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*Digital History ID 3807*

## Slavery Fact Sheets

### Geography

1. Enslaved Africans came primarily from a region stretching from the Senegal River in northern Africa to Angola in the South.
2. Europeans divided this stretch of land into five coasts:
  - Upper Guinea Coast: The area delineated by the Senegal and Gambia Rivers
  - Ivory (or Kwa Kwa or Windward) Coast: Central Liberia
  - Lower Guinea Coast: Divided into the Gold Coast on the west (Cote d'Ivoire and Ghana), the Slave Coast (Togo, Benin, and western Nigeria), and the Bight of Benin (Nigeria and Cameroon)
  - Gabon
  - Angola
3. The Angolan coast supplied nearly half the slaves sent to the Americas.

### Religion

1. Unlike European religions, most African religions were not based on sacred texts or scriptures, but rather on continuous revelation.
2. Most areas did not create a religious orthodoxy or have an entrenched priesthood.
3. Most African religions recognized a variety of supernatural beings.
4. Religious practice focused on contact between this world and the other world, typically through augury, divination, prophecy, and spirit mediumship.

### Organization

1. The notion of tribes, combining a common language and customs with a political structure is mistaken. Atlantic Africa was divided into states (political units) and nations (cultural units).
2. While some states were quite large, others were quite modest in size and many were tiny, consisting of a capital town of a few thousand people and a dozen villages under its control.
3. In the 17th century, 70 percent of the people lived in states with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants.
4. Unlike the rich and powerful of Europe and Asia, those in Africa were not landowners, since African law did not recognize the right to own, sell, or rent land as property.
5. Private wealth usually derived from control of dependents--clients, pawns, wives in polygynous households, and slaves.

### African Slavery

1. African law recognized slavery and the right of owners to alienate slaves.

2. A relatively low population density and an absence of the concept of property in land encouraged the development of slavery in West and Central Africa.
3. Slavery had been important in the medieval empires of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai, and slave exports had supplemented the export of gold.
4. Although African slavery was not a benign institution, slaves in Africa were used in a wider variety of ways than in the New World: they were employed as agricultural workers, soldiers, servants, and officials.
5. The great majority of slaves sold to Europeans were not slaves in Africa; they were usually recent war captives or victims of banditry and judicial proceedings.
6. Even under harsh chattel slavery, manumission was possible for a significant number of slaves and slaves usually had a right to keep any monetary earnings and buy their freedom.
7. Multi-generational slavery was uncommon; in part this reflected the fact that most African slaves were women.
8. During the early years of enslavement, African slaves usually worked under supervision. Then many became "allotment slaves," who worked five or six days until about 2 p.m. on the master's lands, and in the evenings and on their days off, worked their own plots. In the third stage settled slaves spent most of their time working their land in exchange for a fixed obligation, usually what it took to feed an adult male for a year.

## Slave Trade

1. During the era of the Atlantic slave trade, many of those enslaved, perhaps a majority, were kept in Africa.
2. The Atlantic slave trade carried about two to three men for every woman.
3. The slave trade reduced the adult male population by about 20 percent, dramatically altering the ratio of working adults to dependents and of adult men to adult women.
4. One result of unbalanced sex ratios was to encourage polygyny.
5. Another result was to reduce traditional male forms of work, such as hunting, fishing, livestock rearing, the clearing of fields, the chopping down of trees, and the digging up of roots. The result was a less protein rich diet and a reduction in agricultural productivity.
6. About 14 percent of slaves sent to the New World were children under 14; 56 percent were male adults; and 30 percent were female adults.

