Chapter 25

Africa and the Africans in the Age of the Atlantic Slave Trade

OUTLINE

I. Introduction

With the rise of the West, the traditional alignment of Africa with the Islamic world was altered. External influences exerted both by the West and by Islam accelerated political change and introduced substantial social reorganization. After 1450, much of Africa was brought into the world trade system, often through involvement in the slave trade. Through the institution of slavery, African culture was transferred to the New World, where it became part of a new social amalgam. Involvement in the slave trade was not the only influence on Africa in this period. East Africa remained part of the Islamic trade system, and the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia continued its independent existence. In some parts of Africa, states formed into larger kingdoms without outside influence.

II. The Atlantic Slave Trade

A. Introduction

Along the Atlantic coast of Africa, the Portuguese established trade forts and trading posts, the most important of which was El Mina. Forts normally existed with the consent of local rulers, who benefited from European trade. The initial Portuguese ports were located in the gold-producing region, where the Europeans penetrated already extant African trade routes. From the coast, Portuguese traders slowly penetrated inland to establish new trade links. In addition to trade, the Portuguese brought missionaries, who attempted to convert the royal families of Benin, Kongo, and other coastal kingdoms. Only in Kongo, where Nzinga Mvemba accepted conversion, did the missionaries enjoy success. The Portuguese continued to press southward along the Atlantic coast. In the 1570s, they established Luanda, which became the basis for the first Portuguese colony of Angola. On the Indian Ocean coast, the Portuguese also established merchant bases that were intended to give access to trade routes in the interior. Somewhat later, the Dutch, French, and English followed the established pattern of founding trade forts in Africa. Although gold was the primary export item in the initial trade relationship with Africa, slaves were always important. The first African slaves brought directly to Portugal arrived in 1441. As relations with African rulers expanded, the export of slaves grew in volume. With the development of plantation agriculture in the Atlantic islands and then the Americas, slaves became the primary component of the coercive labor system. By 1600, the slave trade was the greatest component of European trade with Africa.

B. Trend Toward Expansion

Between 1450 and 1850, about 12 million Africans were shipped to the plantations of the Americas. Perhaps as many as four million more Africans were killed in slaving wars prior to shipment. The volume of slaves shipped increased from the 16th century to a zenith in the 18th
century. By 1800, about three million slaves resided in the Americas. At its end in the 19th century, the slave trade still shipped more than one million slaves to Cuba and Brazil. High slave mortality in the plantation environment required the constant replenishment of workers. Only in the southern United States was there positive population growth among the slave population. The plantations of the Caribbean and Brazil imported more slaves than elsewhere. Although the greatest number of slaves were shipped to the New World, Muslim traders continued an active business in the Red Sea, trans-Sahara, and East African routes. The points of origin of the slave trade moved from the Senegambia region in the 16th century to central Africa in the seventeenth century and then to the Gold and Slave Coasts in the 18th century.

C. Demographic Patterns

The Atlantic slave trade concentrated on male laborers, rather than on females for use as concubines. It has been estimated that the drain of slaves from western and central Africa resulted in much slower population growth in that region. In some African societies, females began to outnumber males. Trade with the Americas resulted in the importation of new food crops, such as maize and manioc, which helped support more rapid population growth.

D. Organization of the Trade

Until 1630, the slave trade remained in the hands of the Portuguese. The Dutch and British began to export slaves to plantation colonies in the Americas after 1637. France did not become a major slave exporter until the 18th century. Europeans sent to coastal forts to manage the slave trade suffered extraordinary mortality rates from tropical diseases. For both Europeans and Africans, the slave trade proved deadly. European traders often dealt with African rulers who sought to monopolize the trade in slaves passing through their kingdoms. Both Europeans and indigenous peoples were active participants in the commerce because it was possible to realize major profits. Risks, however, cut severely into profit margins. By the 18th century, British profits in slaving averaged between five and 10 percent. Slavery was part of the triangular trade in which European manufactured goods were shipped to Africa for slaves sent to the plantation colonies from which sugar and cotton were exported to Europe. Overall profits in the triangular trade contributed to the longevity of the commerce in human beings. Over 40 percent of all slaves exported to the Americas left in the century after 1760. In Africa, participation in the slave trade often reduced local economies to dependence on European manufactures. In this peculiar fashion, Africa was linked to the global trade system.

