

The Impact of the Colombian Exchange on West Africa

by Douglas Cioffi and Emily White

West Africans were experienced agricultural workers whose labor was used to exploit the resources of the American continents. Although slavery existed throughout human history, slavery in the Americas, including the United States, developed into a fundamentally different institution from slavery in the ancient Mediterranean world and Africa. There was no reciprocal obligation by the elite to the enslaved. Enslavement was a permanent hereditary status based on skin color. There was an impassable racial barrier that denied the fundamental humanity of the enslaved. Olaudah Equiano was probably born on the west coast of equatorial Africa in 1745 and was kidnapped and sold into slavery when he was eleven. While enslaved, he worked on a Virginia plantation, as the servant for a British naval officer and for a Philadelphia merchant. After purchasing his freedom, he wrote his memoirs and became active in the anti-slavery movement. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vasa, Written by Himself* (London, 1789) is available on the web at docsouth.unc.edu. These materials are from the *New York and Slavery: Complicity and Resistance* curriculum. The full guide is available online at http://people.hofstra.edu/faculty/alan_j_singer.

A. The Life of Olaudah Equiano (c.1745 - c.1797)

Source: http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/equiano_olaudah.html

Olaudah Equiano is best known for his autobiography, an account of his childhood in an area called 'Eboe' in Guinea as the son of the chief and his experiences as a former slave. The book, which was called *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, became popular at the height of the anti-slavery campaign. Around the age of eleven, Equiano and his sister were kidnapped and shipped through the notorious middle passage. A British naval officer, Michael Pascal, later bought Equiano and introduced him to the naval way of life. Pascal also renamed Equiano 'Gustavus Vassa' after a 16th-century Swedish king who led the Swedes in a war of independence against the Danes.

Equiano was brought to England where he learned to read and write at a school in London in between naval actions. Equiano saw action in major naval battles during the Seven Years War in the 1750s and traveled to Canada and the Mediterranean. He had fought for the British and felt entitled to freedom and some of the prize money handed out to sailors. But he was cheated and sold to another sea-captain who took him to Monserrat in the Caribbean where he was sold to a Quaker merchant. During this time he was exposed to the horrors of slavery. Equiano was more fortunate than most of his peers. After three years of saving his income he was able to buy his freedom in 1766 for £40.

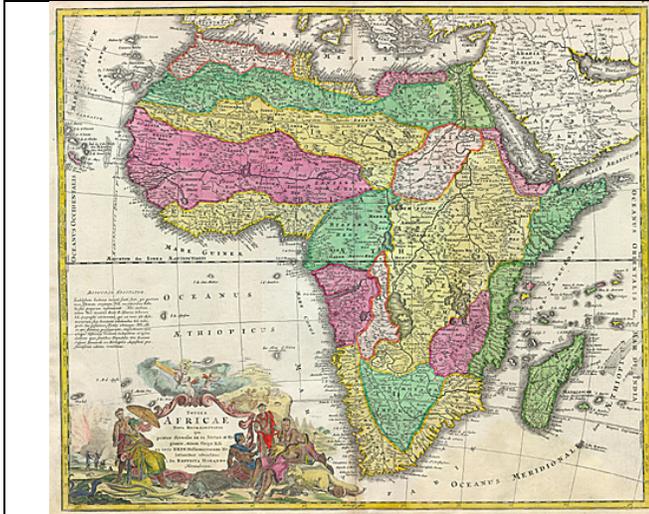
Equiano went to England, became a hairdresser, but soon returned to sea. In 1775, he became involved in a project to set up a new plantation on the Caribbean coast of Central America. During this time Equiano and his associates bought people but he states in his autobiography that he did "every thing I could to comfort the poor creatures. . ." Equiano later protested against slavery and worked with Granville Sharpe, a prominent British abolitionist. Equiano appealed to Sharpe to save his friend, John Annis, former slave who had been illegally kidnapped by his prior owner. Unfortunately, Annis could not be helped. Equiano's experience as a slave-owner turned sour when he was again cheated and threatened with re-enslavement.

His book appeared in the spring of 1789 and was favorably reviewed. He went on lecture tours and sold the book across Britain, while actively campaigning to abolish the slave trade. In 1792, Equiano married an Englishwoman named Susanna Cullen. They had two daughters, one of whom inherited a sizeable estate from her father when Equiano died in 1797.

