

15.3 Olaudah Equiano, *The Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African*

One African who survived the journey was Olaudah Equiano (ca. 1745–1797), an Ibo born in eastern Nigeria near Benin. When Equiano was ten years old, he and his sister were captured from their home by local robbers who quickly sold the children to slavers. Equiano served a series of masters, first in Barbados and later in Virginia; he was finally bought by a British naval officer who took him to Canada, England, and then back to the West Indies. This owner gave Equiano the new name of Gustavus Vassa. In 1766, by luck and frugal trading, Equiano had saved the hefty sum of forty pounds sterling, which was enough money to buy his freedom. As a free man, he returned to England, where he worked as a barber, a domestic servant, and a sailor.

In 1789, he published a two-volume set of memoirs in English, describing his life in Africa and his experiences as a slave. His account, excerpted in the following reading, became a best-seller in England and soon enabled Equiano; to become active in the English antislavery movement.

Source: From Olaudah Equiano, *The Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African*, Written by Himself (Boston: I. Knapp, 1837), 31–32, 43–44, 47–48, 50–52.

One day, when all our people were gone out to their works as usual and only I and my dear sister were left to mind the house, two men and a woman got over our walls, and in a moment seized us both, and without giving us time to cry out or make resistance they stopped our mouths and ran off with us into the nearest wood. Here they tied our hands and continued to carry us as far as they could till night came on, when we reached a small house where the robbers halted for refreshment and spent the night. . . .

The first object which saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast was the sea, and a slave ship which was then riding at anchor and waiting for its cargo. These filled me with astonishment, which was soon converted into terror when I was carried on board. I was immediately handled and tossed up to see if I were sound by some of the crew, and I was now persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits and that they were going to kill me. Their complexions too differing so much from ours, their long hair and the language they spoke (which was very different from any I had ever heard) united to confirm me in this belief. Indeed such were the horrors of my views and fears at the moment that, if ten thousand worlds had been my own, I would have freely parted with them all to have exchanged my condition with that of the meanest slave in my own country. When I looked round the ship too and saw a large furnace or copper boiling and a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow, I no longer doubted of my fate; and quite overpowered with horror and anguish, I fell motionless on the deck and fainted. When I recovered a little I found some black people about me, who I believed were some of those who had brought me on board and had been receiving their pay; they talked to me in order to cheer me, but all in vain. I asked them if we were not to be eaten by those white men with horrible looks, red faces, and loose hair. They told me I was not, and one of the crew brought me a small portion of spirituous liquor in a wine glass, but being afraid of him I would not take it out of his hand. One of the blacks there took it from him and gave it to me, and I took a little down my palate, which instead of reviving me, as they thought it would, threw me into the greatest consternation at the strange feeling it produced, having never tasted any such liquor before. Soon after this the blacks who brought me on board went off, and left me abandoned to despair. . . .

The stench of the hold while we were on the coast was so intolerably loathsome that it was dangerous to remain there for any time, and some of us had been permitted to stay on the deck for the fresh air; but now that the whole ship's cargo were confined together it became absolutely pestilential. The closeness of the place and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to run himself, almost suffocated us. This produced copious perspirations, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died, thus falling victims to the improvident avarice, as I may call it, of their purchasers. This wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains, now become insupportable, and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the women and the groans of the dying rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable. Happily perhaps for myself I was soon reduced so low here that it was thought necessary to keep me almost always on deck, and from my extreme youth I was not put in fetters. . . .

At last we came in sight of the island of Barbados, at which the whites on board gave a great shout and made many signs of joy to us. We did not know what to think of this, but as the vessel drew nearer we plainly saw the harbour and other ships of different kinds and sizes, and we soon anchored amongst them off Bridgetown. Many merchants and planters now came on board, though it was in the evening. They put us in separate parcels and examined us attentively.

They also made us jump, and pointed to the land, signifying we were to go there. We thought by this we should be eaten by these ugly men, as they appeared to us; and when soon after we were all put down under the deck again, there was much dread and trembling among us, and nothing but bitter cries to be heard all the night from these apprehensions, insomuch that at last the white people got some old slaves from the land to pacify us. They told us we were not to be eaten but to work, and were soon to go on land where we should see many of our country people. This report eased us much; and sure enough soon after we were landed there came to us Africans of all languages. We were conducted immediately to the merchant's yard, where we were all pent up together like so many sheep in a fold without regard to sex or age. As every object was new to me everything I saw filled me with surprise. What struck me first was that the houses were built with storeys, and in every other respect different from those in Africa: but I was still more astonished on seeing people on horseback. I did not know what this could mean, and indeed I thought these people were full of nothing but magical arts. While I was in this astonishment one of my fellow prisoners spoke to a countryman of his about the horses, who said they were the same kind they had in their country. I understood them though they were from a distant part of Africa, and I thought it odd I had not seen any horses there; but afterwards when I came to converse with different Africans I found they had many horses amongst them, and much larger than those I then saw. We were not many days in the merchant's custody before we were sold after their usual manner, which is this: On a signal given, (as the beat of a drum) the buyers rush at once into the yard where the slaves are confined, and make choice of that parcel they like best. The noise and clamour with which this is attended and the eagerness visible in the countenances of the buyers serve not a little to increase the apprehensions of the terrified Africans, who may well be supposed to consider them as the ministers of that destruction to which they think themselves devoted. In this matter, without scruple, are relations and friends separated, most of them never to see each other again. I remember in the vessel in which I was brought over, in the men's apartment there were several brothers who, in the sale, were sold in different lots; and it was very moving on this occasion to see and hear their cries at parting. O, ye nominal Christians! might not an African ask you, Do unto all men as you would men should do unto you? Is it not enough that we are torn from our country and friends to toil for your luxury and lust of gain? Must every tender feeling be likewise sacrificed to your avarice? Are the dearest friends and relations, now rendered more dear by their separation from their kindred, still to be parted from each other and thus prevented from cheering the gloom of slavery with the small comfort of being together and mingling their sufferings and sorrows? Why are parents to lose their children, brothers their sisters, or husbands their wives? Surely this is a new refinement in cruelty which, while it has no advantage to atone for it, thus aggravates distress and adds fresh horrors even to the wretchedness of slavery.

