

# A glimpse of unbalanced trade relations



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James Barbot's account offers a snapshot of 17th century African slave trade, a tumultuous period wherein the Dutch, French and English have emerged as dominant players in the Trans-Atlantic trade ring.

The Portuguese had pioneered the slave trade after being the first to establish contact with indigenous African elites in the 15th century. The Spanish and other Europeans then followed suit in an attempt to address the burgeoning demand for cheap labor in their respective colonies. Several literatures contend that reigning feudal relations allowed various forms of servitude to exist in African societies even prior to the arrival of Europeans. Slavery was a common practice in Africa, which involved prisoners of war, criminals, heretics, the mentally-ill, the indebted and those who were punished for angering their rulers.

Noted African historian, Adu Boahen, ascribed African enslavement in the 17th century and beyond to African coastal kings and their elders: "[V]ery few Europeans actually ever marched inland and captured slaves themselves. Africans became enslaved mainly through four ways: first, criminals sold by the chiefs as punishment; secondly, free Africans obtained from raids by African and a few European gangs, thirdly, domestic slaves resold, and fourthly, prisoners of war," (quoted in Person-Lynn, par. 2). Notwithstanding these cultural complexities, transatlantic demand for cheap labor spurred African slavery to new and never before imagined heights. Barbot recounts a series of trade "conferences" or negotiations with the King of Ibani and his appointed traders (Caboceiros), culminating in the trade of African slaves for "standard" European goods. His succeeding narrative highlights the

common trade practice of setting anchor offshore to wait for local traders to arrive by canoe.

Maintaining amicable relations with the local elite ensured the safety and success of their undertaking. Slave traders also found it easier to simply establish contacts with local African leaders and merchants than conduct inland expeditions to capture slaves themselves. Arms were supplied to particular kingdoms to encourage factionalism and strife among African tribes. Tribal conflicts ensured that there was always a fresh supply of slaves to be bought from the winning party. Slave traders have been known to aid regimes they deemed amenable to their interests. (Person-Lynn, par.

5). Europeans and their counterparts in the African elite, represented by the King and the Caboceiros found common interest in the slave trade. The latter exploited the trade for its own private profit. Barbot's account is also evidence of the extensive and systematic nature of the slave trade; an ingrained economic activity in coastal kingdoms throughout Africa. Clearly, slave trade was a well-organized, clear-cut barter system that used currency in the form of bars of iron ("the standard coin") and other items.

Although the exchange accorded considerable economic gains to some African states at the time, these were merely fleeting (African Migration). Reliance on European capital and other exports was ruinous for the African economy in the long run. Labor export greatly contributed to a shortage in workers, while the influx of European goods further dimmed Africa's hopes of ever developing its own industries. Objectively speaking, the transatlantic slave trade system played a critical role in developing a globally integrated

economy, although such progress had to come at a high price: “ The misery of the African slaves formed a vital link in the trading system that connected the continents and formed the backbone of the global network of commerce” (Harms, par. 1). It is even argued that the African slave economy ushered in Europe’s Industrial Revolution (Blackburn).

Fortunately, slavery – although part and parcel of history – cannot be viewed from an amoral perspective. While Barbot’s chronicles could be considered a harmless read (if one deliberately ignored the racial undertones), the slave trade can never be considered a normal way of doing business. There is no denying that the slave trade during the 15th century and beyond had far-reaching implications that contributed to important developments across the world. These however do not justify the misery endured by thousands of people. We also need to draw a distinction between private profits and social costs.

The development of one nation or set of people should never come at the price of plundering and exploiting another. Works Cited“ African Migration to the New World: the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. ” Peopling North America: Population Movements & Migration. Ed. Applied History Research Group. 22 June 2001.

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