

## CHAPTER 20 – AFRICA AND THE AFRICANS IN THE AGE OF THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE

### CHAPTER SUMMARY

Much of Africa followed its own lines of development between the beginning of the 15th and 19th centuries. The rise of the West and the Western-dominated economy, however, was a powerful force in influencing the course of African history. The Atlantic slave trade predominated in economic affairs after the middle of the 17th century. The forced removal of Africans had a major effect in some African regions and was a primary factor contributing to the nature of New World populations. African culture became one of the important strands in the development of American civilizations. Despite the rise of the West and the slave trade, nearly all of Africa remained politically independent and culturally autonomous. Among the important trends, Islam consolidated its position in sub-Saharan and east Africa, while in many parts of Africa, independent states formed and expanded.

**The Atlantic Slave Trade.** The Portuguese inaugurated the pattern for contacts along the African coast. They established trading forts (factories); the most important, El Mina, received gold from the interior. Most forts were established with the approval of African authorities desiring trade benefits. Some of the forts allowed trade to interior states. Portuguese and Afro-Portuguese traders (*lançados*) followed routes to the interior to open new markets. Missionary efforts followed, particularly to the powerful states of Benin and the Kongo. King Nzinga Mvemba of the Kongo accepted Christianity and, with Portuguese assistance, sought to introduce European influences to his state. The ravages of the slave trade were a major reason for the limited success of the policies. Africa, in general, tried to fit the European concepts they found useful into their belief structures. The Europeans regarded Africans as pagan savages who could adopt civilized behavior and convert to Christianity. The Portuguese continued their southward ventures, in the 1570s establishing Luanda on the Angolan coast among the Mbundu. In the Indian Ocean, they established bases on Mozambique Island and other towns in an effort to control the gold trade coming from Monomotapa. On both coasts, few Portuguese settled permanently. Other Europeans followed Portuguese patterns by creating trading stations through agreement with Africans. In almost all instances, slavery eventually became the principal focus of relationships. Added impetus came from the development of sugar plantations on Portuguese and Spanish Atlantic islands and their subsequent extension to the Americas.

**Trend Toward Expansion.** Between 1450 and 1850, about 12 million Africans were shipped across the Atlantic; about 10 or 11 million arrived alive. A number equal to one-third of those shipped might have died in the initial raiding or march to the coast. The volume of the trade increased from the 16th to the 18th centuries, with 80 percent of the total coming in the latter century. Brazil received more than 40 percent of all slaves reaching the Americas. The continued high volume was necessary because of high slave mortality and low fertility. Only in the southern United States did slaves have a positive growth rate. Other slave trades—trans-Saharan, Red Sea, and east African—under Muslim control, added another 3 million individuals to the total.

**In Depth: Slavery and Human Society.** Slavery has existed in both complex and simpler societies from the earliest times. Coerced labor took different forms: indentured servants,

convict laborers, debt peons, chattel slaves. The denial of control over an individual's labor was the essential characteristic of slavery systems. It was easier to enslave people outside one's own society, to exploit differences in culture, language, and color. The attitude of Europeans and non-African Muslims thus contributed to the development of modern racism. The campaign against slavery that grew from Enlightenment ideas was an important turning point in world history. Slavery has persisted in a few societies until the present, but few individuals openly defend the institution. African slavery was important in shaping the modern world. It was one of the early international trades, and it assisted the development of capitalism. Vociferous debate continues about many interpretations of the effect of the trade on African and American societies.

**Demographic Patterns.** The Saharan slave trade to the Islamic world carried mostly women for sexual and domestic employment. The Atlantic trade concentrated on young men fit for hard labor in the Americas. African societies who sold slaves might keep women and children for their own uses. The Atlantic trade had an important demographic effect on parts of western and central Africa; the population there in 1850 might have been one-half of what it would have been without the trade. The women and children not exported skewed the balance of the sexes in African-enslaving societies. The introduction of American crops, such as maize and manioc, helped suffering regions to recover from population losses.