Questions:

1. What does this memoir tell us about the organization and extent of slavery in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world?
2. What does this selection indicate about Equiano's African home and African culture?
3. What does the memoir, particularly its title, *The Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African*, tell us about the cultural effects of slavery upon Africans in the eighteenth century?

15.2 "Our Kingdom Is Being Lost": Nzinga Mbemba (Afonso I)

The next selection is a letter from the African King of Kongo, Nzinga Mbemba, who had converted to Christianity and adopted the name Afonso I (reigned ca. 1506–1543). Afonso had hoped to develop a prosperous state by cooperating with the Europeans. But by the time of his death, his kingdom had almost disintegrated. His concerns are expressed in a letter to the Portuguese king, Joao III, in 1526. It was evident that Portuguese exploitation and aggressive pursuit of slaves resulted in dissension and instability throughout the region.

Source: Copyright © 1964 by Basil Davidson, Reprinted by permission of Curtis Brown, Ltd.

Sir, Your Highness should know how our Kingdom is being lost in so many ways that it is convenient to provide for the necessary remedy, since this is caused by the excessive freedom given by your agents and officials to the men and merchants who are allowed to come to this Kingdom to set up shops with goods and many things which have been prohibited by us, and which they spread throughout our Kingdoms and Domains in such an abundance that many of our vassals, whom we had in obedience, do not comply because they have the things in greater abundance than we ourselves; and it was with these things that we had them content and subjected under our vassalage and jurisdiction, so it is doing a great harm not only to the service of God, but the security and peace of our Kingdoms and State as well.

And we cannot reckon how great the damage is, since the mentioned merchants are taking every day our natives, sons of the land and the sons of our noblemen and vassals and our relatives, because the thieves and men of bad conscience grab them wishing to have the things and wares of this Kingdom which they are ambitious of; they grab them and get them to be sold; and so great, Sir, is the corruption and licentiousness that our country is being completely depopulated, and Your Highness should not agree with this nor accept it as in your service. And to avoid it we need from your Kingdoms no more than some priests and a few people to teach in schools, and no other goods except wine and flour for the holy sacrament. That is why we beg of Your Highness to help and assist us in this matter, commanding your factors [agents] that they should not send here either merchants or wares, because it *our will that in these Kingdoms there should not be any trade of slaves nor outlet for them*. Concerning what is referred [to] above, again we beg of Your Highness to agree with it, since otherwise we cannot remedy such an obvious damage. Pray Our Lord in his mercy to have Your Highness under His guard and let you do forever the things of His service. . . .

Moreover, Sir, in our Kingdoms there is another great inconvenience which is of little service to God, and this is that many of our people, keenly desirous as they are of the wares and things of your Kingdoms, which are brought here by your people, and in order to satisfy their voracious appetite, seize many of our people, freed and exempt men, and very often it happens that they kidnap even noblemen and the sons of noblemen, and our relatives, and take them to be sold to the white men who are in our Kingdoms; and for this purpose they have concealed them; and others are brought during the night so that they might not be recognized.

And as soon as they are taken by the white men they are immediately ironed and branded with fire, and when they are carried to be embarked, if they are caught by our guards' men the whites allege that they have bought them but they cannot say from whom, so that it is our duty to do justice and to restore to the freemen their freedom, but it cannot be done if your subjects feel offended, as they claim to be.

And to avoid such a great evil we passed a law so that any white man living in our Kingdoms and wanting to purchase goods in any way should first inform three of our noblemen and officials of our court whom we rely upon in this matter, and these are Dom Pedro Manipanza and Dom Manuel Manissaba, our chief usher, and Gocalo Pires our chief freighter, who should investigate if the mentioned goods are captives or free men, and if cleared by them there will be no further doubt nor embargo for them to be taken and embarked. But if the white men do not comply with it they will lose the aforementioned goods. And if we do them this favor and concession it is for the part Your Highness has in it, since we know that it is in your service too that these goods are taken from our Kingdom, otherwise we should not consent to this. . . .

Question:

1. Why was his kingdom "out of balance" and what reforms did he suggest?

15.5 Thomas Nelson, Slavery and the Slave Trade of Brazil

Under pressure from Britain, Brazil agreed to abolish its slave trade in 1826, but contraband traffic in slaves continued unabated in subsequent decades. Meanwhile, Britain claimed the right to search and arrest suspected slave ships. During the 1840s, Thomas Nelson served as a surgeon aboard a British frigate, the H.M.S. *Crescent*, and his duties included the inspection and treatment of contraband slaves intercepted en route to Brazil. The following reading is an excerpt from his book describing the conditions of the Africans he encountered.

Source: From Thomas Nelson, *Remarks on the Slavery and Slave Trade of the Brazils* (London: J. Halchard and Son, 1846), pp. 43–56 passim.

