New Approaches to African History

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A History of the African Diaspora

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
CHAPTER 1

Antiquity

Scholars of American history have long understood that discussions of the African American experience must begin with a consideration of people and cultures and developments in Africa itself, before the rise of American slavery and the transatlantic slave trade, to debilitate the notion that black folk, prior to their experiences in the Americas, had no history worthy of the name.

Long before the rise of professional historians, black men and women had reached a similar conclusion. Facing the withering effects of slavery, black thinkers as early as David Walker and Frederick Douglass were careful to mention the glories of the African past. When circumstances all around suggested otherwise, they found evidence of the potential and ability of black people in the achievements of antiquity. Rather than conforming to divine decree or reflecting the natural order of things, the enslavement of black people, when placed in the context of thousands of years of history in Africa itself, was but an aberration. In this view, there was nothing inevitable about black suffering and subjugation.

These early thinkers, uninformed about the greatness of West and West Central African civilizations, invariably cited those of ancient Egypt, Nubia, and Ethiopia as exemplars of black accomplishment and creativity. In so doing, they anticipated the subsequent writings of scholars like W. E. B. Du Bois, Carter G. Woodson, and St. Clair Drake, who likewise embraced the idea that ancient Egyptian and Nubian societies were related to those toiling in American sugar cane and cotton fields. This view was not limited to black thinkers in the
Americas; the Senegalese scholar Cheikh Anta Diop argued for links between Egypt, Ethiopia, and West Africa. The latest to make such claims have been the "Afrocentrists," but whatever the particular school of thought, certain of their ideas resonate with communities in both West Africa and the African Diaspora, where the notion of a connectedness to either Egypt and Nubia or Ethiopia resides in the cultural expressions of the folk. Whether one accepts their views or finds them extravagant, there is no avoiding the realization that Africans and their descendants have pursued a long and uninterrupted conversation about their relationship to the ancients. Such intergenerational discussion has not been idle chitchat but rather has significantly influenced the unfolding of African American art, music, religion, politics, and societies.

A brief consideration of ancient Africa, especially Egypt, Nubia, and Ethiopia, remains important for at least two reasons: First, it contextualizes the discussion of subsequent developments largely inaugurated with massive trades in African captives. Antiquity reminds us that modernity could not have been predicted, that Africans were not always under the heel but were in fact at the forefront of human civilization. Second, antiquity reminds us that the African Diaspora did not begin with the slave trades. Rather, the dissemination of African ideas and persons actually began long ago. In this first diasporic phase, ideas were arguably more significant than the number of people dispersed. The Mediterranean in particular benefited from Egyptian and Nubian culture and learning. This initial phase was further distinguished by the political standing of the Africans in question; Egypt was a world power that imposed its will on others, rather than the reverse. This was therefore a different kind of African Diaspora than what followed many centuries later.

Egypt

The study of ancient Egypt is a discipline unto itself, involving majestic monuments, mesmerizing religions, magnificent arts, epic wars, and the like, all of which lie beyond our purpose here. Rather, our deliberations are confined to Egypt's relations with its neighbors, especially to the south, as it is in such relations that the concept of an ancient African Diaspora can be demonstrated.


Ancient Egypt, located along the Nile and divided into Upper and Lower regions, exchanged goods and ideas with Sumer (in Mesopotamia, between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers) as early as 3500 BCE, and by 1700 BCE it was connected with urban-based civilizations in the Indus valley, the Iranian plateau, and China. Situated in Africa, Egypt was also a global crossroad for various populations and cultures, its participation in this intercontinental zone a major feature of the African Diaspora's opening chapter.

Just who were these ancient Egyptians? While none can reasonably quibble with identifying them as northeastern Africans, the discussion becomes more complex when the subject turns to "race." Race, as it is used currently, lacks scientific value or meaning; it is as a sociopolitical concept that race takes on decided import and gravity. Our understanding of ancient Egypt is complicated by our own conversations about race, and by attempts to relate modern ideas to ancient times. A contemporary preoccupation, race was of scant significance in ancient Egypt, if the concept even existed. For example, while some paintings depict the Egyptians as dark skinned, it is more common to see males painted a dark reddish-brown and females a lighter brown or yellow. Such varying representations were not meant to simply convey
physical traits, but social standing as well; a woman portrayed as light brown suggests privilege and exemption from the need to work outdoors, her actual skin tone a matter of conjecture.

Ancient Egyptians were highly ethnocentric, regarding themselves as “the people” and everyone else as uncivilized; a distinction having more to do with land of birth and culture than outward appearance. Foreigners included Bedouins from Arabia, “Asiatics” from Asia Minor, Libyans from the west, and the Nehesi from the area south of Egypt, called Nehesu or Khent (“borderland”) by the Egyptians, otherwise known as Nubia or Kush. But given Egypt’s long history, its gene pool periodically received infusions from Asia Minor, southern Europe, the Arabian peninsula, and, of course, sub-Saharan Africa. What Egyptians may have looked like in the third millennium BCE is not necessarily how they appeared 1,000 years later, let alone after 4,000 years. Swift and dramatic changes in the North American gene pool between 1500 CE and 2002 caution that sustained and substantial immigration can produce startling transformations.

Egypt and the South

During the Old and Middle Kingdoms (3400–2180 and 2080–1640 BCE), Egypt sought to militarily control Nubia and parts of Syria and Palestine. Under the New Kingdom (1570–1090 BCE), Egypt repeatedly invaded Palestine and Syria in its competition with Assyria and (subsequently) Babylon for control of the region. Africa was therefore a major foreign power in what would become the Middle East for thousands of years, that were formative, in lands destined to become sacred for millions of people.