**Organization of the Trade.** Control over the slave trade reflected the European political situation. Until 1630, the Portuguese were the principal suppliers. The Dutch became major competitors after they seized El Mina in 1630. By the 1660s, the English worked to supply their plantation colonies. The French became major carriers in the 18th century. Each nation established forts for receiving slaves. Tropical diseases caused both resident Europeans and the crews of slave-carrying ships high mortality rates. The Europeans dealt with local rulers, calculating value in currencies composed of iron bars, brass rings, and cowry shells. The Spanish had a system in which a healthy man was considered a standard unit called an "Indies piece." Slaves arrived at the coast as a result of warfare and of purchase and movement by indigenous traders. Dahomey had a royal monopoly on slave flow. There have been arguments about the profitability of the slave trade. It has been suggested that its profits were a key element for the rise of commercial capitalism and the Industrial Revolution. Individual voyages certainly did bring profits to merchants and specializing ports. But considerable risks were involved. English profitability in the late 18th century was about 5 percent to 10 percent, about equal to other commercial ventures. The full economic importance is difficult to determine because of its direct links to the plantation and mining economies of the Americas. Goods were exchanged among Europe, Africa, and the Americas in complex patterns. The slave trade surely contributed to emerging Atlantic capitalism, while at the same time making African economies dependent on European trade and linked to the world economy.

**African Societies, Slavery, and the Slave Trade.** The Atlantic trade transformed African patterns of slavery. Africans had developed many forms of servitude in their nonegalitarian societies. With land controlled by the state, slaves were an important way for individuals and lineages to gain wealth and status. Slaves held many occupations. Their treatment ranged from the relatively benign, when they were incorporated into kinship systems, to severe economic and social exploitation, when ruling hierarchies exercised power. The Atlantic trade opened new opportunities to slaveholding societies for expansion and intensification of slavery. Enslavement of women was central to African society. The Sudanic states had introduced

Islamic concepts of slavery. The existence of slavery allowed Europeans to mobilize commerce in slaves by tapping existing structures with the assistance of interested African rulers.

**Slaving and African Politics.** Most of the states of western and central Africa were small and unstable. The continuing wars elevated the importance of the military and promoted the slave trade. Increasing centralization and hierarchy developed in the enslaving societies; those attacked reacted by augmenting self-sufficiency and anti-authoritarian ideas. A result of the presence of the Europeans along the western coast was a shift of the locus of African power. Inland states close to the coast, and thus free from direct European influence, through access to Western firearms and other goods, became intermediaries in the trade and expanded their influence.

**Asante and Dahomey.** Among the important states developing during the slave trade era was the empire of Asante among the Akan people. Centered on Kumasi, Asante was between the coast and the inland Hausa and Mande trading regions. Under the Oyoko clan, the Asante gained access to firearms after 1650 and began centralizing and expanding. Osei Tutu became the asantehene, the supreme civil and military leader, of the Akan clans. By 1700, the Dutch along the coast were dealing directly with the new power. Through control of gold-producing regions and slaves, Asante remained dominant in the Gold Coast until the 1820s. In the Bight of Benin, the state of Benin was at the height of its power when Europeans arrived. The ruler for a long period controlled the trade with Europeans; slaves never were a primary commodity. The kingdom of Dahomey among the Fon peoples had a different response to the Europeans. It emerged around Abomey in the 17th century; by the 1720s, access to firearms led to the formation of an autocratic regime based on trading slaves. Under Agaja (1708-1740), Dahomey expanded to the coast, seizing the port of Whydah. The state maintained its policies into the 19th century. Too much emphasis on the slave trade obscures creative processes occurring in many African states. The growing divine authority of rulers paralleled the rise of absolutism in Europe. New political forms emerged that limited the power of some monarchs. In the Yoruba state of Oyo, a council and king shared authority. Art, crafts, weaving, and wood carving flourished in many regions. Benin and the Yoruba states created remarkable wood and ivory sculptures.

