa?

This lesson attempts to place the proactive nature of the African trade in its wider historical context. Furthermore, by putting the account of Baquaqua at its core it tries to focus the trade back on those who were enslaved with sensitivity and balance. All three lessons attempt to investigate the reasons for African involvement in the Atlantic trade and the processes by which the trade took place. However, the lessons whilst challenging the oversimplification of Africans as solely 'victims' of the Slave Trade, the lessons must also attempt to reach some conclusions over the real impact of the trade on both the continent of Africa and Africans themselves.

Interestingly James Walvin amongst others has suggested that it was not the profits alone which kept the slave trade alive. Indeed as he points out, the British trade was just as profitable when abolitionism took hold. Furthermore, he suggested that the use of slaves in the America's impeded economic development. This provides an interesting point of comparison with African trading communities. Tony Hopkins proposed the theory that Africa experienced a crisis of adaptation when the slave trade was suppressed. Certainly there is plenty of evidence to suggest that many African communities were reluctant to give up the trade in favour of so called 'legitimate' products such as palm oil.

Further suggested reading

A G Hopkins **An Economic History of West Africa** (New York 1973)

Robin Law **The Slave Coast of West Africa 1550-1750: The Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on African Society** (Oxford University Press 1991)

Robin Law **Ouidah: The Social History of a West African Slaving Port 1727-1892** (Ohio University Press 2006)

James Walvin **Atlas of Slavery** (Harlow, England & New York 2006)