A few minutes after the vessel dropped her anchor, I went on board of her, and although somewhat prepared by the previous inspection of two full slavers to encounter a scene of disease and wretchedness, still my experience, aided by my imagination, fell short of the loathsome spectacle which met my eyes on stepping over the side. Huddled closely together on deck, and blocking up the gangways on either side, cowered, or rather squatted, three hundred and sixty-two negroes, with disease, want, and misery stamped upon them with such painful intensity as utterly beggars all powers of description. In one corner, apart from the rest, a group of wretched beings lay stretched, many in the last stage of exhaustion, and all covered with the pustules of smallpox. Several of these I noticed had crawled to the spot where the water had been served out, in the hope of procuring a mouthful more of the precious liquid; but unable to return to their proper places, lay prostrate around the empty tub. Here and there, amid the throng, were isolated cases of the same loathsome disease in its confluent or worst form, and cases of extreme emaciation and exhaustion, some in a state of perfect stupor, others looking piteously around, and pointing with their fingers to their parched mouths whenever they caught an eye who they thought would relieve them. On every side, squalid and sunken visages were rendered still more hideous by the swollen eyelids and the puriform discharge of a virulent ophthalmia, with which the majority appeared to be afflicted; added to this were figures shriveled to absolute skin and bone, and doubled up in a posture which originally want of space had compelled them to adopt, and which debility and stiffness of the joints compelled them to retain.

On looking more leisurely around, after the first paroxysm of horror and disgust had subsided, I remarked on the poop another wretched group, composed entirely of females. Some were mothers with infants who were vainly endeavoring to suck a few drops of moisture from the lank, withered, and skinny breasts of their wretched mothers; others were of every intermediate age. The most of them destitute even of the decency of a rag, and all presenting as woeful a spectacle of misery as it is possible to conceive.

While employed in examining the negroes individually, and separating and classifying the sick, who constituted by far the majority, I obtained a closer insight into their actual condition. Many I found afflicted with a confluent smallpox, still more with purulent ophthalmia, and the majority of what remained, with dysentery, ulcers, emaciation, and exhaustion. In several, two or three of these were met. Not the least distressing sight on that pest-laden deck was the negroes whom the ophthalmia had struck blind, and who cowered in seeming apathy to all that was going on around. This was indeed the ultimatum of wretchedness, the last drops of the cup of bitterness. Deprived of liberty, and torn from their native country, there was nothing more of human misery but to make them the victims of a physical darkness as deep as they had already been made of a moral one.

The stench on board was nearly overwhelming. The odor of the negroes themselves, rendered still stronger by their filthy and crowded condition, the sickening smell of the suppurative stage of smallpox, and the far more disgusting effluvia of dysenteric discharge, combined with bilge water, putrid jerked beef, and numerous other matters to form a stench, it required no little exertion of fortitude to withstand. To all this, hunger and thirst lent their aid to finish the scene; and so poignant were they, that the struggles to obtain the means of satisfying them were occasionally so great as to require the interference of the prize crew. The moment it could be done, water in abundance and a meal was provided them; and none but an eyewitness could form an idea of the eagerness with which the former luxury was coveted and enjoyed. For many days, it seems, the water had not only been reduced in quantity, but so filled with impurities, and so putrid, that nothing but the most stringent necessity could have induced the use of it. . . .

Early yesterday morning (11th of September, 1843) the decks of the *Crescent* were again thronged by a miserable crowd of liberated Africans. The vessel in which they had been conveyed from the “coast” was captured a few days ago by one of the boats belonging to H.M.S. *Frolic*, a little to the northward of Rio.

Previously to the removal of the negroes, Dr. Gunn (the surgeon of the *Crescent*) and myself went on board the slaver, and stepping over the side, were astonished at the smallness of the vessel, and the number of wretched negroes who had been thrust on board of her. Below, the hold was crowded to excess; and above, the deck was so closely packed with the poor creatures, that we had to walk along the top of the low bulwarks in order to get aft. Of the appearance of the

negroes, no pen can give an adequate idea. In numbers, the different protuberances and anatomical peculiarities of the bones can be distinctly traced by the eye, and appear, on every motion, ready to break through the skin, which is, in fact, all that covers them. Nor has this been confined to appearance; in many, at the bend of the elbows and knee-joints, over the hip-joints and lower part of the spine, the integuments have given way, and caused the most distressing and ill-conditioned sores. A great number of the Africans, especially the younger, cannot stand upright even when assisted, and the moment they are left to themselves, they double up their knees under their chins, and draw their legs so closely to their bodies, that they scarcely retain the form of humanity. So weak and so cramped are the most of them that they had to be carried in the arms of the seamen, one by one, up the *Crescent's* ladder. All those not affected with contagious diseases are now on board the *Crescent*, and the most of them look like animated skeletons. From one of the Portuguese crew, who is at present under treatment for smallpox, I learn that the name of the vessel is the *Vencedora*, and that she left Benguela on the coast of Africa with four hundred and sixty slaves on board. But of this *number* only three hundred and thirty-eight have been counted over the side, a circumstance which will appear the less surprising when the space in which they were stowed comes to be considered. . . .

Just as the negroes who remained of the *Vencedora* had entirely recovered their wonted health and vigor, and were fit to be sent to one of our colonies, H.M.S. *Dolphin*, on the 15th of November, 1843, brought into harbor a full slaver, which she had captured a day or two before, a little to the northward of Rio. The crew of the slaver had actually run her ashore, and had begun to throw the negroes overboard into the sea, in order that they might be induced to swim for the land, when the boats of the *Dolphin* came up and obliged them to stop and effect their own escape.

This vessel is the largest I have yet seen employed in this traffic, and is better fitted and found than the common run of slavers; she is American built, and several of her fittings bear the name of American tradesmen. But, as usual, the Africans benefit nothing from the greater size of the vessel. The additional room has not been devoted to give increased accommodation, but to carry a greater number from the coast. The hold, instead of being fitted with one slave deck, has two; so that, in fact, the negroes have been as badly off, if not worse, than they would have been in a smaller vessel.