While especially interested in Nubia’s gold, Egypt also recruited the Nubians themselves for the Egyptian army, as their military prowess, especially in archery, was highly regarded (Egyptians referred to Nubia as Ta-Seti, or the “land of the bow”). Nubians were also sought as laborers, and some were even enslaved. However, with the possible exception of the Hebrews, Egypt’s enslaved population was never very large, with slaves from Europe and Asia Minor often more numerous than Nubians or other Africans.

While extending its control over Nubian territory and tapping Nubian labor, Egypt also relocated select Nubians to its capital at Thebes, where an institution called the Kap provided a formal, rare Egyptian education. Nubians learned the ways of Egypt, but their presence as elites, workers, and soldiers also led to the spread of Nubian culture in Egypt. This phenomenon was similar to later developments in the Americas, where the convergence of African, European, Asian, and Native American elements led to a flourishing of African-inspired cultures, among others.

One of the more fascinating aspects of the New Kingdom’s eighteenth dynasty’s involvement with Nubia was the determinant role Nubian women played in the royal court. Indeed, Nubian women became Egyptian royals, wielding tremendous power as queen mothers and royal wives. As wives, they ruled at times with their husbands, at times as regents, and in some instances alone. Ahmose I inaugurated the eighteenth dynasty and ruled with Nefertari, a Nubian who enjoyed tremendous prestige and popularity with native Egyptians. Their great-granddaughter Hatshepsut ruled as both queen and regent from 1503 to 1482 BCE. Ties to Nubia were later strengthened when Amenhotep III married thirteen-year-old Tiye, another Nubian. Their seven children included sons Amenhotep IV and Tutankhamen. Renowned and emulated for her beauty, Tiye was also well educated and quite the political force; funerary sculptures depict her as an equal to Amenhotep III. She may have been responsible for affairs of state under Amenhotep IV, who changed his name to Akhenaton (from aton, solar symbol of supreme deity) as part of his promotion of monotheism. As Akhenaton’s wife, Nefertiti, was yet another Nubian, we can see that it is not possible to discuss the New Kingdom without acknowledging the Nubian presence and contribution.

Nubian Ascendancy

Nubia, also located along the Nile, was called QeS by its inhabitants. None of its various names – Nubia, QeS, Cush, Kush, Ta-Seti, Nehesu, Khent – refer to skin color; one can surmise that whatever differences existed between Egyptians and Nubians, skin color was not one that elicited elaboration.

Nubia was likewise divided into Lower and Upper regions: The former was associated with bows, shields, and other manufactures as well as raw materials; the latter with gold, precious stones, leopard skins, and cattle. A Nubian state may have existed prior to Egypt’s Old Kingdom, and at least one was its contemporary. The three major
Nubian kingdoms came later and are named after their capitals: Kerma (1750–1550 BCE), Napata (750–300 BCE), and Meroë (300 BCE–350 CE).

Scholars point to the distinctiveness of Nubian history and culture, that Nubia was not simply an outpost of Egyptian civilization or an imitation of Egypt on a smaller scale. The history of Napata, however, features Egyptian and Nubian convergence. Under Napata’s leadership, the Nubians not only freed themselves of Egyptian domination but also turned and conquered Egypt. Establishing the twenty-fifth dynasty, the Nubians ruled as Egyptian pharaohs, their acceptance by the Egyptians a reflection of the long familiarity of the Egyptian with the Nubian.

The twenty-fifth dynasty was a time of contestation between Egypt and Assyria for control of Palestine. Assyria invaded Egypt in 674 BCE but was defeated. Three years later they were successful, driving the Nubians south where they eventually reestablished their capital at Meroë. Removed from the interminable conflicts in the Near East, neither the Ptolemies nor Rome mounted any serious effort to conquer Meroë, opting instead to maintain trade relations. Commerce and defensible terrain allowed Meroë to flourish and export such commodities as gold, cotton, precious stones, ostrich feathers, ivory, and elephants (the latter for war and amusement), while producing large quantities of iron.

Meroë was a unique civilization, with large stone monuments of stelae and its own system of writing, Meroitic. Nubian women played major roles in government (Egypt’s eighteenth dynasty may reflect this custom); queen mothers were especially powerful, and, together with royal wives, were called Candaces (from Kentakes). The renown of the Candaces in the ancient Near East was such that they reappear in accounts connected with the Bible; they were a source of dramatic and powerful images reverberating to the present day.

Africans in the Graeco-Roman World

The ancient Mediterranean world, successively dominated by the Greeks, Phoenicians, and Romans, came to know Africans from a number of places and in varying capacities. Most Africans, especially during the Roman period, entered the Mediterranean from both Egypt and Nubia. They also came from areas south of the Nile, North Africa (from what is now Libya west to Morocco), the southern fringes of the Sahara Desert, and West Africa proper.

In sharp contrast to the impressions that Egyptians and Nubians had of each other for millennia, southern Europeans were completely struck by the African’s color; the darker the color, the stronger the impression. Although stunned, southern Europeans generally did not ascribe any intrinsic value or worth to skin color, and, unlike contemporary notions of race and racism, did not equate blackness with inferiority. Modern day racism apparently did not exist in the ancient Mediterranean world. In fact, there is evidence that just the opposite was true, that Africans were viewed favorably.

