

HOW IMPORTANT WERE AFRICANS TO THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE?

Lesson Rationale

Current research on the Atlantic Slave trade has raised the question of why it was that slavery was deemed 'necessary' and desirable to Europeans and why it was that the trade focused on Africa as a source of slaves. Key themes raised by historians such as James Walvin, Peter Coclanis and Philip Morgan in response to this include the demand for a new world labour force, the fact that other sources were tried but proved less than successful and that slavery was possible and indeed profitable at this time.

More difficult it seems to understand was 'Why Africa?'. Again, scholarship has raised some very interesting reasons about why Africa was to provide Europeans and Americans with this labour force. The indisputable violence and horror of the trade have been used to explain the trade in terms of racism and religious bigotry. Certainly, the language and treatment used towards slaves is both demeaning and discriminatory but to suggest that 'Africans' were used as slaves wholly due to racism is to see only part of the picture. Indeed the institution of slavery has existed throughout history and amongst all racial groups. Furthermore, the development of racist ideas appears to have played a far greater part in the abolition of the slave trade than in its operation. From my reading it is clear that there are ideologies about race and religion developing particularly during the abolitionist nineteenth century which are much more difficult to find amongst the pragmatic commercial opportunism of the seventeenth and eighteenth century trade. It seems that availability and opportunity were far more important in explaining 'why Africa?' than racism and religious bigotry.

So why did Africa present the opportunity? In terms of many school materials there frequently seems to be a 'blank canvas' approach to the African Atlantic Trade which focuses on the commercialism of European nations and traders where their demands are paramount. But this wholly obscures the proactive nature of African involvement in international commerce.

Why was Africa able to provide so many slaves? Its very geography was absolutely crucial, the diversity of its states, governments etc facilitated the trade. Diversity led to the opportunity for military dispute and conquest. Indeed the key to an understanding of the Atlantic Slave Trade is the internationalism of the commerce. It is important to note that use of the term to Africa and more particularly 'Africans', an instantly recognisable but rather inaccurate description to describe the peoples living on the continent of Africa, is itself problematic. No individual living on the African continent before, during and after the era of the Slave Trade would have described themselves as 'African'. Much more likely to suggest Fon, Gun, Yoruba etc. Only with colonialism were these peoples forced into entities and states we begin to recognise today such as Nigeria, Kenya. The modern map of the continent was created not by local differences and commonalities but by those of their European masters. Only with the growing Pan-African movements of the early twentieth century did a sense of 'Africa' become a more African rather than a European construct. It is interesting to note here that the shared horrors of the Atlantic slave ship and the experiences of slavery itself did forge a sense of community on those who had been forced through the process as slaves. The reference to those who had experienced the Atlantic crossing as 'ship mates' suggests a

growing sense of community in the New world which crossed the language, geographical and political barriers long established in Africa.

For an understanding of the slave trade in Africa however, it is necessary to rid oneself of the connotation of any 'oneness'. The continent was made up of a diversity of peoples, cultures, religions and languages. Diversity is the key to any understanding of both the continent and also to an understanding of how the slave trade was able to operate there. The three lessons attempt place Africa at the heart of the trade. To both personalise the experience of slavery, through the accounts of men like Mohommah Baquaqua, but also to personalise the trade. In this way, those living on the African continent can be seen as the traders, rulers, soldiers, farmers, linguists, slaves, ordinary and extraordinary people that they were.

The National Archive and the University of Virginia have some great sources from which to examine these themes. Furthermore, they also offer the opportunity for self discovery. Some of the sources do appear 'difficult' and challenging eg. Handwriting that's difficult to read, words that are unfamiliar, documents that have been damaged over time. However, working with these documents, even in copied form can be very exciting. Difficult handwriting, torn pages etc can be challenging but pupils love cracking codes. Furthermore, the idea of discovering evidence first hand makes working with selected sources extremely rewarding. Carefully selected pieces and group work can facilitate difficult areas. Furthermore, mistakes are a learning experience. A valuable lesson is that many history books contain horrific misreading of sources. The document used in lesson 2 The Day Book of the Ship Africa, in its original form is challenging. However, the repetitive patterns of language used, writing and items mentioned make it increasingly accessible the more it is studied. The attached transcript is far from perfect and this could also provide an opportunity for further classroom activities, notably improving on the transcript and 'filling in the blanks'.