Questions

1. Why is Olaudah Equiano also known as Gustavus Vassa?
2. What is different or unique about Equiano's life compared to the experience of other enslaved Africans?

B. Locating West Africa and Guinea on Maps



Historic Map of Africa. Source:
[http://bell.lib.umn.edu/historical/H af car.html](http://bell.lib.umn.edu/historical/H_af_car.html)



Guinea, 1625. By Jodocus Hondius. Source:
<http://www.uflib.ufl.edu/maps/ALW1665L.JPG>

C. West African Artifacts from the Merseyside Museum in Liverpool, UK

Artifacts give us clues to life in West Africa prior to the trans-Atlantic slave trade and challenge stereotypes about traditional African societies. One myth is that West Africa was isolated from the rest of the world. A second myth is that West African societies were illiterate. A third myth is that West African societies were technologically backward.



1. A wood tablet with a passage from the Koran.

1. There was an extensive trade network connecting West Africa with the Arab world.
2. Many religious leaders, government officials and merchants were literate.



2. Benin bronze showing the arrival of Portuguese slave traders accompanied by hunting dogs.

1. The creation of metal bas-reliefs suggest a high level of metallurgical skills.
2. Images on the bas-reliefs tell stories and record history in a form of pre-writing

D. Olaudah Equiano Describes Capture and Enslavement in Africa

Source: The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself. Vol. I. London: Author [1789], p. 25-32.

Capture: One day, when all our people were gone out to their works as usual, and only I and my dear sister were left to mind the house, two men and a woman got over our walls, and in a moment seized us both, and, without giving us time to cry out, or make resistance, they stopped our mouths, and ran off with us into the nearest wood. Here they tied our hands, and continued to carry us as far as they could, till night came on, when we reached a small house, where the robbers halted for refreshment, and spent the night. When we went to rest the following night they offered us some victuals; but we refused it; and the only comfort we had was in being in one another's arms all that night, and bathing each other with our tears. We were soon deprived of even the small comfort of weeping together. The next day proved a day of greater sorrow than I had yet experienced; for my sister and I were then separated. At length, after many days traveling, during which I had often changed masters, I got into the hands of a chieftain, in a very pleasant country. This man had two wives and some children, and they all used me extremely well, and did all they could to comfort me; particularly the first wife, who was something like my mother.

Enslavement: Although I was a great many days journey from my father's house, yet these people spoke exactly the same language with us. This first master of mine, as I may call him, was a smith, and my principal employment was working his bellows, which were the same kind as I had seen in my vicinity. They were in some respects not unlike the stoves here in gentlemen's kitchens; and were covered over with leather; and in the middle of that leather a stick was fixed, and a person stood up, and worked it, in the same manner as is done to pump water out of a cask with a hand pump. I believe it was gold he worked, for it was of a lovely bright yellow color, and was worn by the women on their wrists and ankles.

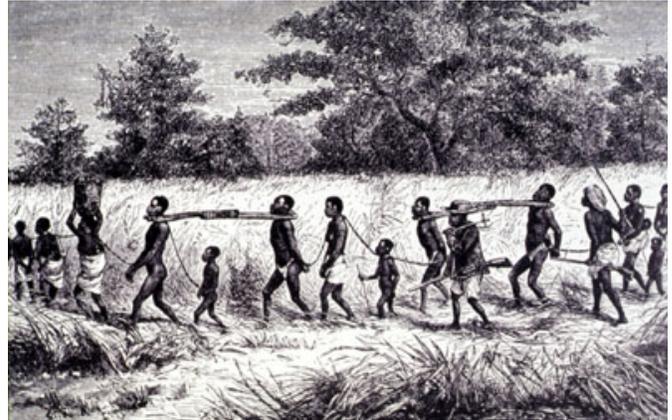
Failed Escape: I ran into a thicket that was hard by, and hid myself in the bushes. Soon afterwards my mistress and the slave returned, and, not seeing me, they searched all the house, but not finding me, they thought I had run away, and the whole neighborhood was raised in the pursuit of me. I had before entertained hopes of getting home, and I had determined when it should be dark to make the attempt; but I was now convinced it was fruitless, and I began to consider that, if possibly I could escape all other animals, I could not those of the human kind; and that, not knowing the way, I must perish in the woods. I at length quitted the thicket, very faint and hungry, for I had not eaten or drank any thing all the day; and crept to my master's kitchen, from whence I set out at first, and which was an open shed, and laid myself down in the ashes with an anxious wish for death to relieve me from all my pains.