The Greeks were so taken with the pigmentation of Africans that they invented the term Ethiopian (from Aethiops). The term means “burnt-faced person” and reflects the European belief that the skin color and hair of the African were caused by the sun. “To wash an Ethiopian white” was a common expression in the Graeco-Roman world, indicating enough familiarity with blackness to use it in conveying the futility of attempting to change the unalterable. The term Ethiopian was at times also applied by the Greeks to Arabs, Indians, and others of dark hue, and it is often used inaccurately to refer to Nubians. It should be borne in mind that the ancient state of Ethiopia did not begin until the first century CE.

The combined vocabulary of the Greeks and Romans could include terms of distinction. Color variation was one scheme by which groups (rather than individuals) were categorized, located as they were along a continuum from dark (fuscus) to very dark (nigerrimi). Ptolemy, for example, described the population around Meroë as “deeply black” and “pure Ethiopians,” as opposed to those living in the border region between Egypt and Nubia, who, according to Flavius Philostratus, were not as black as the Nubians but darker than the Egyptians. While these classifications are nonscientific and subjective, they demonstrate that blackness varied in the ancient world, much as it does today.

In addition to pigmentation, diet also formed the basis of categorization, so that the work of second-century BCE geographer and historian Agatharchides, as recorded in On the Brythmeans Sea and surviving in part in the writings of Diodorus (born 100 BCE) and Photius, speaks of the Struthophagi or ostrich eaters; the Spermatophagi, consumers of nuts and tree fruit; the Ichthyophagi or fish eaters; and the Pamphagi, who ate everything. Of course, some groups were purely fanciful, as is evident by Pliny the Elder’s (born 23 CE) list that includes the
Trogodytae (voiceless save for squeaking noises); the Blemmyae (headless, with eyes and mouths in their chests); the Himantopodes, who crawled instead of walked; and the three- and four-eyed Nisicathae and Nitatae.

Greek and Roman attempts to account for unknown parts of Africa represent an acknowledgment of the limitations of the former’s knowledge. But what the Greeks and Romans did know of Africa, they tended to admire. Their attitudes toward Africans can be deduced from their accounts of actual encounters, as well as from their literature (such as poetry and drama). Artwork is also a source of information. These views come together in yet another Graeco-Roman division of the African population, this time along lines of civilizational achievement; African societies deemed high in attainment were greatly acclaimed. Egyptians and Nubians had established literate, urban-based, technologically advanced civilizations long before there was a Rome or an Athens, so there was every reason for African achievement to be praised and even emulated. It is not surprising that Homer speaks of the Olympian gods, especially Zeus, feasting with the “blameless” Ethiopians, the most distant of men, who by the time of Xenophanes (d. circa 478 BCE) had been identified as black and flat nosed, and by the fifth century located to the south of Egypt. Herodotus maintained that the Ethiopians were the tallest and most handsome of men, and the most pious. He added that Meroë was a “great city,” and that the Nubians had supplied Egypt with eighteen pharaohs. Diodorus wrote that the inhabitants of Meroë were the “first of all men and the first to honor the gods whose favor they enjoyed,” and, together with Lucian, who maintained that the “Ethiopians” had invented astrology, claimed that many Nubian practices and institutions were subsequently borrowed by the Egyptians. Meroë was to be distinguished, however, from “primitive” Ethiopians, who went about “filthy” and naked (or nearly so) and who did not believe in the gods. Celebrated sexual encounters in the Greek and Roman imagination are yet another measure of the regard for the Nubian. Examples include Zeus, who may have been portrayed in the Inachus of Sophocles (circa 496–406 BCE) as black or dark, and whose child by Io is described by Aeschylus (525–456 BCE) as black and by Hesiod (fl. circa 700 BCE) as the ancestor of the Ethiopians and Libyans. Delphos, the founder of Delphi, was believed to be the son of Poseidon or Apollo and a woman whose name means “the black woman.” There is also the example of Perseus, who married the daughter of the king of the Ethiopians, the dark-hued Andromeda.

Just as individuals like Herodotus actually traveled to Africa and gathered information, Africans also entered southern Europe. The context was often one of war, both for and against the Greeks and Romans. Nubians were a part of the Egyptian occupation of Cyprus under Amasis (569–522 BCE), and there is the account of Memnon and his black soldiers coming to the aid of the Greeks in the possibly mythical Trojan Wars. A large number of Nubians fought under Xerxes of Persia in the very real Battle of Marathon in 480–79 BCE. These Nubians experienced liaisons with Greek women, resulting in the “brown babies” of the Persian Wars. Carthage, founded no earlier than 750 BCE by the combination of Phoenician settlers and Berber natives referred to as Numidians, developed a society in which the Berber masses were treated harshly. Although transsaharan trade in the hands of the Garamantes was not very important during Carthaginian ascendancy, a sufficient number of subsaharan Africans made their way to Carthage, where they were inducted into military service. Frontius records the presence of “very black” auxiliaries among the Carthaginian prisoners taken by Gelon of Syracuse in 480 BCE. The Punic Wars (264–241, 218–201, and 149–146 BCE) also saw Maghribian (North African) “Ethiopians,” possibly West Africans, employed in the invasion of Italy, serving as mahouts aloft elephants. Rome would go on to conquer Egypt and occupy it from the time of Augustus to the sixth century CE. Its relations with Nubia and the south were relatively peaceful until the third century CE, when it incurred difficulties with the Beja of the Red Sea hills, called “Blemmyes” in the Roman sources.

Africans enslaved in the Graeco-Roman world were only a small fraction of the total number of slaves in these territories. Enslaved Africans also only represented a portion of the overall African population living in southern Europe. A number of Africans were attracted to places like Rome for trade and occupational opportunities, and they could be found working as musicians, actors, jugglers, gladiators, wrestlers, boxers, religious specialists, and day laborers. Some became famous, such as the black athlete Olympius described by sixth-century poet Luxorius. In addition to entertaining and fighting the Romans, Africans also served in the Roman armies, as was the case with the elite Moorish cavalry from northwest Africa under Lucius Quietus, himself of possible Moroccan heritage. Black soldiers even served in the Roman army as far north as Britain.

