

Equiano's travels

Business



Olaudah Equiano is an African author born in Essaka, an Igbo village in Benin which is currently known as Nigeria.

As a young boy of only 11 years, Equiano together with his sister were captured and sold into slavery. However, it did not take long before the two children were separated from each other. Although he left his home at a tender age, he still identifies himself as an African and he emphasizes his originality by writing his bibliography titled: *The Life of Olaudah Equiano the African*. Although it was impossible to practice his African culture in a foreign land, he did not do away with the fact that he was African. He embraced the British culture so that he would blend in and survive. In 1792, he even went further and married a British woman, Susanna Cullen who bore him two children, Anna Maria (October 1793) and Johanna (April 1795).

This paper seeks to address the life history of Equiano and discuss how he defines his identity. Equiano was captured by slave traders who were on their way to the West Indies. As he had skills of a sailor, he spent much of his time serving captains of slave ships and British navy vessels. His servanthood in the British navy vessels bore him a new name, Gustavas Vassa. He was given this name by Captain Henry Pascal and Equiano used his new name all his life even though he used his African name when publishing his autobiography. While working for Captain Pascal, Equiano was able to travel to many places such as South Carolina, Georgia, Pennsylvania, the Caribbean, Nova Scotia, Gibraltar, Scotland, England and Holland.

In 1763, Equiano was bought by a Quaker from Philadelphia who was known as Robert King. He worked as Robert's clerk. This was of great advantage to

him as he was allowed to engage in his own trade interactions. It enabled him to raise enough money to buy his freedom in the year 1766. He then established himself in England in the year 1767 and started schooling. At the same time, he worked as an assistant to Dr.

Charles Irving who was a scientist. The publication of his autobiography made him to travel throughout Great Britain. Olaudah Equiano has a dual identity. Having been moved from Africa before he had grown up, it makes sense that he identifies himself with both the British and the African cultures. His identity has, in numerous occasions been questioned.

Some people even claimed that he originated from West Indies, a claim that Equiano strongly rebutted. Equiano felt that such claims were aimed at discrediting his narrative. In his narrative, Equiano begins by describing himself as an "obscure individual, and a stranger too" (Egan). These words have a strong implication what he identifies himself to be. It would be completely wrong for him to consider himself European as we see he went through a lot of hardship to be where he got.

Having gone through the slavery times already says a lot. He considers himself as a student to the England customs. In his narrative, he asserts that he did not take it lightly when an English man refused to pay his debt. He had sold some goods to one Mr. Smith, on credit, believing that the gentleman nature of English people would prompt Smith to pay him back.

But that was not the case; he wasn't paid a single sent. This story shows Equiano as a man who saw himself to be more English than Mr. Smith.

Equiano believes in honesty and respect for property which is only evident in <https://assignbuster.com/equianos-travels/>

the English as opposed to the Africans. Equiano strongly emphasizes on his dual identity in his autobiography. He clearly describes how well he could speak English and could understand what was being addressed.

He further adds that he felt easy with what he terms as his "countrymen". This shows that he relates himself with the Englishmen and is happy to be one of them. This extract clearly defines how he became to see himself as an Englishman. In the other hand it shows that his originality was not in England as he had to learn the English language. In the beginning, Equiano symbolizes himself as a trade commodity between traders.

However, it reaches a point where he refuses to be sold anymore by his master Pascal claiming that Pascal had illegally taken his wages and prize-money. However, as fate would dictate, no one listens to him and Pascal sells him. Furthermore, he forcefully takes away his only jacket. Pascal tells him that even if his prize-money was more he would still take it all. This is an indication that Equiano was being oppressed but had no voice. That kind of treatment shows that slaves had no right to their earnings; their masters were at liberty to do anything to them.

Equiano's belief in God further shows that he had baptized himself into an Englishman. By the time he was leaving his cradle land he had no idea of what Christianity was. However, his Christianity is manifested when he feels that he was going through hard times as a result of God's anger on him for the sins he had committed. This makes him to change his ways of living in order to prevent God's wrath. As though God had heard his prayers, his next master is a Quaker merchant, Robert King.

He had a good relationship with his master which yielded many fruits. Firstly, King would allow him to do his side businesses. Secondly, he gained favoritism as he states that King preferred him to white men. Lastly, it gained him his freedom. King had encouraged him to work hard and save his earnings so that he would use them to buy his freedom.

Therefore, he managed to save forty sterling pounds to buy his freedom: This was the same amount King had used to buy him! It could be argued that apart from being a hard worker, King liked Equiano because of his faith. Equiano's hybridism is inevitable as they were his surviving skills. He wanted to abolish slave trade and so he had to identify himself as an African who had gone through it. On the other hand, for him to live in peace with the British he had to copy their language, culture, ways of trading and social lives. It would be selfish of him to identify himself with one side. Moreover, it's like he wanted to tread on a neutral ground in his narrative; he does want to look like he is leaning on one side.

As it is commonly said, one has to do what the Romans do when he goes to Rome. Therefore, Equiano went to Rome and did as the Romans did. In his hybridity, Equiano has been able to help in abolishing of slave trade. If he did not identify himself as English it would be hard for Englishmen to read his autobiography. On the contrary, identifying himself as an African benefited the Africans as they also voiced up and refused to be bought.

They felt that if our fellow African is against slave trade then we should also be against it. Also, his hybridism enabled him to attain his freedom. Since he could speak and understand English, he was able to communicate with his

master, King, who helped him to get his freedom. In conclusion, Equiano played an important role in abolishing slave trade (Resource Bank). His stand to be both British and African came in handy in many situations.

Also, his involvement in trade was a way of empowering himself which in the end we see him as a man who stood and voiced up on behalf of the slaves. Moreover, Equiano is seen as a man who did not forget where he came from. He remembers his cradle land and appreciates by writing an autobiography. He speaks on behalf on the oppressed slaves on the kind of treatment they get from their masters. His bibliography encourages slaves that they too can attain their freedom.