On attempting to go down into the hold, and satisfy myself with an examination before the Africans were removed, I was forced, after one or two unsuccessful attempts, to give it up;—the effluvium was perfectly overwhelming, and the heat so great, that the moment I left the square of the hatchway, the sensation approached suffocation. The decks furnished a melancholy spectacle of disease and wretchedness; but the most prominent and widely spread scourge is purulent ophthalmia. Numbers of the poor creatures are squatting down in corners or groping about the deck deprived of all sight. Their immensely swollen eyelids, contrasting with their haggard and wasted features, and the discharge which keeps constantly trickling down their cheeks, and which they have not even a rag to wipe away, gives them an appearance of ghastly, murky misery which it is impossible for me to describe.

Many eyes, I am afraid, are irretrievably lost, and several poor wretches must remain forever totally blind. Dysentery, too, that fellest of all diseases in the negro race, is at work amongst them, and will undoubtedly commit fearful ravages. Five hundred and seventy-two Africans were found on board. What the number was at starting there is no means of ascertaining. One of the crew, a slave, who acted on board in the capacity of a cook, and who preferred being captured by Englishmen to escaping with his master, told me that many had died and were thrown overboard during the passage. The exact number taken on board, however, he could not tell. In all probability, it was not under seven hundred; but of course this is only mere conjecture.

Questions:

1. What diseases did Nelson describe as being most prevalent among the Africans who survived the Atlantic crossing? Roughly what proportion of slaves arrived in Brazil compared to those who left American ports?
2. Compare Nelson's account of conditions aboard slave ships with Equiano's personal memoir.

John Barbot: description of slaving in Africa (1682)

As an agent for the French Royal African Company, John Barbot made at least two voyages to the west coast of Africa, one in 1678 and the other in 1682. In this excerpt below, published as "A Description of the Coasts of North and South Guinea" in 1732, he describes the effects of slavery on the region, which supplied most of Africa's slaves throughout the 17th and 18th centuries.

Those sold by the Blacks are for the most part prisoners of war, taken either in fight, or pursuit, or in the incursions they make into their enemies territories; others stolen away by their own countrymen; and some there are, who will sell their own children, kindred, or neighbours. This has been often seen, and to compass it, they desire the person they intend to sell, to help them in carrying something to the factory by way of trade, and when there, the person so deluded, not understanding the language, is old and deliver'd up as a slave, notwithstanding all his resistance, and exclaiming against the treachery. . . .

The kings are so absolute, that upon any slight pretense of offences committed by their subjects, they order them to be sold for slaves, without regard to rank, or possession. . . .

Abundance of little Blacks of both sexes are also stolen away by their neighbours, when found abroad on the roads, or in the woods; or else in the Cougans, or cornfields, at the time of the year, when their parents keep them there all day, to scare away the devouring small birds, that come to feed on the millet, in swarms, as has been said above.

In times of dearth and famine, abundance of those people will sell themselves, for a maintenance, and to prevent starving. When I first arriv'd at Goerree, in December, 1681, I could have bought a great number, at very easy rates, if I could have found provisions to subsist them; so great was the dearth then, in that part of Nigritia.

To conclude, some slaves are also brought to these Blacks, from very remote inland countries, by way of trade, and sold for things of very inconsiderable value; but these slaves are generally poor and weak, by reason of the barbarous usage they have had in traveling so far, being continually beaten, and almost famish'd; so inhuman are the Blacks to one another. . . .

The trade of slaves is in a more peculiar manner the business of kings, rich men, and prime merchants, exclusive of the inferior sort of Blacks.

These slaves are severely and barbarously treated by their masters, who subsist them poorly, and beat them inhumanly, as may be seen by the scabs and wounds on the bodies of many of them when sold to us. They scarce allow them the least rag to cover their nakedness, which they also take off from them when sold to Europeans; and they always go bare-headed. The wives and children of slaves, are also slaves to the master under whom they are married; and when dead, they never bury them, but cast out the bodies into some by place, to be devoured by birds, or beasts of prey.

This barbarous usage of those unfortunate wretches, makes it appear, that the fate of such as are bought and transported from the coast to America, or other parts of the world, by Europeans, is less deplorable, than that of those who end their days in their native country; for aboard ships all possible care is taken to preserve and subsist them for the interest of the owners, and when sold in America, the same motive ought to prevail with their masters to use them well, that they may live the longer, and do them more service. Not to mention the inestimable advantage they may reap, of becoming christians, and saving their souls, if they make a true use of their condition.

Many of those slaves we transport from Guinea to America are prepossessed with the opinion, that they are carried like sheep to the slaughter, and that the Europeans are fond of their flesh; which notion so far prevails with some, as to make them fall into a deep melancholy and despair, and to refuse all sustenance, tho' never so much compelled and even beaten to oblige them to take some nourishment: notwithstanding all which, they will starve to death; whereof I have had several instances in my own slaves both aboard and at Guadalupe. And tho' I must say I am naturally compassionate, yet have I been necessitated sometimes to cause the teeth of those wretches to be broken, because they would not open their mouths, or be prevailed upon by any entreaties to feed themselves; and thus have forced some sustenance into their throats. . . .

As the slaves come down to Fida from the inland country, they are put into a booth, or prison, built for that purpose, near the beach, all of them together; and when the Europeans are to receive them, every part of every one of them, to the smallest member, men and women being all stark naked. Such as are allowed good and sound, are set on one side, and the others by themselves; which slaves so rejected are there called Mackrons, being above thirty five years of age, or defective in their limbs, eyes or teeth; or grown grey, or that have the venereal disease, or any other imperfection. These being set aside, each of the others, which have passed as good, is marked on the breast, with a red- hot iron, imprinting the mark of the French, English, or Dutch companies, that so each nation may distinguish their own, and to prevent their being chang'd by the natives for worse, as they are apt enough to do. In this particular, care is taken that the women, as tenderest, be not burnt too hard.