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## Myths and Misconceptions and the Slave Trade and Slavery

### Slavery and World History

**Myth:** Slavery is a product of capitalism.

**Fact:** Slavery is older than the first human records.

**Myth:** Slavery is a product of Western Civilization.

**Fact:** Slavery is virtually a universal institution.

**Myth:** Slavery in the non-western world was a mild, benign, and non-economic institution.

**Fact:** Slaves were always subject to torture, sexual exploitation, and arbitrary death.

**Myth:** Slavery was an economically backward and inefficient institution.

**Fact:** Many of the most progressive societies in the world had slaves.

**Myth:** Slavery was always based on race.

**Fact:** Not until the 15th century was slavery associated primarily with people of African descent.

## Enslavement and the Slave Trade

**Myth:** New World slaves came exclusively from West Africa.

**Fact:** Half of all New World slaves came from central Africa.

**Myth:** Europeans physically enslaved Africans or hired mercenaries who captured people for export or that African rulers were "Holocaust abettors" who were themselves to blame for the slave trade.

**Fact:** Europeans did engage in some slave raiding; the majority of people who were transported to the Americas were enslaved by Africans in Africa.

**Myth:** Many slaves were captured with nets.

**Fact:** There is no evidence that slaves were captured with nets; war was the most important source of enslavement.

**Myth:** Kidnapping was the usual means of enslavement.

**Fact:** War was the most important source of enslavement; it would be incorrect to reduce all of these wars to slave raids.

**Myth:** The Middle Passage stripped enslaved Africans of their cultural heritage and transformed them into docile, passive figures wholly receptive to the cultural inputs of their masters.

**Fact:** Slaves engaged in at least 250 shipboard rebellions.

## Slavery in the Americas

**Myth:** Most slaves were imported into what is now the United States

**Fact:** Well over 90 percent of slaves from Africa were imported into the Caribbean and South America

**Myth:** Slavery played a marginal role in the history of the Americas

**Fact:** African slaves were the only remedy for the labor shortages that plagued Europe's New World dominions.

**Fact:** Slave labor made it profitable to mine for precious metal and to harvest sugar, indigo, and tobacco; slaves taught whites how to raise such crops as rice and indigo.

**Myth:** Europeans arrived in the New World in far larger numbers than did Africans.

**Fact:** Before 1820, the number of Africans outstripped the combined total of European immigrants by a ratio of 3, 4, or 5 to 1.

**Myth:** The first slaves arrived in what is now the U.S. in 1619

**Fact:** Slaves arrived in Spanish Florida at least a century before 1619 and a recently uncovered census shows that blacks were present in Virginia before 1619.

## Slave Culture

**Myth:** The slave trade permanently broke slaves' bonds with Africa.

**Fact:** Slaves were able to draw upon their African cultural background and experiences and use them as a basis for life in the New World.

**Myth:** Plantation life with its harsh labor, unstable families, and high mortality, made it difficult for Africans to construct social ties

**Fact:** African nations persisted in America well into the 18th century and even the early 19th century.

**Myth:** Masters assigned names to slaves or slaves imitated masters' systems of naming.

**Fact:** In fact, slaves were rarely named for owners. Naming patterns appear to have reflected African practices, such as the custom of giving children "day names" (after the day they were born) and "name-saking," such as naming children after grandparents.

**Myth:** Slaveholders sought to deculturate slaves by forbidding African names and languages and obliterating African culture.

**Fact:** While deculturation was part of the "project" of slavery, in fact African music, dance, decoration, design, cuisine, and religion exerted a profound, ongoing influence on American

culture.

**Fact:**Slaves adapted religious rites and perpetuated a rich tradition of folklore.

## Economics of Slavery

**Myth:**Slavesholders lost money and were more interested in status than moneymaking; slaves did little productive work

**Fact:**Slaves worked longer days, more days, and more of their life

**Myth:**Slavery was incompatible with urban life and factory technology

**Fact:**Sugar mills were the first true factories in the world; slaves were widely used in cities and in various kinds of manufacturing and crafts.

**Myth:**Slaves engaged almost exclusively in unskilled brutish field labor.

**Fact:** Much of the labor performed by slaves required high skill levels and careful, painstaking effort.

**Fact:**Masters relied on slaves for skilled craftsmanship.

## Religion

**Myth:**West and Central Africans received their first exposure to Christianity in the New World.

**Fact:**Catholic missionary activities began in the central African kingdom of Kongo half a century before Columbus's voyages of discovery and Kongo converted to Catholicism in 1491. A sizeable community of African Christians developed around Portuguese settlement.