How Important were Africans to the Atlantic Slave Trade?

Lessons 1:

The geography of the African continent is vital to understanding 'why Africa'. Its accessibility to both Europe and the New world is crucial to any explanation of the Atlantic trade. There are a wealth of maps which illustrate this and explain why particularly West Africa.

European Maps such as the map used in Lesson 1 from the 17th century have also been well used to demonstrate their confinement to the coastal regions and their lack of activity and knowledge in the interior.

There are a wealth of written descriptions of coastal and interior areas, which, although largely European and often reflecting the ignorance of many things they have seen, can be useful in filling in geographical features. The sources used in this lesson are from both the National Archives and from the collections held at the University of Virginia. However, there are a wealth of other examples full

of descriptive detail, for example the descriptions of Richard Lander, Mungo Park etc quickly build up a picture of the rural communities and urban conurbations in the hinterland of west Africa¹.

Furthermore, an understanding of the physical geography lends itself to trade. Notably the inland routes and roadways along which slave caravans were transported and the inland and coastal waterways eg. The Niger Delta which enabled transportation to the coast. Furthermore, the inland lagoon system of the slave coast which enabled transportation of goods, including slaves both to the coast and along the coast. This made the transportation of slaves practical and also enabled traders to respond to demands, political conditions. For example there are lots of examples where if one state was closed to trade due to political problems/war etc, traders would transport them along the lagoons to another town which was open for trade. This geography proved to be particularly useful after the abolition of the slave trade when it took much of the necessary movement of slaves along the coast out of range of the British patrols².

The extension work on the writing of Archibald Dalziel challenges perceptions about the relationships between Africans and Europeans on the coast and goes some way to explain European restrictions on the coast. Dalziel's position as Governor of Cape Coast Castle, and therefore a direct beneficiary of the Atlantic Trade should become evident and his portrayal of the African's as 'savage' and warlike, a motive for continuing the trade³.

Diversity was key to the operation of the slave trade on the African continent. The existence of wholly diverse political entities from the enormous Oyo Empire to the small autonomous city states like Little Popo proved a heady mix of rivalry, conquest and power⁴.

The picture sources, supported by the account of Baquaqua⁵ attempt to offer a glimpse into the lives of African's across the era of the slave trade. The activity, based on close analysis of each picture, with minimal, initial teacher input will hopefully, establish a sense of this diversity. The typical west coast village with its single storey housing and the king's palace (a more substantial building in the background) is a visual image much supported by written sources such as Baquaqua, Lander etc.

The Metal workers in the late 17th century, engaged in war materials or farming implements? Provides an interesting point for discussion, notably about Africa as a producer but also about the nature of that production. Was it limited as suggested by Baquaqua and therefore a reason to engage in Atlantic commerce? Was it geared towards warfare or domestic needs?

¹ Clapperton, W H, Journal of a Second Expedition into the Interior of West Africa (London 1829)
Kingston W H G Travels of Mungo Park, Denham and Clapperton (London 1886)
Lander R, Records of Captain Clapperton's Last Expedition to Africa...with the subsequent adventures of the Author 2 Vols (London 1830)

² Gilmour, C S, Slave Trading along the Lagoons of South-West Nigeria: The Case of Badagry in Ports of the slave Trade (Bights of Benin and Biafra) (Centre of Commonwealth Studies, University of Stirling 1999)

³ Dalziel, A The History of Dahomy: an Inland Kingdo of Africa: Compiled from Authentic Memoirs (London 1793)