Sold and Sold Again: In a small time afterwards I was again sold. I was now carried to the left of the sun's rising, through many different countries, and a number of large woods. The people I was sold to used to carry me very often, when I was tired, either on their shoulders or on their backs. From the time I left my own nation I always found somebody that understood me till I came to the sea coast. The languages of different nations did not totally differ, nor were they so copious as those of the Europeans, particularly the English. They were therefore easily learned; and, while I was journeying thus through Africa, I acquired two or three different tongues. In this manner I had been travelling for a considerable time, when one evening, to my great surprise, whom should I see brought to the house where I was but my dear sister! I did not long remain after my sister. I was again sold, and carried through a number of places, till, after travelling a considerable time, I came to a town called Tinmah, in the most beautiful country I had yet seen in Africa. It was extremely rich, and there were many rivulets which flowed through it, and supplied a large pond in the center of the town, where the people washed. I was sold here for one hundred and seventy-two of them by a merchant who lived and brought me there. I had been about two or three days at his house, when a wealthy widow, a neighbor of his, came there one evening, and brought with her an only son, a young gentleman about my own age and size. Here they saw me; and, having taken a fancy to me, I was bought of the merchant, and went home with them. Her house and premises were situated close to one of those

rivulets I have mentioned, and were the finest I ever saw in Africa: they were very extensive, and she had a number of slaves to attend her.

The language of these people resembled ours so nearly, that we understood each other perfectly. They had also the very same customs as we. There were likewise slaves daily to attend us, while my young master and I with other boys sported with our darts and bows and arrows, as I had been used to do at home. In this resemblance to my former happy state I passed about two months; and I now began to think I was to be adopted into the family, and was beginning to be reconciled to my situation, and to forget by degrees my misfortunes, when all at once the delusion vanished; for, without the least previous knowledge, one morning early, while my dear master and companion was still asleep, I was wakened out of my reverie to fresh sorrow, and hurried away.

Transported to the Sea Coast: All the nations and people I had hitherto passed through resembled our own in their manners, customs, and language: but I came at length to a country, the inhabitants of which differed from us in all those particulars. I was very much struck with this difference, especially when I came among a people who did not circumcise [remove the foreskin from the penis of male children], and ate without washing their hands. They cooked also in iron pots, and had European cutlasses and cross bows, which were unknown to us, and fought with their fists amongst themselves. Their women were not so modest as ours, for they ate, and drank, and slept, with their men. But, above all, I was amazed to see no sacrifices or offerings among them. In some of those places the people ornamented themselves with scars, and likewise filed their teeth very sharp. They wanted sometimes to ornament me in the same manner, but I



“Gang of captives met at Mbame’s on their way to Teffe,”
Harper’s Weekly (vol. 32, May 1866). <http://www.virginia.edu/woodson/courses/arch566/week3.html>

would not suffer them. At last I came to the banks of a large river, which was covered with canoes, in which the people appeared to live with their household utensils and provisions of all kinds. I was beyond measure astonished at this, as I had never before seen any water larger than a pond or a rivulet: and my surprise was mingled with no small fear when I was put into one of these canoes, and we began to paddle and move along the river. Thus I continued to travel, sometimes by land, sometimes by water, through different countries and various nations, till, at the end of six or seven months after I had been kidnapped, I arrived at the sea coast. It would be tedious and uninteresting to relate all the incidents which befell me during this journey, and which I have not yet forgotten; of the various hands I passed through, and the manners and customs of all the different people among whom I lived: I shall therefore only observe, that in all the places where I was the soil was exceedingly rich. There were also vast quantities of different gums, though not used for any purpose; and every where a great deal of tobacco. The cotton even grew quite wild; and there was plenty of red-wood. I saw no mechanics whatever in all the way, except such as I have mentioned. The chief employment in all these countries was agriculture, and both the males and females, as with us, were brought up to it, and trained in the arts of war.