**Myth:**Priests and missionaries were primarily responsible for converting slaves to Christianity.

**Fact:** In Latin America, slaves were instructed not by European clergy but by African Christians, who spread a specifically African interpretation of Christianity.

**Myth:** Upon arrival in Latin America, slaves were given hasty instruction in a complex foreign religion in a language they could barely understand.

**Fact:**A certain number of slaves were baptized Christians and others were familiar with Christianity.

**Myth:**The Catholic Church did not tolerate the mixture of Catholicism with traditional African religions.

**Fact:** In Kongo and in Latin America, the Church did tolerate the mixture of Catholicism with African religions, allowing Africans to retain their old cosmology, understanding of the universe, and the place of gods and other divine beings in the universe.

**Myth:** Before the Civil War, the Southern churches were highly segregated.

**Fact:**In 1860, slave constituted about 26 percent of the Southern Baptist church membership.

**Myth:**Slave Christianity was essentially a "religion of docility."

**Fact:**Christianity was dual edged and marked by millennialist possibilities; whites could not prevent black preachers from turning Christianity into a source of self-respect and faith in deliverance.

## Resistance

**Myth:**Slaves were brainwashed and stunned into submission and rarely resisted slavery.

**Fact:**Resistance took a variety of forms ranging from day-to-day resistance, economic bargaining, running away and maroonage, and outright rebellions

## Slavery and World History

1. The most ancient civilizations--ancient Mesopotamia, Old Kingdom Egypt, and the budding civilization that formed in the Indus and Yangtze river valleys--all had some form of slavery present in their earliest years.

2. In none of these cultures did slaves constitute a large proportion of the population.
3. It was in classical Greece and Rome that the first true slave societies came into existence. From the 5th to the 3rd centuries b.c., perhaps a third to a half of Athens's population consisted of slaves. Slaves constituted as much as 30 percent of Rome's population.
4. England's Domesday book of 1086 indicated that 10 percent of the population was enslaved.
5. Although slavery is often stigmatized as archaic and backward, slavery has been found in many of the most progressive societies.
6. Contrary to what many think, slavery never disappeared from medieval Europe. Slavery persisted in Sicily, southern Italy, Russia, southern France, Spain, and elsewhere.

## Glossary

### Curse of Ham

The claim that Noah, the biblical father of all subsequent humanity, cursed his son Ham with both blackness and the condition of slavery for looking at him drunk and naked and exposing him to his other sons, Shem and Japheth. In fact Ham was not cursed and his association with black slavery does not appear in the Hebrew Bible.

Noah cursed Canaan--the ancestor of the Semitic Canaanites, who occupied Israel before the Hebrews--to be the "servant of servants." Why Noah was upset with Canaan we are never told. Ham's African sons were Cush (Ethiopia), Put (Libya), and Misraim (Egypt)--and they were not cursed.

### Maroons

Independent communities of fugitive slaves.

### Task System

One of two plantation labor systems. Under the task system, slaves were assigned several specific tasks within a day. When those tasks were finished, slaves could have time to themselves to spend however they wished. Slaves who worked in rice and long staple cotton plantations, in the naval stores industry, or in skilled labor positions worked under the task system. The benefits of this system for slaves included less supervision, more autonomy and more free time.

### Gang System

Wherever tobacco, sugar or short staple cotton grew, slaves worked in large groups or gangs under the strict supervision of white overseers or black drivers from dawn to dusk. Close supervision meant less autonomy and less free time.

### Trash Gangs

Many boys and girls performed light agricultural labor, sweeping yards, clearing dried cornstalks from fields, chopping cotton, carrying water to field hands, weeding, picking cotton at a slower pace, feeding work animals, and driving cows to pasture.