The branded slaves, after this, are returned to their former booth, where the factor is to subsist them at his own charge, which amounts to about two-pence a day for each of them, with bread and water, which is all their allowance. There they continue sometimes ten or fifteen days, till the sea is still enough to send them aboard; for very often it continues too boisterous for so long a time, unless in January, February and March, which is commonly the calmest season: and when it is so, the slaves are carried off by parcels, in bar-canoes, and put aboard the ships in the road. Before they enter the canoes, or come out of the booth, their former Black masters strip them of every rag they have, without distinction of men or women; to supply which, in orderly ships, each of them as they come aboard is allowed a piece of canvas, to wrap around their waist, which is very acceptable to those poor wretches. . . .

If there happens to be no stock of slaves at Fida, the factor must trust the Blacks with his goods, to the value of a hundred and fifty, or two hundred slaves; which goods they carry up into the inland, to buy slaves, at all the markets, for above two hundred leagues up the country, where they are kept like cattle in Europe; the slaves sold there being generally prisoners of war, taken from their enemies, like other booty, and perhaps some few sold by their own countrymen, in extreme want, or upon a famine; as also some as a punishment of heinous crimes: tho' many Europeans believe that parents sell their own children, men their wives and relations, which, if it ever happens, is so seldom, that it cannot justly be charged upon a whole nation, as a custom and common practice. . . .

One thing is to be taken notice of by sea-faring men, that this Fida and Ardra slaves are of all the others, the most apt to revolt aboard ships, by a conspiracy carried on amongst themselves; especially such as are brought down to Fida, from very remote inland countries, who easily draw others into their plot: for being used to see men's flesh eaten in their own country, and publick markets held for the purpose, they are very full of the notion, that we buy and transport them to the same purpose; and will therefore watch all opportunities to deliver themselves, by assaulting a ship's crew, and murdering them all, if possible: whereof, we have almost every year some instances,

in one European ship or other, that is filled with slaves.

African slave trade memorandum (1839)

Great Britain abolished slavery within its dominions in 1831, but it continued to encounter slavery and the slave trade in other parts of the world as it expanded its empire throughout the 19th century. On September 23, 1839, Colonial Secretary Lord John Russell issued this memorandum on British efforts to suppress the slave trade. Britain took a leading role in ending the slave trade around the world and eventually succeeded, despite much opposition, in the 1870s.

There are three kinds of measures proposed to be taken for the prevention of the dreadful trade in Slaves, carried on by African Chiefs, & European merchants—the sellers & buyers in this Traffic.

1. The first is a more vigilant and systematic course of naval operations. The Admiralty are giving directions in conjunction with the Government upon this subject.
2. The next is a combination of treaties made with the Princes & Chiefs both of the Coast, & the Interior, for the substitution of innocent commerce for the Trade in Men. The expedition is about to sail, & the Governors on the Coast will be furnished with instructions for this purpose.
3. The remaining point, and the one on which the greatest difficulty exists, relates to the acquisition of territory in Africa, by the Crown. Mr. Buxton, who is the most earnest in favour of this measure, does not seem to have thoroughly considered it. In speaking of the necessary conditions he states "first, the territory shall be freely offered to us without any kind of constraint—and an annual rent should be paid for it." I must remark upon these conditions that besides the vagueness of the first, the proposal to pay an annual rent for the Sovereignty is I believe new, & I am sure is inadvisable. Sovereignty must be absolute; the Crown paying a rent to an African Chief would appear in the humiliating & precarious situation of a tenant of such barbarous Chief. I agree however with Mr. Buxton that the Commissioners should not be instructed peremptorily to refuse in all cases "the sovereignty over any Province or Place." What I should propose is this. That the Commissioners should be instructed to enquire & report on the practicability, advantages, & dangers of acquiring sovereignty for the Crown of any place or situation in the interior of Africa. They should not be satisfied with ascertaining that a single Chief is willing to barter his dominions for manufactured goods. They should weigh the hazard of jealousy, & hostility being excited among neighbouring Chiefs by the appearance of the British flag in the midst of their possessions as a token of sovereign power. They should calculate the force that would be necessary to maintain & defend the territory that might be acquired—the facility or difficulty of relief—the extent of territory necessary to protect those who might seek shelter & security within its borders—the danger of invasion from any European power, which might have settlements on the Coast. If upon examination of these & many other points they should be of opinion that the acquisition of territory by the Crown is essential to the success of the great objects of the Expedition, they will yet conclude no Treaty for that purpose, but make an ample report of all the facts for the information of Government. In my opinion so large a scheme could not be adopted, even to a limited extent, without consulting the House of Commons, & perhaps submitting the facts to a committee in both Houses.

ID: 308720

[back to top](#)

CITATION: MLA STYLE

"African slave trade memorandum (1839)." *World History: The Modern Era*. ABC-CLIO, 2010. Web. 12 Mar. 2010.
<<http://www.worldhistory.abc-clio.com>>.

[View All Citation Styles](#)



© 2010 ABC-CLIO. All rights reserved.

15.4 Commerce, Slavery, and Religion in North Africa

The purchase of slaves by North African merchants through the agency of rulers on the southern Saharan fringes began as early as the ninth century a.d. and was brought to an end only at the beginning of the twentieth century. West African Muslim rulers played an important controlling role in all external trade, and North African merchants could operate only with their consent. From the nineteenth-century evidence we have from the northern regions of what is now Nigeria, it is clear that rulers had first choice of merchandise from the large caravans and paid for it in slaves—a commodity that could be obtained at will by raiding the large non-Muslim populations surrounding these Muslim states. The enslavement of non-Muslims was permitted by Islamic law as a by-product of *jihād*—“war for the expansion of the domain of Islam,” but the random rounding up of non-Muslim populations to pay off a debt, such as is illustrated in the following piece, hardly comes under this rubric. Nevertheless, the narrator seeks some religious justification for carrying off black Africans into slavery inasmuch as their routinized mass “conversion” to Islam en route ensures their salvation. As he acknowledges, piety and commerce may be mutually reinforcing.