**East Africa and the Sudan.** On Africa's east coast, the Swahili trading towns continued a commerce of ivory, gold, and slaves for Middle Eastern markets. A few slaves went to European plantation colonies. On Zanzibar and other islands, Arabs, Indians, and Swahili produced cloves with slave labor. In the interior, African peoples had created important states. Migrants from the upper Nile valley moved into Uganda and Kenya, where they mixed with Bantu-speaking inhabitants. Strong monarchies developed in Bunyoro and Buganda. In western Africa, in the northern savanna, the process of Islamization entered a new phase, linking it with the external slave trade and the growth of slavery. Songhay broke up in the 16th century and was succeeded by new states. The Bambara of Segu were pagan; the Hausa states of northern Nigeria were ruled by Muslims, although most of the population followed African religions. Beginning in the 1770s, Muslim reform movements swept the western Sudan. In 1804, Uthman Dan Fodio, a Fulani Muslim, inspired a religious revolution that won control of most of the Hausa states. A new and powerful kingdom developed at Sokoto. The effects of Islamization were felt widely in the west African interior by the 1840s. Cultural and social change accelerated. Many war captives were dispatched to the coast or across the Sahara for the slave trade. The level of local slave labor also increased in agricultural and manufacturing enterprises.

**White Settlers and Africans in Southern Africa.** By the 16th century, Bantu-speaking peoples occupied the eastern regions of southern Africa. Drier western lands were left to the indigenous Khoikhoi and San. Migration, peaceful contacts, and war characterized the relations between the groups. The Bantu peoples practiced agriculture and herding, worked iron and copper, and traded with neighbors. Chiefdoms of various sizes, where leaders ruled with popular support, were typical. New chiefdoms continually emerged, resulting in competition for land and political instability. In the Dutch colony at Cape Town, established in 1652, the settlers developed large estates worked by slaves. Colonial expansion led to successful wars against the San and Khoikhoi. By the 1760s, the Afrikaners crossed the Orange River and met the Bantu. Competition and war over land resulted. Britain occupied the Dutch colony in 1795 and gained formal possession in 1815. British efforts to limit Afrikaner expansion were unsuccessful, and frequent fighting occurred between the Afrikaners and Africans. Some Afrikaners, seeking to escape British control, migrated beyond colonial boundaries and founded autonomous states.

**The Mfecane and the Zulu Rise to Power.** By 1818, a new leader, Shaka, gained authority among the Nguni people. He created a formidable military force of regiments organized on lineage and age lines. Shaka's Zulu chiefdom became the center of a new political and military organization that absorbed or destroyed rivals. Shaka was assassinated in 1828, but his successors ruled over a still-growing polity. The rise of the Zulu and other Nguni chiefdoms marked the beginning of the Mfecane, a time of wars and wandering. Defeated peoples fled into new regions and created new states—among them the Swazi and Lesotho—by using Zulu tactics. The Afrikaners' superior firepower enabled them to hold their lands. The Zulus remained powerful until defeated during the 1870s by the British. The basic patterns of conflict between Europeans and Africans took form during this era.

**The African Diaspora.** In the Americas, slaves came in large enough numbers to become an important segment of the New World population. African cultures adapted to their new physical and social environments. The slave trade linked Africa and the Americas; it was the principal way in which African societies joined the world economy. Africans participating in the commerce dealt effectively with the new conditions, using the wealth and knowledge gained to the advantage of their states.

**Slave Lives.** The slave trade killed millions of Africans; family and community relationships were destroyed. As many as one-third of captives may have died on their way to shipping ports; shipboard mortality reached about 18 percent. The trauma of the Middle Passage, however, did not strip Africans of their culture, and they interjected it into the New World.

**Africans in the Americas.** African slaves crossed the Atlantic to work in New World plantations and mines. The plantation system developed on Atlantic islands was transferred to the Americas. Africans quickly replaced Indians and indentured Europeans as agricultural laborers. Slaves also mined gold and silver and labored in many urban occupations. In early 17th-century Lima, Africans outnumbered Europeans.