## Slavery and the Law in Virginia

1662	Negro women's children to serve accounting to the condition of the mother.
1667	An act declaring the baptism of slaves doth not exempt them from bondage.
1669	An act about the casual killing of slaves....If any slaves resist his master (or other by his master's order correcting him) and by the extremity of the correction should chance to die, that his death shall not be attempted felony.

1670	No Negroes nor Indians to buy Christian servants.
1672	An act for the apprehension and suppression of runaways, Negroes and slaves....If any Negroe, mulatto, Indian slave, or servant for life, runaway and shall be pursued by the warrant or hue and cry, it shall and may be lawful for any person who shall endeavour to take them, upon the resistance of such Negro, mulatto, Indian slave, or servant for life, to kill or wound him or them so resisting....And if it happen that such Negroe, mulatto, Indian slave, or servants for life doe dye of any wound in such their resistance received the master or owner of such shall receive satisfaction from the public....
1680	An act for preventing Negroes' Insurrections. Whereas the frequent meeting of considerable numbers of Negroe slaves under pretence of feasts and burials is judged of dangerous consequence...it shall not be lawful for any Negroe or other slave to carry or arm himself with any club, staff, gun, sword, or any other weapon of defense or offense, not to goe or depart from his master's ground without a certificate from his master...and such permission not to be granted but upon particular and necessary operations; and every Negroe or slave so offending not having a certificate...[will receive] twenty lashes on his bare back well laid....If any Negroe or other slave shall absent himself from his master's service and lie hid and lurking in obscure places...it shall be lawful...to kill the said Negroe or slave....
1682	An additional act for the better preventing insurrections by Negroes....No master or overseer knowingly permit or suffer...any Negroe or slave not properly belonging to him or them, to remain or be upon his or their plantation above the space of four hours at any one time....
1691	Virginia voted to banish any white man or woman who married a black, mulatto, or Indian. Any white woman who gave birth to a mulatto child was required to pay a heavy fine or be sold for a five year term of servitude.

## Historiography

### African Historiography

#### Walter Rodney

The slave trade contributed to Africa's depopulation, to the increased use of slaves within Africa, to the development of more predatory political systems, and to a greater gap between rich and poor.

#### John Fage

Rejected the argument that slave exports led to serious depopulation and contended that the slavetrade contributed to political centralization and economic growth.

Mier and Kopytoff Argue that African slavery was one of a series of relationships, like marriage and parentage, that involve rights in persons; argued that African slaves gradually ceased to be aliens and eventually were incorporated within the kinship system.

John Thornton Africans were co-architects of the Atlantic world.

### New World Historiography

#### Eric Williams

Racism was the result and not the cause of slavery; slave economies were a major source of capital for the industrial revolution; abolition came when slave economies were declining in profitability; abolition was driven more by economic interests than by philanthropy.

#### Frank Tannenbaum

Compared to British colonists, Latin Americans were less tainted by racial prejudice, were more lenient in their treatment of slaves, and extended

religious and legal protections involving families and physical cruelty.

### **Carl Degler**

Demographic necessity led the Portuguese in Brazil to promote freedmen and mulattoes into positions of social respectability; in the U.S., poor white yeomanry supported racism to protect their position in society.

## **U.S. Historiography**

### **U.B. Phillips**

The slave was the beneficiary of a patriarchal but unprofitable institution.

### **Kenneth Stampp**

Slavery was a dehumanizing, exploitative, but highly profitable labor system. Slaveowners maintained discipline by instilling "a sense of complete dependence," employing whipping to make slaves "stand in fear." They also provided more positive incentives, including patches of land for gardens, passes to visit other farms and plantations, and cash payments. Slaves resisted masters by working indifferently, breaking tools, running away, and rebelling.

### **Stanley Elkins**

The slave trade was so disruptive and U.S. slavery so severe that it shattered cultural ties with Africa; the slave was a psychic casualty of an all-embracing, repressive system.

### **Lawrence Levine**

In music, dance, song, religion, and folk belief, slaves created a separate, independent life which fostered a strong sense of community.

### **Eugene Genovese**

Slavery was an economically inefficient institution that impeded the growth of industry, retarded the growth of

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