The following account was given to General E. Daumas, a French officer serving in Algeria in the 1830s, by a member of a caravan headed by a Tuareg guide (*khābīr*) called Cheggueun, which set out from Metlily in the Algerian Sahara to do business in Katsina in the far north of present-day Nigeria. Katsina was one of the emirates that formed part of a large Islamic empire founded in the early years of the nineteenth century with its capital at Sokoto.

Source: Abridged and trans. John O. Hunwick from Gen. E. Daumas, *Le Grand Désert. Itinéraire d'une caravane du Sahara au pays des nègres, royaume de Haoussa*, 4th ed., (Paris, 1860), pp. 199–247.

THE SLAVE TRADE

We had been at Katsina for ten days and when the story had got around in the surrounding villages that a rich caravan had arrived, all the petty merchants hastened to the town. Moreover, since those of Katsina were pressing us it was decided to put our merchandise on sale and Cheggueun went to tell Omar¹ what we intended to do. The response of the serki (ruler) was that we could do as we liked, but that he would reserve the sale of all our broadcloths, in the name of the sultan. His oukil (agent) made a list the same day and took us to the palace to discuss the price with the serki himself.

“Khabir (caravan leader),” said Omar to our chief, “according to what my agent has told me, the broadcloths of your merchants are of inferior quality and are worth no more than a single slave, negro or negress, per cubit.” “Sir, it shall be done according to your justice. We are your servants,” replied Cheggueun, and we all put our fist on our chest as a sign of consent, for in fact we were getting a good deal. “Go in peace, then,” replied the serki, “I do not have enough slaves to pay you today. But, by the grace of God, Mohammed Omar shall not fail in his word.”

As we went out of the palace a regular low pitched sound caught our attention. It came from the center of the town and we made for it. It led us to the Makhzen (army) square where, from every street, a crowd came running like us. At the center of the square was placed a huge drum which a strapping Negro beat with a knobbed stick with all his might. This is the sultan’s drum. It is never beaten for anything but assembling the army.

We had discovered the secret of the strange noise that had moved us and this proclamation of the chief of the Makhzenia informed us for what purpose they were gathered: “This is the will of the serki. In the name of sultan Bello the Victorious,² may God bless him, all of you, are summoned to present yourselves here at daybreak, armed and mounted, with sufficient provisions to go, some to Zenfra [Zamfara] and others to Zendeur [Zinder] to hunt the idolatrous Koholanés³—enemies of the glorious sultan our master—may God curse them.” “All that the sultan orders is good,” responded the soldiers. “Let it be done according to the will of our lord and master.”

¹ Umar Dallāji, emir of Katsina, 1806–1835.

² Muhammad Bellow (d. 1837) was the ruler of the Sokoto empire of which the emirate of Katsina formed a constituent part.

³ In Saharan Arabic *ku.hān* (sing. *ak.hal*) is the equivalent of *sūdān*—“blacks” with a pejorative connotation.

Part 15: Trade and Exploitation Across the Atlantic

The following day, in fact, the Mekhazenia (soldiers), prompt to the appointed meeting, divided themselves into two goums (companies), one taking the east and the other the south-west with orders to attack places without defences and to carry off the inhabitants as well as seizing all peasants busy cultivating their fields. At the same time orders were given to track down the idolatrous Koholanes in the interior.

Whilst waiting for the return of the goums that Omar had despatched to hunt Negroes, we went every day to the slave market where we bought at the following prices:

A Negro with beard	10 or 15,000 cowries
--------------------	----------------------

They are not considered as merchandise since one has little chance of preventing them from escaping.

An adult Negress, same price for	10 or 15,000 cowries the same reasons
----------------------------------	---------------------------------------

An adolescent Negro	30,000 cowries
---------------------	----------------

A young Negress	50-60,000 cowries
-----------------	-------------------

(The price varies according to whether she is more or less beautiful.)

A male Negro child	45,000 cowries
--------------------	----------------

A female Negro child	35-40,000 cowries
----------------------	-------------------

The seller gives the buyer the greatest possible chance to examine the slaves and one has three days to give notice of concealed faults.

THE RETURN OF OMAR'S GOUM

The gound of serki Omar had been on campaign for about a month when we learnt from a messenger that the double raid launched against Zinder and Zamfara had been completely successful and that the makhzen, bringing back two thousand slaves would return to Katsina the next day. In a few hours this good news had spread throughout the town and at daybreak the next day the entire population crowded the gardens on the east side where the two armies that had the previous day joined up ought to arrive.

A cloud of dust soon announced it and as they crossed the outer wall where the route was better marked and the terrain more solid, their confused mass began to make itself out from the veil of sand that they had raised on the plain. The prisoners walked at the head, men, women, children, the elderly, almost all naked or half covered in rags of blue cloth. The women and the elderly were unbound but tightly packed together; the children were piled onto camels with some sitting on their mothers' backs in a piece of cloth doing duty as a bag. The men had been chained, five or six to the same chain, their necks fixed in a strong iron ring closed by a padlock and their hands bound with palm ropes. The strongest and most resistant were tied down to the tails of horses. Women moaned and children cried. Men, in general, seemed more resigned, but the bloody cuts that the whip had made on their shoulders bore witness to their tough struggle with the horsemen of the serki.

The convoy steered itself towards the palace and its arrival was announced to Mohammed Omar by musicians. At the first sound of the music the serki came out of his palace followed by his agent and some dignitaries. On seeing him all the slaves threw themselves on their knees and the musicians attacked their instruments with a passion that bordered on fury. The serki, approaching the gound, complimented its leaders, examined the slaves and gave the order for them to be taken to the market. There they were placed in two rows in sheds, women on one side and men on the other, and on the next day we were invited to go and choose those which suited us. Cheggueun and the palace agent went with us and after very careful examination each of us obtained as many Negroes and Negresses as he had handed over cubits of broadcloth to the serki. Nevertheless, we only accepted those whose sound constitutions were a surety against the hazards of the long journey we had to make. The elderly, small children and pregnant women were sold to the people of Katsina or given by Omar as gifts to the leaders of his mekhazenas.