III. African Societies, Slavery, and the Slave Trade

A. Introduction

Slavery was an indigenous feature of African culture and economy. Slaves were an important component of social status and personal wealth. In the Islamic Sudanic states, slavery was regarded as suitable only for unbelievers. Despite prohibitions, states often enslaved both pagans and Muslims. The existence of slavery prior to European arrival allowed European merchants to tap into a system that already flourished. In some African states, rulers were eager to increase their own wealth and power by exchanging slaves for technology in the form of arms. For this reason, states in the process of political centralization were often the most active participants in the slave trade.
B. Slaving and African Politics

Much of western Africa was divided into small kingdoms engaged in a virtually constant process of expansion and war. War raised the social status of warriors and made the slave trade an extension of African political development. European participation in the slave trade shifted the focus of political centralization among African states from the savanna to the Atlantic coast. The most powerful African kingdoms developed just inland from the coastal regions. The exchange of slaves for guns and other weapons allowed these central African states to dominate their neighbors.

C. Asante and Dahomey

In the Gold Coast, the Asante empire rose during the era of the slave trade. On the basis of access to Western arms in exchange for slaves, the Oyoko clan of the Akan people began to centralize the region after 1651. Osei Tutu became the first asantehene, or supreme civil and religious leader of the Asante. By 1700, Osei Tutu’s organization of the Asante caused the Dutch to deal directly with the new political power. On the basis of control over a gold-producing region and the slave trade, Asante maintained its power into the first two decades of the 19th century. To the east of Asante, the kingdom of Benin also was well-organized, but its commerce with Europeans was less dependent on the slave trade than that of Asante. In the 17th century, the kingdom of Dahomey developed among the Fon people. Using the slave trade to pay for European arms, the kings of Dahomey created an autocratic system of government. The royal court controlled the slave trade and raised armies that were used to raid neighbors for more captives. Dahomey continued to exist as a slaving state until the latter portions of the 19th century. Slaving states often developed ruling ideologies and bureaucracies that were, in some ways, comparable to the emergence of European absolutism. The slave states also generated a significant culture based on bronze-casting, woodcarving, and weaving.

D. East Africa and the Sudan

The Swahili cities of Africa’s eastern coast continued to carry on trade with the new powers of the Indian Ocean, the Portuguese, and the Ottoman Empire. Gold and slaves were sold to both commercial partners. Swahili, Indian, and Arabian merchants established plantations to produce cloves along the eastern coast and on offshore islands. These also produced a demand for slaves. Less is known concerning the interior of eastern Africa. The Luo peoples combined with the Bantu residents of the region to create a composite kingdom at Bunyoro. Another state developed at Buganda. There was little contact with the outside world among these indigenous kingdoms. In the savanna region, the breakup of the kingdom of Songhay in the 16th century produced political fragmentation. By the 1770s, Muslim reform movements penetrated the region through trade networks. The Sufi reform movements had a powerful impact on the Fulani people of the western Sudan. By 1804, Usman Dan Fodio brought the Sufi reform to the Hausa kingdoms of Nigeria. Under the reform banner, the Fulani took control over many of the Hausa kingdoms. Eventually a powerful Sokoto state emerged under a ruling caliph. The reform movement successfully imposed a stricter form of Islam throughout the region of West Africa. The reform wars produced numerous captives that were sold into slavery. The number of slaves within the savanna region rose, and slavery became a common social element of the Sudanic states.

IV. White Settlers and Africans in Southern Africa

A. Introduction

The southern end of the African continent was only slightly affected by the slave trade. The
indigenous peoples were largely agricultural. By the 16th century, much of the population of southern Africa was Bantu and organized into relatively small chiefdoms. Constant expansion brought the Bantu peoples into contact with Dutch colonists in the 17th century. The Dutch East India Company established a colony at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652. Initially commercial, the colony began to expand as farmers pushed outward from the Cape. By the 1760s, the Dutch crossed the Orange River and began to compete with the Bantu population for available land. As the European expansion was occurring, the British seized the colony from the Dutch and imposed formal control by 1815. British attempts to limit Boer expansion failed, leading to increased conflict between the Dutch farmers and the Bantu. The Boers, seeking both new land and escape from British authority, opened up several autonomous Boer states. After 1834, when the British abolished slavery, the Dutch moved across the Orange River into Natal.