Potentially more far-reaching than the actual presence of Africans in southern Europe was the impact of their cultural influence. Scholars debate the extent to which Egyptian science, engineering, architectural
forms, and philosophy influenced developments in Greece. There can be no question, however, that Egyptian and Nubian religion was deeply influential throughout the Mediterranean world for many centuries if not millennia, especially the worship of Isis, adopted and worshiped in many places under several names. Her worshipers made pilgrimage to the island of Philae, near the border of Egypt and Nubia, and Nubian specialists in Isiac worship were welcomed in various centers throughout southern Europe, where the Isiac rites were known as the Eleusianian mysteries.

From all that can be determined, it would appear that the racial attitudes of the ancient Graeco-Roman world differed significantly from the contemporary West. Africans were seen and treated as equals, the representatives of homelands both ancient and respected. Their reception in southern Europe and the Near East underscores the power and prestige of African realms and leaders as a factor that distinguishes this phase of the African Diaspora from what takes place much later. In the ancient world, Africa and Africans were forces to be reckoned with; indeed, for thousands of years, they were the leaders of the ancient world.

Suggestions for Further Reading


CHAPTER 2

Africans and the Bible

The Bible has affected the lives of Africans and their descendants in the Diaspora possibly more than any other document in human history. This phenomenon can be divided into at least two spheres: The first features the roles and experiences of Africans in the Bible, while the second concerns the ways in which these roles and experiences have influenced Africans living in post-Biblical times. Because the Biblical account is seen by many as prescriptive, the interpretation of African roles in the narrative is critical, as it has often determined how post-Biblical Africans were treated. In particular, the Bible has been crucial to slavery, with both benefactors and detractors of the institution taking solace in its pages.

Egypt and Nubia in the Bible

Pharaohs of the twenty-fifth dynasty appear in the Old Testament as allies against the Assyrians, and Taharka (690–664 BCE) is mentioned by name (Isaiah 37:9; 2 Kings 19:9). Egypt and Nubia’s union under this dynasty is demonstrated by the prophet Isaiah’s conjoined messages to each (Isaiah 18–20). In language corresponding to Herodotus, Isaiah (18:2,7) writes this of Nubia:

Go, swift messengers to a nation tall and smooth,
To a people feared far and wide,

A powerful and oppressive nation
Whose land the rivers divide.

Such esteem for Nubia is consistent with the view of states along the Nile as powerful neighbors of Israel, ever present in regional affairs. Indeed, the very formation of the Hebrew people is intimately associated with Egypt and Nubia. Egypt in particular features large in the Old Testament, playing successive roles as asylum, oppressor, ally, and foe. The enslavement and subsequent divine deliverance of the Hebrews was a source of consolation and hope for enslaved Africans and their descendants thousands of years later. But while many identified with the Hebrews, others celebrated the connection to Egypt.

Assuming a historical basis for Hebrew enslavement, it is unreasonable to believe they would have avoided sexual unions with Egyptians and Nubians for 400 years; indeed, individual stories suggest that the interaction between Hebrews and Egyptians or Nubians may have been significant. Even before the Hebrew community in Egypt, Egyptian women figured prominently in the lives of the prophets. Abraham, the father of revelatory monotheism, had a son Ishmael by the Egyptian Hagar, and Ishmael in turn married an Egyptian woman. Upon entry into Egypt, the patriarch Joseph also married an Egyptian woman, Asenath, who bore Manasseh and Ephraim, so that at least one of the twelve tribes was of partial African origin. Moses himself married a Nubian woman (Numbers 12:1). These examples suggest such women were desirable and instrumental at critical junctures, birthing clans and nations.

Beyond the question of intermarriage is the issue of cultural influence. The Hebrews were necessarily affected by their long stay in Egypt; after all, Joseph was embalmed. Such influence probably remained with the Hebrews for many years, as they exited Egypt with a “mixed multitude” (Exodus 12:38). Much of the Old Testament is concerned with eradicating that influence, along with others from Mesopotamia. If the Exodus is afforded credibility, it gives pause that the Hebrews, every one of them, came out of Africa after a 400-year sojourn. The story is not unlike the human birthing process, the crossing of the Red Sea a movement through the amniotic fluids of an African mother.

Mention of individual Egyptians and Nubians in the Bible is relatively rare. Some are in servile positions; others are associated with
lands beyond Nubia proper, and Palestine. Such a reading assumes that Noah’s other two sons, Japheth and Shem, were “white” and “Asian,” or at least not black.

The term Cush probably derives from Ḫqṣ (םכש) and is simply a place-name, bearing no racial or ethnic connotations. The Greek terms Ethiopia and Ethiopian do not appear in the Hebrew and Chaldean Old Testament, but rather the words Cush and Cushite, suggesting Nubian features were not a concern for Old Testament writers but became one with the rise of Alexander and the ensuing period of hellenization, when translators of the Septuagint, the Old Testament in Greek, opted to substitute Ethiopia for Cush.

Although the physical features of the Cushites or Nubians were not a significant matter for early Jews, an incident that precedes the presentation of the Table of Nations would eventually be interpreted in a way that would affect issues of slavery and race for centuries to come. The incident concerns a drunken Noah whose “nakedness is uncovered” by his son Ham, a phrase with multiple possible meanings. When Noah awoke from his stupor and realized “what had been done to him,” he uttered words that would have profound implications for people of African descent:

Cursed be Canaan;
The lowest of servants
He shall be to his brothers.