DEPARTURE OF THE CARAVAN

We were now in the month of April and the season was favorable for leaving. We hastened to gather provisions of maize, millet, dried meat, butter and honey sufficient for each person for three months and we bought baggage camels in sufficient number to insure against accidents en route and some oxhide tents. Finally, our caravan which had set out from Metlily (in Algeria) with sixty-four camels and only sixteen persons, was now augmented by four hundred slaves, of whom three hundred were women, and had a total of almost six hundred camels.

The people of Touat [Tuwāt]⁴ who joined with us, had increased in number similarly. They had purchased fifteen hundred slaves and their camels had risen in number to two thousand. Altogether we formed a company of about two thousand one hundred men and two thousand six hundred camels. Katsina had no square big enough to contain us and so, under the name of the Touat caravan, we went to establish ourselves in one of the great empty spaces set up in the middle of the gardens.

Finally we saw successively arriving the three caravans of Ghadames, Ghat and the Fezzan.⁵ The first had penetrated as far as Nupe on the banks of the Bahar-el-Nil [river Niger] to the south of Sokoto. It brought back three thousand slaves and three thousand five hundred camels. The second had pushed down to Kano to the south-east of Katsina. It only numbered seven or eight hundred camels and four or five hundred slaves. The third came back from Sokoto and was no larger than the preceding one.

At daybreak our camels were loaded, the Negro children perched atop the baggage, the male Negroes secured by their chains in the center of the convoy and the Negro females grouped in eights or tens under the watch of men carrying whips. The departure signal was given and the first caravan moved. It was at this point that suddenly a confused noise of cries and sobs passed from one group of slaves to another and reached our own. All, together, wept and moaned, called out and uttered farewells. They were terrified of being eaten during the journey. Some rolled on the ground, clung to bushes and absolutely refused to walk. Nothing had any effect on them, neither kind words nor threats. They could only be got up with mighty lashes of the whip and by rendering them completely bloody. Despite their obstinacy, no one of them resisted this extreme measure. Moreover, joined together as they were, the less fearful or more courageous, struggling with the weaker ones, forced them to walk.

The first day we halted at only three leagues⁶ from Katsina on a huge plain where we found pools and plenty of grass and wood. Each caravan established its camp separately. As soon as our camels had crouched down and after having, first and foremost, chained up our Negresses by the foot in groups of eight or ten, we forced our Negroes to help us, using their left hand which we had left free, in unloading our animals, marking out a circle with our loads and putting up the ox-hide tents we had brought from Katsina within this perimeter. Two or three of the older Negresses whom we had not chained together, but who nevertheless had their feet shackled, were set to preparing something for us to dine on.

The next day we loaded up early and this time the Ghat caravan took the lead. Although calmer than they were the evening before, our slaves were still very irritable. To tire them out and weaken them we made the slaves carry their irons, their dishes and the mortars for pounding maize and millet. And so that our entire attention could be concentrated on them, each of us tied his camels together in a single file. Watching over them thus became easier and if one of them fell down or a load fell off, we could in this way halt them all at once and we avoided the whole group bolting as we got one on its feet or reloaded another.

ESCAPE, RECAPTURE, PUNISHMENT

[The narrator's personal slave, Mebrouk, could not reconcile himself to his condition, despite his owner's blandishments, and led a party of six slaves—all chained together for the night—in an escape. Two were recaptured; two others chained together were attacked by a lion and one was mauled to death while the other eventually died of fright. Mebrouk and one other slave were never found.]

When news of this event was noised abroad our khebirs, each followed by fifteen horsemen, set off at a gallop and explored the countryside far and wide. But it is full of scrub and so dotted with hillocks that they could only find two of the fugitives. As a lesson for the future, it remained for us to learn from the two recaptured fugitives by what clever means they and their companions had slipped their chains. But neither kindness nor patience on the part of Cheggueun who was interrogating them, could make their tongues wag and, seized by anger, he ordered that they should be flogged in front of the other slaves. In no time all these pagans were lined up on the side of a hillock. Two powerful men seized one of the two Negroes, threw him to the ground and sat astride his heels and neck. At the same time two chaouchs (assistants) had taken up their stations, canes in hand, one on the right and the other on the left of the guilty one.

⁴ Tuwat is a large oasis in the central Algerian Sahara.

⁵ Ghadames and Ghat are Libyan oases close to the Algerian border. Fezzan is a large oasis region in southern Libya.

⁶ The conventional distance of a league is three miles.

"Go to it," said Cheggueun. At the first blow the canes were white. At the fiftieth they were red and blood ran on the thighs and sides of the victim. But the obstinate fellow had still said nothing. Only his fitful breathing and some movement of his loins bore witness to the fact that they were not beating a corpse. Finally he cried out, "Abi (father)! Serki (chief)! I will tell all. Stop the beating." A gesture from Cheggueun brought the chaouchs to a halt.

"Speak," he said to the Negro. "What did you do to break your chains and what happened to them?"

"O Serki! I touched them with my kerikeri (amulet) and made them melt."

"Chaouchs!" responded Cheggueun, "Beat him harder. He lies."

The canes descended on the liar so hard that they removed a strip of his skin.

"Abi! Serki! I will talk. I will talk," he cried.

"Dog of a pagan," said Cheggueun, "I will have you killed if you lie to me again."