B. The Mfecane and the Zulu Rise to Power

As the Dutch were moving northward, the Bantu peoples were being reorganized into a new military organization. The architect of the political and military reformulation of Bantu society was Shaka, who became leader of the Zulu state in 1818. Although Shaka was assassinated in 1828, his reforms continued to provide the basis for a more powerful Zulu state. The expansion of the Zulu created a process of political reconfiguring called the **mfecane**, or wars of crushing and wandering. Other Bantu states, such as Lesotho and Swazi, began to develop in addition to the Zulu. The Boers were able to survive the growth of Zulu power, but the African state was only suppressed after the Zulu Wars with Britain during the 1870s.

V. The African Diaspora

A. Introduction

The slave trade defined the basic relationship between Africa and the New World. African middlemen profited from the increasing value of slaves in the 18th century.

B. Slave Lives

Perhaps as many as one-third of the African captives intended for slavery died before reaching the coastal ports. Mortality during the sea voyage from Africa to the New World ran at about 18 percent. The Middle Passage was a traumatic experience for African slaves, but it failed to strip them of their indigenous culture.

C. Africans in America

Most slaves were intended for the plantations and mines of America. Slaves also provided a significant portion of the labor force in American cities, participating in a wide variety of urban occupations.

D. American Slave Societies

American society was based on both ethnicity and race. American society placed whites at the top of the social hierarchy, slaves at the bottom, and free men and women of color in an intermediary position. Within the slave community itself, there is some evidence that members of the African elite who had been sold into slavery continued to exercise authority in the New World. Slave communities, in some cases, continued to recognize ethnic divisions derived from African origins. Slave societies varied regionally. In the Caribbean, Africans made up the majority of the
population. In Brazil, slaves made up a smaller proportion of the total population, but free men and women of color were almost equal in number to the slaves. Combined, these groups comprised nearly two-thirds of the population. Creoles predominated among the slave populations of North America, and there were fewer free men and women of color. Because of successful rates of reproduction in North America, fewer slaves had African ties.

E. The People and Gods in Exile

Despite enormous difficulties, slave communities attempted to preserve family units. Many African cultural elements also survived enslavement. Cultural continuity often depended on the intensity and volume of trade with specific regions of Africa. In many cases, Africans in the Americas had to incorporate the beliefs and practices of many peoples and cultures. African culture in the Americas tended to be dynamic rather than strictly a continuation of any strain of African culture. Slaves in Latin America converted to Roman Catholicism but retained African religious practices. Obeah, candomble, and Vodun were varieties of African religion transported to the New World. Religious practice in the New World tended to be eclectic rather than uniform. Muslim slaves were more resistant to combining their religious beliefs with other faiths. Resistance to slavery was common in the Americas. Outright rebellion and the formation of communities of escaped slaves were two of the most direct forms of resistance.

F. Africa and the End of the Slave Trade

The abolition of the slave trade was due to what were essentially European cultural movements, but it revolutionized relations with Africa. There is little evidence for an economic motive. Intellectual movements, such as the Enlightenment, began to portray slavery as an aspect of retrograde societies. Britain was the first nation in which a strong abolition movement under the leadership of religious humanitarians arose. Britain abolished the slave trade in 1807, but the complete end of the slave trade did not occur until 1888.

VI. Conclusion: The Impact of Slavery on Africa

The slave trade drew Africa into the world commercial system with various results. In some areas, the outcome was the formation of more centralized kingdoms. Coercive labor patterns continued to be the rule in Africa, even after the slave trade was abolished. The millions of transported Africans created new cultural forms and contributed greatly to their new societies in which they found themselves.
TIMELINE

*Insert the following events into the timeline. This should help you to compare important historical events chronologically.*

- Portuguese fort at El Mina established
- British slave trade abolished
- Dutch establish colony at Cape of Good Hope
- death of Shaka, *mfecane* underway
- Usman Dan Fodio launches reform among Hausa
- British seize Cape Colony from Dutch

1482
1652
1795
1804
1807
1828

TERMS, PEOPLE, EVENTS

*The following terms, people, and events are important to your understanding of the chapter. Define each one.*

- factories
- Nzinga Mvemba
- Indies piece
- Osei Tutu
- Luo
- Shaka
- Lesotho
- creole slaves
- *vodun*
- William Wilberforce
- El Mina
- Luanda
- triangular trade
- *asantehene*
- Fulani
- *mfecane*
- Middle Passage
- *obeah*
- Palmares
- Maroons
- Royal African Company
- Asante
- Dahomey
- Great Trek
- Swazi
- *salt-water slaves*
- *candomble*
- Suriname
MAP EXERCISE

The following exercise is intended to clarify the geophysical environment and the spatial relationships among the important objects and places mentioned in the chapter. Locate the following places on the map.