(Genesis 9:24–27)

The ambiguity of the passage lends itself to conflicting interpretations. Who was being cursed, Ham or his son Canaan? Did Noah’s curse carry divine sanction, or was it the innocuous expletives of an angry mortal?

The interpretation of Noah’s curse depends upon the perspective. Believers are divided over its meaning. To the cynical, the curse was written after the entry of the Hebrews into Palestine to justify the appropriation of land. For the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century slaveholder, it became “the Hamitic curse” and meant that African slavery had been providentially decreed. In this reading, the European slaveholder was simply fulfilling the will of God, as God’s chosen instrument.

To the extent that the curse enjoys divine sanction, the likelihood that it was meant to apply to all of the descendants of Ham is mitigated by the record of the Bible itself. The only person discussed in any detail in Genesis Chapter 10, site of the Table of Nations, is one
Nimrod, son of Cush, who “became a mighty one on the earth. He was a mighty hunter before the Lord,” and credited with establishing such cities as Babel and Nineveh in Assyria. If anything, Nimrod represents a tradition of imperialism and domination rather than subservience. Another example is Egypt itself, as it was the Egyptians, descendants of Ham, who were the slaveholders. Again, it was to the Nubians that the Israelites turned for help against the Assyrians out of recognition of their ascendency. There is also the fascinating account of Moses and his Nubian bride (Numbers 12), a marriage opposed by Moses’ siblings Miriam and Aaron for reasons unclear. In a stunning rebuke, Yahweh not only supports Moses but also turns Miriam’s skin into a leprous, luminous white that persists for days, an unusual punishment laced with humor if not sarcasm.

Unfortunately, the import of the divine rebuke did not endure. Scholars of the revered communication would produce additional literature to accompany the scriptures and unfold their meaning. In contrast to the Jewish Talmud (a collection of laws and rabbinical wisdom and the second most holy text in Judaism), another tradition began, perhaps around the fifth century BCE, that may have characterized blackness itself as a consequence of and punishment for Ham’s transgression. This tradition that can be found in the fifth-century CE literature of the Midrashim and the sixth-century CE Babylonian Talmud. However, some scholars argue that the idea of blackness as scourge actually derives from mistranslations of these texts, rather than the texts themselves.

African-born persons rarely appear in the New Testament. Jesus is said to have spent an unspecified number of his childhood years in Egypt, where in all likelihood he would have lived in the large Jewish community at Alexandria (Matthew 2:13–23). Simon of Cyrene (North Africa) is remembered for helping Jesus carry the cross (Luke 23:26; Matthew 27:32; Mark 15:21). The “Ethiopian” eunuch, who will be discussed in more detail, is prominently featured in the book of the Acts of the Apostles.

It is striking that the formation of the early Jewish state involved the literal transfer of a community from one land of Ham to another. It is therefore not possible to hold an intelligent discussion of the Old Testament without understanding the contribution of the African. It is not a question of a lone Nubian here and an odd Egyptian there; rather, the Old Testament world was awash in Africa’s colors and cultures.

The Queen of Sheba

While the Hamitic curse would be used in the future with devastating effect, another account in the Old Testament forms the basis for perhaps the most significant and certainly most hallowed tradition involving Biblical Africa, linking the continent to the African Diaspora from ancient times to the present. In arresting defiance of, and in diametric opposition to, the damnation of Canaan, the very glory of God is held to have rested upon a favored Ethiopia. The explanation of how that happened is a fascinating journey into an African reading of the Bible, and it links the continent to three separate faiths in fundamental and enduring ways.

The story begins with King Solomon, who already had ties to the Nile valley by his marriage to an Egyptian princess and possibly by way of his mother Bathsheba, whose name may signify “from the house or land of Sheba.” Word of his fabled wisdom spread far and wide, eventually attracting the Queen of Sheba, who journeyed to Israel with a large retinue to hear Solomon’s wisdom for herself (2 Chronicles 9:1–12; 1 Kings 10:1–13). More than favorably impressed, the Queen gave the king a large quantity of gold, spices, and precious stones. In exchange, Solomon gave unspecified gifts of his own.

According to the Ethiopian holy book Kebra Nagast or “Glory of Kings,” completed in the early fourteenth century and drawn from the Bible, the Qur’an, apocryphal literatures, and other sources, Solomon and the Queen, identified as Makeda in the Ethiopian manuscript, struck up a romance consummated through Solomon’s guile. After nine months and a conversion to Judaism, Makeda gave birth to Menelik (literally, “son of the wise man”), who years later returned to Jerusalem where he was acknowledged by his father, crowned the king of Ethiopia, and implored to remain in Jerusalem to inherit the throne of Israel. Longing for home, Menelik instead returned to Ethiopia with a number of priests and the Tabot or the Ark of the Covenant (or Tabernacle of Zion). The Ark, symbol of Yahweh’s presence and Israel’s unique status, henceforth rests, according to this tradition, in Ethiopia, thereby transferring to the Ethiopians the honor of “God’s chosen people.” Likewise, the kings of Ethiopia are descendants of Solomon, each a “lion of Judah.”