"By my father's neck," replied the slave, "here is the truth. During the night, by slithering on the sand, Mebrouk came over to us. He had some hot water in a calabash and he poured some of this in the lock of our chains. Thus wetted, when we tapped it on its side we made the bolt slide and we opened it. Out of the five, however, two had to escape attached to one another, carrying the chain with them."

"O my children," Cheggueun said to us, "you hear him. Above all, those of you whose Negroes are chained up with old chains, never go to sleep without seeing with your eye and touching with your hand the padlocks which protect your fortune. Let this be a good lesson to you all!"

The slave was seated and the chaouchs helped him to stand up. Limping and groaning he dragged himself to the feet of his master, prostrated with his face on the ground and poured sand over himself as a sign of his repentance and submission. It had taken no less than one hundred and twenty strokes of the cane to drag out his secret from him and good justice would have required that his accomplice receive the same. But his owner objected that two such wounded men would be an embarrassment for everyone, that they might die of exhaustion and that his loss was already great. Cheggueun, who had a heart of gold, was easily convinced by these good reasons and he gave orders that on departure the next morning the sick man should be put on a camel.

WITH THE MARABOUTS

[The caravan halted at a place called Aghezeur, probably near Agades in present-day Niger, to take on provisions and to reclaim some items they had deposited there on the southbound journey in the keeping of a community of "marabouts" (Muslim holymen).]

With our preparations for departure complete we were of a mind to set out on the third day after our arrival, but the marabouts of the zaouïa (lodge) of Sidi Ahmed who had come to our camp and called us together for prayer held us back with these words: "O Muslims! These negroes you are bringing are idolators. We must make them know the One God; we must teach them to pray and how to perform ablutions; we must circumcise them today. God will reward you for it. Make your slaves assemble. By God's grace we know their language; we will put ourselves in the middle of them and teach them what it is good for them to know."

We understood well, for the Lord loves him who causes the number of His servants to be increased; moreover, there is, from the point of view of sales, a great advantage in turning an idolator into a Muslim. Almost all of our slaves already knew the *shahāda* (declaration of faith) and the name of the Prophet and God. Frequently, during leisure time at camp we would teach them the basic tenets of the religion, speaking broken gnāwiyya⁷ to them while they spoke broken Arabic to us. To the best behaved we offered some concessions; to the obdurate some harsh discipline; thus self-interest, if not conviction, had readied them for the solemn ceremony which would today make them into Muslims.

In front of the *zāwiya* of Sidi Ahmed is a huge open space. Each one of us led his Negroes there and made them sit on the ground and soon their number sketched out a gigantic thick semi-circle facing the zaouïa. Like a muezzin calling to prayer, the imam climbed up on the mosque and uttered these words:

"God is One; He has no associates. He is unique of His kind and none is comparable to Him. He is the Sovereign and Incomparable Lord. He is from all time and shall endure for all time. Eternity shall not destroy Him and time and the centuries do not change Him. He is the First, the Last, the Manifest and the Hidden. He knows what is in the inside of bodies. Nothing is similar to Him; He is superior to all things. His superiority and His exaltation, instead of distancing Him from His worshippers, brings Him closer to His creatures. He is All-Seeing, All-Knowing, He is Omnipresent. He is Holy and no place can encompass Him. Only the saints can look upon Him in the places where His dwelling is sempiternal, as has been established by the verses of the Qur'an and the accounts of the ancients. He is Living, He is Powerful, He is Almighty, He is Superb, He is Severe; idleness and weakness are remote from Him."

⁷ "Blacks" language, i.e., Hausa.

"He forgets not, He sleeps not. His is the command and to Him belongs the vastness of the universe. To Him belong honor and omnipotence. He created creatures and their acts. When He wishes a thing, it is. When He does not wish it, it is not. He is the Beginning and the End, the Doer of His will. Everything that is in the world—movement, rest, good, evil, profit, loss, faith, infidelity, obedience and disobedience—all come from God. There is no bird that flies with its wings, no beast that walks on its feet, no serpent that glides on its stomach, no leaf that grows or falls and no light or darkness without the almighty will of God. Everything that exists is created; God exists from eternity and all that has been created demonstrates His unity. Man's petition to God is prayer and prayer itself only exists by the will of God. If you put your confidence in God, He will care for you as He cares for the birds of the heavens who set out hungry and return full. He does not bring food to their nests, but he puts in them the instinct to search for it."

I would not dare to say that this speech made a lively impression on the Negroes, but the solemnity of the new spectacle for them, the receptivity with which we, their masters and the holy marabout, listened certainly made them ready for the carrying out of the religious act that would make them Muslims. When time for the operation came, though all or almost all showed themselves surprised, not one refused to undergo it, for they take pride in having no fear of pain. As soon as they had been marked with the symbol of the Muslims, they had their wounds staunching by us with an astringent powder made of dried ground leaves of arrar [juniper] and el-aazir, blended with butter.⁸

The marabouts then prayed over them in gnāwiyya, saying: "O you Negroes, give thanks to God! Yesterday you were idolators and today you are Muslims. Depart with your masters who will clothe you, feed you and love you like their brothers and children. Serve them well and they will give you your liberty in a while. If you are comfortable with them you shall stay there. If not you shall return to your land."

That day and the next we took particular care of our slaves. We fed them good meat and let them sleep in tents to keep them from the cold and dew of the nights. Thanks to such attentions our caravan did not lose a single one. In the other caravans, however, some of the older ones died.

Questions:

1. How did the Muslim Holy men (Marabouts) influence the commerce in African slavery?
2. How does the organization of the slave trade in North Africa in the nineteenth century compare with the organization of the slave trade in West Africa in the eighteenth century (see Reading 7)?

⁸ El-Aazir has not been identified. The "butter" referred to was no doubt samm—"clarified butter" or "ghee," not the type one is accustomed to spread on bread.