**American Slave Societies.** In all American slave societies, a rough social hierarchy developed. Whites were at the top, slaves at the bottom. Free people of color were in-between. Among the slaves, owners created a hierarchy based on origin and color. Despite the many pressures, slaves retained their own social perceptions: Many slave rebellions were organized on ethnic

and political lines. Slave-based societies varied in composition. Africans formed the overwhelming majority of the population on Caribbean islands; high mortality ensured a large number of African-born individuals. Brazil had a more diverse population. Many slaves were freed, and miscegenation was common. Slaves made up 35 percent of the population; free people of color were equal in number. The southern British North American colonies differed in that a positive growth rate among slaves lessened the need for continuing imports. Manumission was uncommon, and free people of color were under 10 percent of Afro-American numbers. Thus, slavery was less influenced by African ways.

**The People and Gods in Exile.** Africans worked under extremely harsh conditions. The lesser numbers of women brought to the New World limited opportunities for family life. When a family was present, its continuance depended on the decisions of the owner. Despite the difficulties, most slaves lived in family units. Many aspects of African culture survived, especially when a region had many slaves from one African grouping. African culture was dynamic and creative, incorporating customs that assisted survival from different African ethnicities or from their masters. Religion demonstrates this theme. African beliefs mixed with Christianity, or survived independently. Haitian vodun is a good example of the latter. Muslim Africans tried to hold their beliefs; in 1835, a major slave rising in Brazil was organized by Muslims, Yoruba, and Hausa. Resistance to slavery was a common occurrence. Slaves ran away and formed lasting independent communities; in 17th-century Brazil, Palmares, a runaway slave state under Angolan leadership, had a population of 10,000. In Suriname, runaway slaves formed a still-existing community with a culture fusing west African, Indian, and European elements.

**The End of the Slave Trade and the Abolition of Slavery.** The influences causing the end of the slave trade and slavery were external to Africa. The continued flourishing of slave-based economies in Africa and the Americas makes it difficult to advance economic self-interest as a reason for ending the slave trade. Africans had commercial alternatives, but they did not affect the supply of slaves. Enlightenment thinkers during the 18th century condemned slavery and the slave trade as immoral and cruel. The abolitionist movement gained strength in England and won abolition of the slave trade for Britons in 1807. The British pressured other nations to follow course, although the final end of New World slavery did not occur until Brazilian abolition in 1888.

**Global Connections: Africa and the African Diaspora in World Context.** Africa entered the world economy in the slave-trade era. Its incorporation produced differing effects on African societies, but many societies had to adapt in ways that placed them at a disadvantage that facilitated later loss of independence during the 19th century. The legacy of the slave trade, as European rulers practiced forced labor policies, lingered into the 20th century.

## **KEY TERMS**

**Factories:** Trading stations with resident merchants established by the Portuguese and other Europeans.

**El Mina:** Important Portuguese factory on the coast of modern Ghana.

## Vocabulary:

1. Angola
2. Boer
3. Creole slaves
4. Factories
5. Indies piece
6. Lesotho
7. Saltwater slaves
8. Shaka
9. Zulu
10. Vodun
11. Oba
12. Africaners
13. Obeah
14. El Mina
15. Jean Jacques Rousseau
16. Triangular trade
17. Middle Passage
18. Great Trek
19. William Wilberforce
20. Asantehene
21. Creole slaves
22. Mfecane
23. Diaspora
24. Palmares
25. Polygyn
26. Voortrekkers
27. Asante
28. Luo
29. Royal African Company
30. Dahomey
31. John Wesley
32. Swazi
33. Cape Colony

Questions:

1. Discuss Portuguese exploration and penetration of Africa.

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2. Trace the changes in the volume of the Atlantic slave trade between 1450 and 1850.

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3. Describe the demographic effect of the African slave trade on the sub Saharan region.

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4. Summarize the social structure of American slave-based societies.

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5. Explain how the slave trade came to an end.

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