

# The african presence in early modern spain



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

' Discuss the ways in which Africans were conceptualised in Early Modern Spain. Discuss with reference to examples provided by ONE or MORE sources studied on the course.'

This essay will explore briefly the historical background of Spain by identifying some of the major factors that influenced modern society's thinking. In so doing it will contribute to the discussion on how the African community were conceptualised in Modern Spain. In the first part of the essay I will attempt to outline some of the major events in Iberian Peninsula Spain, that had shaped the mentality of both the Muslim and Christian kingdom and how they would have related with Africans. I will then go over the institution of slavery and its importance in Spain over time. Finally, I will offer an overview on the above affect the lives of African in Modern Spain.

In order to explore the ways in which Africans were conceptualised in Early Modern Spain we must first address the historical context. What is currently known as Spain and Portugal, used to be known as the Iberian Peninsula which was ruled by numerous people from different tribes, religions and ethnic backgrounds. In 206 BC the romans started to conquer Hispania, which had previously been under the control of native Celtiberian, but it wasn't until 19 BC that they managed to take full control of the territory.[1]

Then, not long after came the Goth that occupied the Iberian Peninsula from the 5th to the 8th century. The Visigoths considered themselves as the ' heirs of the Roman Empire' and therefore believed that they had the right to take territories owned by the romans in Hispania. In 589 the goths converted

to Catholicism and abolished all laws that separated the Goths from the Romans.[2]

Unfortunately for the goths, in 711 the Muslim (moors) mainly from North Africa and Berber and Arab ethnicity crossed over passing through Gibraltar to take over Hispania.[3]

In 718 the Christian began to regain the Spanish territory from the Moors, this period is known to as the Reconquista. Although the Christians had started to take over, some of the Hispanic territory were still largely occupied by the moors, one of those places being Granada. To gain better support and power, it became clear that the kingdoms of Aragon and Castile were to join forces. They did this primarily through the union of Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella I of Castile in 1419. This act enabled the Christians to take over Granada and return the Spanish territory to the Christians.

For the Catholic Monarch, reconquering what they felt as theirs did not end there, since soon after the inquisition took place, a law/ policy was passed, forcing everyone to convert to the catholic faith and ordered expulsion for those of a Moorish ( those who refused to convert) and Jewish descent.[4]

Throughout this period, we could already see the importance of religious belief as an identity and the conflict that it created within society during the evolution of Spain till its modern days.

In his book '*Inhuman Bondage*', Davis talks about the traditional definition of slavery : " a slave person is the chattel property of another man or woman, and thus subject to sale and /or other forms of transfer". They are also

subject to the master's authority and therefore worked and completed different task for their owner. If their labour or services were not completed to their slave master's will, then they risked physical punishment. This was a way for the slave master's to reinforce their authority and keep their slaves ' in line' .[5]

At some point in the history of Western Europe, we could have agreed that slavery was cross-cultural and multi-ethnic especially during the war period and the conquest for territories. For instance, Ireland and England had enslaved individuals up to the 11th century[6]. Those taken captive during the warfare were held for ransom until exchange took place between both parties. Those who were not rescued did not manage to escape or those who had not been claimed for, would be enslaved by their enemies.[7]Hence the reason why it said that enslaved individuals came from a variety of background, and that it was not limited to one group of people at that time; instead it is believed that a free man could end up being enslaved and an enslaved could then become free, although with time, the route into slavery became much more narrow, and later on more focused on a particular group of individuals.

Slavery is a complex institution that has changed over time but continues to exist. It was already present in both the Christian and Muslim kingdom of Iberian Peninsula and evolved with time.

Roman Spain had a high number of gang slaves that added up near to approximately 30% of the population yet this was not enough to be a slave

society.[8]Slavery is said to have been important during the Visigoth period from the 5th to the early 8th century where catholic Christian were enslaved.

This did not last for long as the Visigoth's ruling was over by the time the moors conquered the territory. The Muslim tended to enslave children, women and men of the opposition party often of Jewish or Christian faiths but of different ethnic background. By the 10<sup>th</sup> century the Slavs became the most imported group for slavery, to the extent that their name has become the origin of the word *slave* in western language and in Arabic[9].