⁴ Law, R Robin Law The Slave Coast of West Africa 1550-1750: The Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on African Society (Oxford University Press 1991)

⁵ Baquaqua M G An Interesting Narrattive: Biography of Mahommah G Baquaqua, A Native of Zoogoo, in the Interior of Africa ed, Samuel Moore (Detroit 1854)
Law R and Lovejoy P E (eds): The Biography of Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua: His Passage from Slavery to Freedom in Africa and America (Princeton 2001)

The image of canoemaking in the late 17th century is particularly interesting as it shows canoe construction in the foreground and the use of canoes to transport people, possibly slaves in the background. However, it is interesting to note that in the far background are porters carrying goods across a bridge, another commonly used mode of transport. The transportation of goods of all kinds is described in detail in many accounts eg. Whitford, at the end of the 19th century describes

Canoes bound for Lagos deeply laden with palm-oil in jars, kernals in bulk covered with mats, bullocks, goats, sheep, corn and various other products from the interior. In addition they are crowded with passengers, chiefly women traders, who seem to be comfortably reposing on top of the cargo⁶.

This source then suggests life including, but also beyond the trade in people.

The images of African cities can provide fertile areas for discussion. The absolutist nature of states like Dahomey which imposed a rigid regime over court, public, conquered peoples and foreigners alike allowed for a well organised if bureaucratic relationship to exist between Europeans and Africans. For example. At the port of Whydah a network of government officials ran the Atlantic trade on behalf of the King who stayed in his capital many miles into the interior. Eg. The Captain of the Sand who oversaw delivery of goods to the beach and the Captain of the Slaves who oversaw the delivery of slaves. The complex system of legal arrangement such as passes and customs duties to be paid to the King for permission to trade, in average about the price of 11 slaves dependent on the size of ship made the Atlantic trade a viable and profitable operation⁷.

Furthermore, there was a clear division between slaves destined for export (foreigners, mostly war captives and criminals) and domestic slaves, pawns etc who were given protection and indeed rights such as property ownership and the opportunity to be redeemed⁸.

Interestingly the onerous administration of states like Dahomey, which clearly outlined and protected the position of the monarchy, pushed many Europeans to the more free marketeering ports of Porto Novo and Badagry at various times. However, even here trade was closely monitored by the ruling elite. For example, British missionary Dr Irving, visiting the West Coast in the 1850s noted that:

The toll house on Badagry beach had been set up in order to exact duty from all goods being carried along the land spit

And that this was

A very common way by which the revenues of the chiefs are raised⁹

Competition between trading states was fierce, and effected clearly supplies and prices. Even at Whydah, where the price of a slave was 'fixed' by the King was open to 'negotiation' in tough times. On numerous occasions competitors resorted to protectionism, which at its most extreme led to attacks on neighbouring states. This led ultimately to the acquisition of more slaves, however, it is an

⁶ Whitford J Trading Life in Western and Central Africa (Liverpool 1877)

⁷ Law R, Ouidah The Social History of a West African Slaving 'Port' 1727-1892 (Ohio University Press 2004)

⁸ Lovejoy P E Transformations in Slavery: A history of slavery in Africa (Cambridge 1983)

⁹ National Archive FO84/951 30 May 1854 Irving

oversimplification to suggest that these wars were merely 'slave raiding wars'. They were often much more about taking out the competition.

Violence and warfare was clearly at the heart of the slave trade, whether as a method of gaining slaves or, as many historians have argued, the slave trade was a method of gaining guns! Baquaqua's accounts of his own experiences both before and after capture suggest the sense of how armies were used to destroy and enslave neighbouring states.

Eg. They arrived safely on a Saturday, and heard that war would be waging that day, but it was not resumed until the next. The king was advised by his counsellor to go out and meet the enemy in the woods, but did not do so. He then went to the King's house and after breakfasting next morning, the guns began to boom away, and the war went on in earnest. Guns were used by them on this occasion, much more than bows and arrows. The war was too hot for the king, when he, together with his counsellor, fled for their lives...My companions and myself ran to the river but could not cross it; we hid ourselves in the tall grass, but the enemy came and found us, and made us all prisoners. I was tied up very tightly; they placed a rope around my neck and took me off with them...