There are multiple layers to the story. To begin, the location of “Sheba” is in dispute: many cite Saba in Yemen as the most likely site, while some insist upon Nubia or Ethiopia. Interestingly, Jesus simply
refers to the “Queen of the South” who came “from the ends of the earth” to hear Solomon’s wisdom (Matthew 12:42; Luke 11:31), a characterization of space and distance in remarkable resonance with Homer’s Odyssey, wherein the Ethiopians are described as “the most remote of men,” dwelling by the streams of Ocean, “at earth’s two verges, in sunset lands and lands of the rising sun.” As Ethiopia did not exist during the time of Solomon, the only viable alternative to Yemen for Sheba’s location is Nubia, where the queen may have been one of the Candaces. In the end, Sheba’s precise location may not matter very much, as populations and cultural influences regularly crisscrossed the Red Sea in antiquity; in fact, southern Arabia was periodically dominated by powers on nearby African soil, particularly from 335–370 CE and 525–575 CE, when Ethiopia ruled portions of the southern peninsula.

Another complication is the Kebra Nagast’s claims of an initial association with Judaism. Ethiopia is better known as a Christian state. Founded at Aksum (Axum) in 59 CE, Ethiopia became home to Amhara-Tigrean, Galla, Afar, Somali, and Omotic populations, distinguishing it both culturally and territorially from Nubia (which lay to the north). Christianity entered Ethiopia early; tradition links missionary activity to the apostle Matthew, but Ethiopia’s definitive turn to Christianity took place in the middle of the fourth century CE, when King Ezana and the royal court embraced the new religion, and in the fifth century CE, when large-scale conversions occurred. In 1135, the Aksumite rulers were overthrown by the founders of the Zagwe dynasty, whose greatest achievement was the creation of a remarkable ceremonial center at Lalibela (or Roha, named after the dynasty’s most illustrious ruler), site of churches hewn from “living rock,” fashioned deep in the earth. The Zagwes were in turn overthrown by the Solomonids in 1270, claiming descent from Solomon and Makeda.

The Solomonids drew upon traditions enshrined in the Kebra Nagast to legitimate their seizure of power, claiming the best of both worlds by trumpeting their alleged hereditary connections to Israel while simultaneously championing Christianity. Led by a literate elite who wrote in Ge’ez (or Ethiopic), Christian Ethiopia experienced an efflorescence under the Solomonids, particularly from the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries. Although severely challenged by Ahmad Granye’s sixteenth-century Muslim campaign that saw widespread destruction of churches and monasteries, only to be followed by incursions of Galla or Oromo in the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries, Ethiopia’s unique Christian legacy survived. Ethiopia would become an icon in the modern African Diaspora, a symbol of independence and fierce pride, and the focus of a new religion developed in the Caribbean.

**Beta Israel**

The Solomonids were not the only ones to draw from the Kebra Nagast for legitimation. The Jews of Ethiopia, who refer to themselves as the Beta Israel (“House of Israel”) and take umbrage at the term Falasha (“stranger, wanderer,” coined by non-Jewish Ethiopians), also claim descent from Solomon and Makeda. The Beta Israel have a different account of what happened following Menelik’s return to Ethiopia: With the Ark of the Covenant in tow, Menelik’s entourage came to a river and separated into two companies. Those who crossed eventually became Christians, while those who paused remained Jews: a marvelous allegory at the least.

Scholars and politicians have debated whether the Beta Israel are “true” Jews for centuries. Aside from the Solomon-Makeda tradition (given little credence by many scholars), there are other, competing theories attempting to explain how Jews came to Ethiopia. In 1973, for example, Israel’s Sephardic Chief Rabbi recognized the Beta Israel as true Jews, a remnant of the lost tribe of Dan (one of the ten who seemingly vanished after their capture by Assyria in 722 BCE). Other scholars cite evidence of a Jewish military garrison at Elephantine Island, near the traditional border of Egypt and Nubia, between the seventh and the fifth centuries BCE. Yet others point to the proximity of southern Arabia, in which communities of Jews have lived since the seventh century BCE, with most arriving after the destruction of Jerusalem’s Second Temple in 70 CE.

Whatever their origins, the Beta Israel’s subsequent history in Ethiopia is also a matter of scholarly contention; some maintain they were persecuted and harassed for most of their existence, while others argue the relationship between Jews and the Christian state was at times complementary and cooperative. The Beta Israel took refuge in the mountain fastnesses of Ethiopia and were cut off from world Jewry. There they continued to sacrifice animals, observe the Sabbath, follow other religious laws and dietary proscriptions, and circumcise on
commitment. Even so, North Africa was the site of a brilliant Christian civilization, producing the likes of Saint Augustine of Hippo (354–440), born in North Africa and likely of Berber descent. Christian scholars and leaders located throughout Egypt and North Africa played major roles in the various schisms and doctrinal disputes characterizing the troubled history of the early church. However, while North Africa and Egypt provided the setting, European languages dominated the religious discourse; Latin was used in the North African church, and Greek in the Coptic.

An African past filled with splendor and pageantry would serve to defend against the onslaught experienced by the enslaved in the Americas, who were repeatedly told that Africa held no historical significance. Though ancient and in a corner of the continent from which the vast majority of the enslaved did not hail, Egypt, Nubia, and Ethiopia were yet in Africa, and therefore they represented the dignity of the entire continent, a place of honor bestowed largely through exposure to Christianity and Judaism. By the nineteenth century, the prophecy that “Ethiopia shall soon stretch her hands out to God” (Psalm 68:31) would be interpreted by many as a call to convert masses of Africans and their descendants to Christianity, thereby shaping Africa and its Diaspora in profound ways.

Suggestions for Further Reading


Regarding the Kebra Nagast, the only English translation available remains, curiously, E. A. Wallis Budge's The Queen of Sheba and Her Only Son Menyelek (Kebra Nagast) (London and Boston: The Medici Society, Ltd., 1922). Given the date of the translation and Budge's reputation as something of a racist, a modern translation is sorely needed. Donald N. Levine's Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multietnic Society (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1974) provides a critical reading of both Kebra Nagast and the development of Ethiopian society.