By the late middle age, slaves were recruited by the Italians who looked for non-Christian slaves or at least non-Catholic slaves around the Mediterranean right beyond the black sea. When the Christian were on the dominant side of the power scale, they would put large number of Muslim slaves on the western European market.

Even in Portugal the presence of Muslim slaves is documented from the 11<sup>th</sup> century, but from the 1440's and onward the slave trade changed and was more and more directed to the sub-Saharan slaves. This was due to the black death catastrophe that took place in Europe , and the Spaniard and Portuguese expedition to Africa, which resulted into them returning with African men and enslaving them in Europe.[10]

As pointed by Lowe , Africa is a vast continent full of cultural , religious, social , linguistic and ethnic diversity[11]. So, in that sense, an African person is someone originated from the African continent or are the descendants of Africans[12]. In no way does it say that an African Person is solely of black skin, *negros* as the Spanish people would say. the Arabs were <https://assignbuster.com/the-african-presence-in-early-modern-spain/>

from North Africa and did not have black Skin so they were known as the *white slaves* [13] . As for the black slaves, some people would refer to the following 7 group in early modern Spain to identify a *Black* slave[14]:

- Sub-Saharan people- people in this group could come from all type ethnic backgrounds and speak different languages. They could be originated from Guinea, Congo or even Angola and belong to Christian or Muslim background. This group formed most of the black Africans.
- North African Muslims of sub-Saharan background often speaking Arabic.
- People of sub-Saharan ancestors born in Spain or Portugal often baptised and Castilian speaking.
- People of the canary island often of darker skins and already enslaved.
- Hindus or Tamils from India brought by the Portuguese slaves' traders.
- And finally, African Americans brought from America to Spain by their Spanish slave owners.

Some of the above would be enslaved whilst others would be free or freed men.

In 1440s, the first group of captured or sold sub-Saharan African were transported by the Portuguese from the coast of the Atlantic Africa to Europe. By the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Portuguese had established an organised slave trade in Christian Europe . Some of the Africans remained in Portugal whilst others were sent to different parts of Europe.

Those who were taken to Spain often ended in Seville , whilst others went towards the north or/and toward the Crown of Aragon. Seville as a matter of

fact held the highest number of black slaves in Spain. In fact in 1565, 14.670 of inhabitants were slaves, which added up to 3.4% of the population. Seville was also the main slavery base market after Lisbon were many black slaves were purchased to work in the new world.[15]

One of the main concepts shared amongst all during Iberian Peninsula Spain and up to early modern Spain was that Africanwereslaves, most especially those with black skin.[16]

The black skin Africans brought in by the Portuguese, were perfect for the economy as they provided cheap labour , most especially when the New world started and that the Elite Spaniards were able to send their slave to America for agricultural work. This type of slavery was considered as an urban and domestic phenomenon in Iberia.[17]

When the Christian Crown conquered Spain and defeated the Muslim's, those who were left free/or and enslaved were forced to convert to Christianity. they were known as the *moriscos* and were set apart from the society no matter how hard they tried mainly because of their religious background. This group was seen as the enemy because the Christian community did not believe in their conversion, and so it was said that they were not to be trusted afraid that they would create a parallel Muslim community and revive the past. Even when enslaved, the white African Arabs, Berbers or Turks where seen as savages, dangerous and potential runaways[18].

Similarly to the *moriscos*, the Black Africans were also seen as uncivilized savages. For instance when Christopher Colombus travels in 1493 to the Caribbean and addresses his travels in his letter to Isabella and Ferdinand he

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said: ' the people of this island , and of all the others [...] go naked, men and women alike[...]' we can clearly see that to him that kind of attire is abnormal. In that society, to be civilized meant to be clothed, Christian, speak the colonizer's language and have laws of conduct.

He then goes on to say: '[...] I freely gave them good things i had brought along, so that they would be won over, become Christians inclined toward love and the service[19]'. If we consider Aristotle's statement: ' it is clear that some people were born free, and others were naturally born slaves and it is to their advantage to be so'[20]. We can argue that Colombus's aim, or as a matter of fact all of the explorer's aims were to bring back the uncivilized savage back to civilization and also offer them guidance by introducing them to God. In the text he evens says that he captured ' some' by force and taught them his language so that they could get his point across to the wider community. In that sense the outsider, the uncivilized was inferior to those with power, weapon and technology.