However, the following section of Baquaqua's account is perhaps more surprising and intriguing

Whilst travelling through the wood, we met my brother, but neither of us spoke or seemed to know each other; he turned another way without arousing any suspicion; and then went to a place and procured a person to purchase me. Had it been known who it was, they would have insisted upon a very great price as my ransom, but it was only a small sum that was required for my release.

It should have been mentioned that the city was destroyed, the women and children having been sent away... When the wars come on suddenly, the women and children have no means to escape, but are taken prisoners and sold into slavery¹⁰.

This source makes it clear that Slave raiding wars were crucial to the operation of the trade, However, the means by which Baquaqua is ransomed and the subsequent selling on of war captives' clearly demonstrates, in contrast to the assertions of men like Archibald Dalziel, that this was no anarchic violence. It is also interesting to note that Baquaqua is initially enslaved as a result of political rivalry.

Dixon Denham's portrayal of fishing boats and nets of the Shary and the 17th century source showing musicians contrast nicely with the warlike and militaristic nature of the previous sources. There are many pictorial sources available notably at www.slaveryimages.org which show more domestic scenes such as cooking, farming, the market, dress etc which could be used¹¹.

What becomes clear is that European traders were able to tap into existing and expanding commercial networks. Coastal towns such as Lagos were established and grew due to their connections with the interior and these connections were largely commercial. Whilst its roots were in violence, it flourished because of these networks. The ability to harness provisions, labour, eg. Guards, porters etc along with transport and huge outlays of finance were synchronised by

¹⁰ Baquaqua M G An Interesting Narrative....

¹¹ www.slaveryimages.org sponsored by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and the University of Virginia library

'middlemen' who smoothed the passage between slave gatherers, merchants and sea captains. Slaves would pass through networks of interior traders, often many times before they reached the coast. For example when Captain Clapperton and Richard Lander journeyed into the interior in 1825 they noted that the route they travelled was an old trading road. The route, which linked the Oyo empire with Kano and the Sokoto Caliphate (modern Northern Nigeria) was joined along its length by other routes from east and west ¹²

Once at the coast slaves would be collected by coastal traders. In Whydah these were traders operating on behalf of the King. In other places, as noted, there was a great deal of free-marketeering and competition between traders. In a number of places relationships were forged on the basis of nationality. In Badagy for example there were a total of trading chiefs who associated themselves with eg. Britain, France, Portugal, the Netherlands, and Spain specifically and traded with these partners.

Brokers negotiated between merchants and Europeans. If supplies were not available, credit could be advanced to send into the interior for more. Sometimes the cost of as much as 200 slaves (enormous sums). A business relationships based on trust, risk and potential profit. Furthermore, speed in supplying slaves led to better commercial relationships. According to contemporary accounts Whydah at the end of the 17th century had a reputation for rapid delivery of slaves. It was said that it could supply a thousand slave every month if the routes into the interior remained open¹³.

At the other end of the scale were menial jobs, often done, although not always, by domestic slaves, such as porters (the price of a single slave took several men or journeys to carry this in cowrie shells) and canoemen such as the Kroomen of the Gold Coast who were employed all along the Slave Coast to ferry people and goods from shore to ship through the incredibly treacherous surf. The trade was incredibly labour intensive. But there was profit to be made every step of the way. For example work done by Robin Law on the operation of the slave trade at the end of the seventeenth century on the coast of Africa suggests that Whydah became an increasingly popular destination for French traders as the customs there compared favourably with other ports. At Whydah they were paying the value of 25 slaves per ship for customs and 32-35 slaves per ship if the cost of hiring porters and canoemen was included¹⁴.