Questions

1. What happened when Equiano and his sister were captured?
2. What was Equiano surprised to learn about the people who had captured him?
3. Why did Equiano fail in his escape attempt?
4. How did conditions on the sea coast differ from conditions in the interior?
5. In your opinion, how did Olaudah Equiano accommodate himself to enslavement?

E. Impact of Europeans on the Benin Kingdom

Source: <http://www.uiowa.edu/~africart/toc/history/giblinstate.html#benin>

When Portuguese mariners became the first Europeans to visit this part of West Africa in 1486, the *obas* (rulers) benefited from trade with them. Esigie, who ruled from about 1504 to 1550, established close contacts with the Portuguese and, according to some accounts, learned to speak and read Portuguese. The *obas* established a royal monopoly over trade in pepper and ivory with European and Benin became an important exporter of cloth. Benin prevented the depletion of its own population by prohibiting the export of males slaves during the 16th and 17th centuries, although it did import and resell captives purchased by Europeans elsewhere in West Africa.

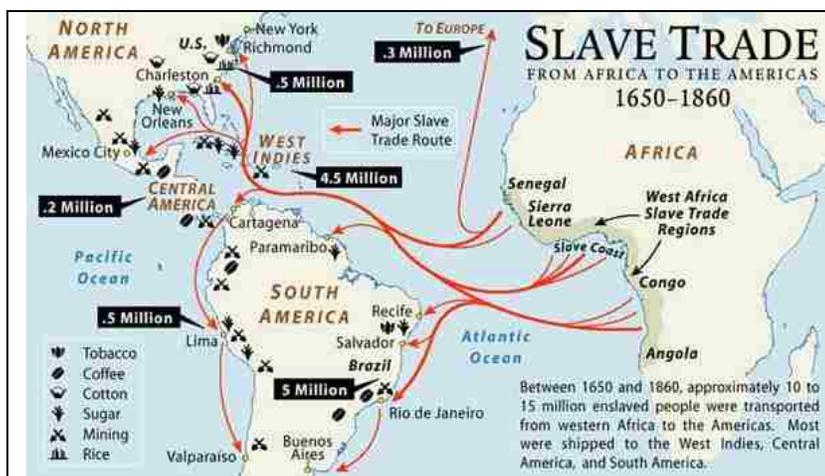
Wealthy and powerful *obas* became the patrons of artists and craftspeople. Under Esigie, the artists of Benin produced their most famous work. Because trade brought copper and brass into the kingdom, metalworkers were able to refine techniques for bronze and brass casting which had been known in Benin since the 13th century. They produced a remarkable series of bronze bas-reliefs lining the walls of the *oba's* palace.

Historians of Benin know relatively little about the kingdom's history during the 18th century, although they recognize that slaves supplanted cloth as Benin's major export after it abolished the prohibition on slave exports. The 19th century is often described by historians as a period of steady decline culminating in the conquest of Benin by the British in 1897. Like much of West Africa, Benin's economy was disrupted by the decision of the British in 1807 to abolish the slave trade. Meanwhile, militarily formidable Islamic states to the north of Benin posed a new threat and one seized control of Benin's northern peripheries. To the west, the Yoruba state of Ibadan menaced Benin. European traders also established an increasingly threatening presence.

This context of decline and external menace has been used by historians to explain an infamous aspect of Benin's history, the practice of human sacrifice. They have suggested that, faced with dwindling profits from trade and besieged by enemies on all sides, the *obas* resorted to ritual sacrifice as a way of overawing their subjects. "The intensification of human sacrifice in Benin City from the late 1880s," writes the Nigerian scholar A.I. Asiwaju, "has been interpreted by some as evidence of the desperation of the rulers seeking ritual solution to the political problem of an imminent collapse."

Questions

1. What role did the *obas* play in Benin society?
2. What was the Benin kingdom's attitude toward slavery in the 16th and 17th centuries?
3. What role did the British play in the collapse of the Benin kingdom?



F. The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade

Use the following map to answer the questions below.

Source: http://www.slaveryinamerica.org/geography/slave_trade.htm

1. From which section of Africa did slave ships depart?
2. To which section of the Americas were the most Africans sent?
3. Based on this map, what was the impact of the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade on Africa and the Americas?