It was believed that unlike the *moriscos*, the black African made great slaves as they were loyal and faithful and submitted easily to their new identity. For example, they allowed themselves to be baptized without any difficulties and become good Christian.[21]The baptism would give them a new identity. This gave them certain advantages, as, although the church did not condemn slavery, they imposed good treatment of Christian slaves. [22]Moreover, the church often expressed its charitable intention, by creating religious confraternity to enable freed and enslaved Africans to gather amongst themselves. The confraternities were also a subtle way of controlling the influx of slave.



If that wasn't enough, the enslaved African were then brought to the Sevillian market located in the heart of business district , to be sold amongst all sort of other object. Even when a slave owner would do his/hers inventories list, the African slaves would feature along with other items such as pictures, furniture and other chattels.[23] Thus, in addition to being seen as inferior , the African was also treated as an object that could be used and/or disposed of in the eyes of some.

When the number of African presence increased and became ' too high', the local people complained and so confraternities were created for African Christian to contain them , but it also allowed for them gather amongst themselves. Never did it once occur to the religious priest or anyone else as matter of fact, that gathering a group of people who are seen as inferior could lead to rebellious thinking , resulting to rebellious group. That was not what came to mind, as the Africans were seen as illiterate, simple minded and lazy.

Africans were seen as lazy from the beginning of time especially the black Africans.[24] Maybe this was because when explorers went to their land, they had concluded that men worked more than women , and also that material goods such as gold came easy to them. Thus since they didn't need to work for, it then they were lazy. As enslaved individual, Africans were forced to work at a the masters standard which if not satisfied would reinforced their authority through the use of physical punishment. This was also to create fear and be an ' example' to others that wished to disobey or runaway.[25]

In Baltaser's work on Juan Latino we can see that thanks to good education, a man who was once a slave managed to develop into a well-known intellectual. Latin which was an old language was something that came easy to him and along with that his so called "Ethiopian" origins. Those were the two main tools that Juan Latino would use in the hope of gaining social and racial respect. Juan Latino carefully turn the concept de "limpieza de sangre" to his advantage by, proclaiming himself as an 'old Christian' saying that he was born in Ethiopia. Ethiopia being the country of which Christianity originated from, thus it would almost seem that he was demanding to be treated fairly and equally[26]. However, he was quickly dismissed by the Spanish as being of dark skin he was perceived as nothing more than a "negro" and therefore being associated to the community of slaves.

The above example could apply to Philip's claim: "Slaves were not objects"[27], as Juan Latino had managed to fulfill his wishes and desires as a slave and had managed to be successful. But this type of change only happened for some, as even Latino had to constantly prove himself as an intellectual artist. What is fascinating is how he manages to use the argument of religion on the rest of the community to challenge they already preconceived ideas on black people.

Finally, we hear that Black African were often seen and associated as torturers, tempter and executioners in Christian Europe. In Spain it was common to see a Black person work as an executioner this was primary because of the color of their skin had been associated with the devil, which was often illustrated as an animalistic black man[28]. Furthermore, the African individual was also said to be sexually promiscuous[29], possibly

because of the ideas shared by the explorers that did not understand why some men in other part of the world(e. g Muslim Africans) had many partners. They also claimed that some would be in relationships with their sister or cousins, which was something that they deemed as wrong.

In conclusion, these pre-conceived ideas shaped by society at the time, restricted Africans from being fully integrated and as a result, they remained social outcast regardless of the efforts made to become ' true Spaniards'. Apart from the identity assigned to them, at no time do we see the wider society taking interest in the true essence of the African individual , his background , origins or cultural. Instead they are encouraged to change and evolve into the what was considered as ' civilisation' and ' perfection' by the White European. One of the main institution to which they were able to do that was through religion, as it was a major factor which contributed in a Spaniard's identity. Thus, if the Africans wanted to obtain social and political respect, they had to prove themselves through religion. It would now be interesting to see whether the African was seen differently in art , and whether we can get a sense of the true origin and nature, and not the ' washed out ' version offered in Modern Spain.

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