CHAPTER 3

Africans and the Islamic World

We tend to know more about Africans in the Americas than elsewhere in the Diaspora. However, as this chapter makes clear, millions of Africans entered Islamic lands, where they made important contributions to extraordinary civilizations, from the heartlands of the faith to Muslim Spain. An extended discussion of this major component of the African Diaspora is warranted, as the juxtaposition of the similarities and differences between this experience and that of Africans in the Americas yields far greater insight into the condition of displacement than does a lone hemispheric focus.

We begin with a brief consideration of Muhammad, born circa 570 CE in the city of Mecca, an oasis important as both marketplace and site of religious shrines. Muhammad was sensitive to the disparities between rich and poor, and his meditations resulted in a series of revelations that began when he was forty years of age; three years later, he began heralding a message centering on the oneness of God, his own role as God’s messenger, the Last Day, and the need for a response of submission, gratitude, worship, and social responsibility. Encountering resistance and harassment, Muhammad and his companions found asylum in Medina, and in 630 they accepted Mecca’s peaceful surrender. By the time of his death in 632, the whole of the Arabian peninsula was united under Muhammad’s control. By 656, Islam had expanded into Syria, Iraq, Egypt, and North Africa, and by 711, Muslim armies had conquered parts of the Iberian peninsula as well.
Golden Lands

Where Muslim armies spearheaded Islam’s expansion into North Africa and Egypt, Muslim traders and clerics led the religion’s spread into regions south of the Sahara. Regularized trade between North and subsaharan Africa became possible with the first-century CE introduction of the camel from the Nile valley to the Sahara’s southern fringes near Lake Chad, after which they spread further west. By the fourth century, camel caravan patterns crisscrossed the desert.

West Africa became associated with gold early in the history of Islam; indeed, one of the earliest West African states, Ghana, became known as “the land of the gold” through the Arabic writing of geographers between the eighth and eleventh centuries. Ghana, home to the Serakole (northern Mande-speakers), was located in the sāhil (“shore”) between the Sahara and the savannah (flat grasslands) further south, as were Gao (on the eastern Niger buckle) and Kanem (along the northeastern side of Lake Chad); together they were introduced to the ninth-century Islamic world as Bilād as-Sūdān, or “land of the blacks.” A brief review of developments within this region and East Africa is important, for as these lands were in direct contact with the Muslim world, they constitute the beginning of this component of the African Diaspora.

West African gold was exchanged primarily for salt (from desert mines and evaporating ponds at the mouth of the Senegal River and elsewhere). The gold was transported to North Africa, then east to Egypt and as far as India, where it served as payment for spices and silks; it was transported across the Mediterranean to pay for European goods and currency. Trade from the West African hinterland to the sahel was organized and controlled by West Africans, who over the centuries developed an extensive network operated by the jumla (Mande for “merchant”) and Hausa traders. Once in the sahel, gold and other commodities were transported north through the Sahara by the Tuareg, Berber-speaking desert-dwellers, along with Arab merchants. The arrangement was to the immediate advantage of West Africans, who maintained secrecy of the gold’s sources, but ultimately it was to their detriment, as they did not control the trade through the desert. A pattern developed early in West Africa, whereby external powers acquired long distance, multiregional trade experience. Those with such expertise eventually took command..."
of the trade and dictated its terms, notwithstanding West Africa's appreciable influence.

Ghana, though still in existence in the twelfth century, was eclipsed in the thirteenth by Mali, populated by southern Mande-speakers fashioned into an empire by the emperor Sunjata around 1230. As was true of Ghana, Mali was also associated with gold in the Muslim world, but unlike Ghana, Mali slowly became a part of that world through the early conversion of its rulers. The fourteenth-century travels and eyewitness accounts of Ibn Battuta (d. 1368) reinforced the image of Mali as a land of wealth, as did the pilgrimage to Mecca of Mansa Musa (reigned 1312–1337). Although diminished Mali would continue through the seventeenth century, its stature in the western Sudan (from the Atlantic Ocean to the Niger buckle) was eclipsed in the fifteenth century by imperial Songhay, whose origins go back to the seventh century and Gao. By the fifteenth century, Islam had become the religion of the court and the merchant community; commercial towns such as Timbuktu and Jenne were transformed into centers of Islamic education and intellectual activity, a development begun under Mansa Musa of Mali. As was true of Ghana and Mali, Songhay was known as a major source of gold, and the disruption of the gold trade under Sunni Ali (1464–1492) was a principal factor in Ashira Muhammad Ture’s 1492 seizure of power.

Viewed as a wealthy land, the western Sudan was increasingly incorporated into the Islamic world. North Africa, Egypt, and the western Sudan exchanged emissaries and written communication (in Arabic). Houses of wealthy merchants were often allied to leading clerical and political families through marriage. All of this resulted in the rise of an elite in the western Sudan, connected through religion, marriage, and commercial interests and accorded prestige by coreligionists in North Africa and Egypt. Muslim West Africa would therefore be differentiated from non-Muslim West Africa, for whom the Islamic world held contempt. Stated differently, the Muslim world entertained no single image of sub-Saharan Africa, distinguishing its various populations on the basis of Islam and related notions of civilization. The status of the land as opposed to the individual was critical; a Muslim was one who practiced the religion, but a Muslim land was one over which Muslim rule had been established. Songhay, with a majority non-Muslim population, was a Muslim land.