Locate the region of the following African kingdoms: Kongo, Asante, Dahomey, Benin, and Sokoto.

What does the location of the emerging states of Africa during the era of the slave trade suggest about the geographical reorientation of African trade? Where were the emerging states located in comparison to the previous kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay?
MAKING CONNECTIONS

The following questions are intended to emphasize important ideas within the chapter.

1. Discuss the stages in the Portuguese penetration of Africa.
2. Trace the changes in volume of the slave trade between 1450 and 1850.
3. What was the demographic impact of the African slave trade on the sub-Saharan region?
4. Discuss the arguments concerning the profitability of the African slave trade.
6. What was the mfecane? How did it affect southern Africa?
7. What was the social structure of American slave-based societies?
8. Why did the slave trade come to an end?

PUTTING LARGER CONCEPTS TOGETHER

The following questions test your ability to summarize the major conclusions of the chapter.

1. The Atlantic slave trade clearly connected two increasingly dependent economies in the Americas and Africa. How did the political, social, and economic organization of the Americas differ from that of Africa?
2. In what ways did the West affect the political development of Africa? How was slavery a component in the nature of state formation in sub-Saharan Africa?
SELF-TEST OF FACTUAL INFORMATION

1. What European nation first established direct contact with black Africa?
   a. Spain
   b. England
   c. Italy
   d. Portugal

2. King Nzinga Mvemba of Kongo was noteworthy because he
   a. was the first African monarch converted to Christianity.
   b. successfully defeated the Portuguese at the battle of Kuwezi.
   c. was one of the most powerful advocates of the African slave trade.
   d. eventually conquered the Boers of southern Africa.

3. Which of the following statements concerning slavery in Europe before 1450 is most accurate?
   a. Europe never had a tradition of slavery.
   b. Slavery had been extensive in the ancient world but had died out during the Middle Ages.
   c. Slavery had died out during the Middle Ages in most of Europe except along the military frontier between Christians and Muslims in the Mediterranean.
   d. Slavery was common everywhere in Europe during the Middle Ages.

4. Aside from Brazil, the region of the New World that received the most slaves was
   a. the British colonies of the southern Atlantic.
   b. Mexico.
   c. the plantation islands of the Caribbean.
   d. Chile.

5. What was the demographic impact of the slave trade on Africa?
   a. The slave trade exported millions but the loss was made up in indigenous population increases.
   b. Population in Africa seems to have grown at a higher than average rate.
   c. The slave trade had the impact of skewing the population of central Africa in favor of a disproportionate number of women.
   d. As a result of the slave trade, the population of Africa was only one-third of what it would have been without the export of men and women.

6. What was the impact of the slave trade on Europeans sent to Africa?
   a. Most died of tropical diseases.
   b. Europeans established wealthy colonies that expanded through the 19th century.
   c. Europeans rapidly dispersed throughout the African nations of the interior and intermarried with indigenous populations.
   d. Europeans sent to Africa often remained for many years, absorbing the African cultures.
7. Which of the following was NOT a large African state that developed during the period of the Atlantic slave trade?
   a. Asante
   b. Benin
   c. Dahomey
   d. Ghana

8. Under whose rule was unity achieved among the numerous Akan clans of Asante?
   a. Usman Dan Fodio
   b. Osei Tutu
   c. Shaka
   d. Agaja

9. The Sufi mystic responsible for initiating a religious reform movement among the Hausa kingdoms was
   a. Usman Dan Fodio.
   b. Osei Tutu.
   c. Shaka.
   d. Agaja.

10. The “Middle Passage” referred to
    a. the journey from captivity to the coastline of Africa.
    b. the sale of slaves in the Americas and subsequent transportation to plantations.
    c. the group of slaves permanently in rebellion in Suriname.
    d. the voyage from Africa across the Atlantic to the Americas.