The spirit of commercialism is one which pervades any study of African trade. It should be noted that several coastal communities were established specifically for the purposes of trading with Europeans. Interestingly a number of these communities were established by refugees from areas ravaged by war. The potential slaves therefore becoming slave traders¹⁵.

¹² R Lander Captain Clapperton's Last Expedition..., page 134

¹³ Law R Ouidah The Social History.... page 133.

¹⁴ Ibid page 47.

¹⁵ Gilmour C S Slave Trading ... page 86

Why did African's trade with Europe?

The spirit of commercialism and the rewards to be reaped by participation in the trade are reflected in the diverse products which were exchanged for slaves, from hard cash (cowries), iron bars, guns, textiles, pottery etc. the goods exchanged is sometimes used as an example of Europeans 'palming off' worthless products. However, the nature of the trade suggests that these were products which were wanted, desired and needed. Indeed there is evidence of disputes between African merchants and Europeans over quality of supplies, and what is being supplied. It is important to note that with the competitive nature of the trade, the Europeans could not afford to short-change their business partners otherwise their 'partners' may swap their allegiances. Examples of European traders having to leave certain areas due to business disputes were common and the Brazilian trader Francisco Felix De Souza and likewise the Dutch trader Hendrik Hertogh, had to transfer their operations on several occasions due to difficult business relationships¹⁶.

The Day Book of the British Ship Africa offers an insight into the goods traded for slaves and the profits to be made. It also gives some suggestion as to the value of these products to Africans and particularly the roles that some African's played, often in a non-commercial way, in enabling the trade to continue¹⁷.

What effect did the Slave Trade have on Africa?

The final lesson attempts to place the proactive nature of the African trade in its wider historical context. Furthermore, by putting the account of Baquaqua at its core it tries to focus the trade back on those who were enslaved with sensitivity and balance. All three lessons attempt to investigate the reasons for African involvement in the Atlantic trade and the processes by which the trade took place. However, the lessons whilst challenging the oversimplification of Africans as solely 'victims' of the Slave Trade, must also attempt to reach some conclusions over the real impact of the trade on both the continent of Africa and Africans themselves.

Interestingly James Walvin amongst others has suggested that it was not the profits alone which kept the slave trade alive. Indeed as he points out, the British trade was just as profitable when abolitionism took hold. Furthermore, he suggested that the use of slaves in the America's impeded economic development¹⁸. This provides an interesting point of comparison with African trading communities. Tony Hopkins proposed the theory that Africa experienced a crisis of adaptation when the slave trade was suppressed. Certainly there is plenty of evidence to suggest that many African communities were reluctant to give up the trade in favour of so called 'legitimate' products such as palm oil¹⁹.

Ultimately, in examining the effect of the Slave Trade on Africa one must look beyond the era of the Slave Trade itself. Indeed the relationship between the slave trade, and perhaps more importantly

¹⁶ Details of the career of Francisco Felix De Souza appear in Law R, Ouidah, the Social History.... and Details of Hendrick Hertogh's difficult commercial life appear in Van Dantzig The Dutch and the Guinea Coast 1674-1742 A Collection of Documents from the General State Archive at the Hague (Accra 1978)

¹⁷ National Archive T70-1218-3 pp. 10-11

¹⁸ Walvin J Lecture given to Transatlantic Teachers Programme October 2010.

¹⁹ Hopkins An Economic History of west Africa (New York 1973).

the abolition and, in the British case particularly the suppression of the slave trade and subsequent nineteenth century empire building in Africa is fertile ground for further investigation.

Further suggested reading

Refer to footnotes for references, however, particularly useful are:

A G Hopkins *An Economic History of West Africa* (New York 1973)

Robin Law *The Slave Coast of West Africa 1550-1750: The Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on African Society* (Oxford University Press 1991)

Robin Law *Ouidah: The Social History of a West African Slaving Port 1727-1892* (Ohio University Press 2004)

James Walvin *Atlas of Slavery* (Harlow, England & New York 2006)