Part of the central Sudan (from the Niger buckle to the Lake Chad area) had a decidedly different trade relationship with North Africa.
To speak of East Africa is to discuss Swahili culture and language, which incorporates Arabic and (to a lesser extent) Malagasy words and concepts. Arabs (and apparently Persians) settling along the coast often intermarried with the local population, resulting in a fusion of genes and lifestyles. The apogee of the Swahili coastal towns lasted from the ninth through the fifteenth centuries CE; this was an age of royal courts, stone palaces, beautiful mosques, and internal plumbing in the best houses. Trade and urban growth corresponded to changes in the Islamic world, as the Muslim political center shifted from Damascus and the Umayyad caliphate (661–750) to Baghdad and the Abbasids (750–1258), thereby elevating the Persian Gulf’s importance. This period in East African history came to an abrupt halt with the arrival of Vasco da Gama and the Portuguese in 1498. Seven years later, Portuguese men-of-war returned to destroy Kilwa and inaugurate a new era in the Indian Ocean.

Pilgrims and Scholars

Many subsaharan Africans entered the Islamic world as fellow believers, usually by traveling to the Middle East and North Africa to make the pilgrimage, to study, or to teach. A number of individuals from subsaharan Africa were regarded as learned and pious. Examples include the eminent scholar Ṭalḥah bin Ḥabīb, taken captive from Timbuktu to Marrakesh in 1594 following the Moroccon conquest of Songhay, where he was imprisoned for two years and taught classes for large numbers until his return to Timbuktu in 1608. A second example is Šālih al-Fulānī, an obscure West African scholar from Futa Jallon (in contemporary Guinea), who headed for Cairo and finally Medina, where he studied and eventually taught from 1791 to his death in 1803–1804.

A tradition of royal pilgrimage dates back to the eleventh century in West Africa and includes the rulers of Kanem, Mali, and Songhay. However, the quintessential hajj was that of Mali’s Mansa Mūsā in 1324. With a retinue of thousands of soldiers, slaves, and high officials, he brought such large quantities of gold to Egypt that its value temporarily depreciated. Less significant for the Muslim chroniclers of the trip, but more stunning in its implications and symbolism for our purposes, was the manner in which Mansa Mūsā entered Egypt. In what must have been a sight for the ages, Mūsā and his thousands encamped around the pyramids prior to entering Cairo. For three days, the glory of imperial Mali and the wonder of ancient Egypt, two of the most powerful icons of the African Diaspora, became one.

The Enslaved

In contrast to those making the pilgrimage, other subsaharan Africans entered the Islamic world as slaves. Muslim societies made use of slaves from all over the reachable world. Europeans were just as eligible as Africans, and Slavic and Caucasian populations were the largest source of slaves for the Islamic world well into the eighteenth century, especially in the Ottoman empire. Race was therefore not a factor—at least not until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when European expansion forced a closer association between blackness and slavery.

When the discussion is restricted to Africa, tentative estimates for the transsaharan, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean slave trades are in the range of 12 million individuals from 650 CE to the end of the sixteenth century, and another 4 million from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. In other words, as many or more captive Africans may have been exported through these trades as were shipped across the Atlantic, although the latter took place within a much more compressed period (fifteenth through the nineteenth centuries). To be sure, these estimates are imprecise and possibly misleading. It is difficult to separate, for example, the Red Sea and Indian Ocean trades, and not all who were transported through the Indian Ocean landed in Islamic lands. Even so, the number of enslaved Africans in the Islamic world was clearly significant.

Slavery in Arabia was already an accepted practice by the time Muhammad was born; the Qurʾān assumes as much and, far from simply condoning it, attempts to improve the servile condition while promoting manumission at the same time. Islam held that freedom was the natural condition of human beings, and only certain circumstances allowed for slavery. According to a strict interpretation of Islamic law, or sharīa, only those non-Muslims who were without a protective pact (ṣahd) with Muslims, who rejected the offer to convert to Islam and were then captured in a war (jihād), could be enslaved. However, after the first century of Islam, reality diverged from theory, and most were in fact captured through raids and kidnaping and then sold to merchants. Stated another way, slavery in the Islamic world was a business.
Keeping in mind the theory–reality divide, Muslims slaveholders were to treat the enslaved with dignity and kindness. Slaves could marry with the slaveholder’s consent, and they were not to be overworked or excessively punished; those seriously injured were to be freed. They were to be provided with material support and medical attention into old age. The enslaved were property, to be bought and sold like any other chattel, yet their undeniable humanity created tensions that Islamic law attempted to resolve. Above all, slaveholders were enjoined to facilitate the conversion of the enslaved; uncircumcised males were circumcised from the outset, and they were given Arabic names. In an interesting parallel with the Americas, these names comprised a “special” category of nomenclature, names of “distinction” for the enslaved. Such appellations included Kāfār (“camphor”) and ‘Anbar (“ambergris”) for males; and Bakhīta (“fortunate”), Mabrūka (“blessed”), and Za’farān (“saffron”) for females. The majority of the enslaved were therefore converted to Islam, and some became literate in Arabic and were taught to read the Qurān.

However, conversion to Islam did not obligate slaveholders to free their slaves; slaveholders were only encouraged by the Qurān to do so. The ideal was to enter into a manumission contract (mukātaba), whereby the enslaved person would be allowed to make and save enough money to pay an agreed upon amount to purchase her or his freedom. As would also be true in the Americas, the acquired freedom was qualified in that the freed person remained a client of the former slaveholder and always in his debt, a condition passed down through several generations.

One of the most arresting aspects of the trans-Saharan, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean slave trades is that they were primarily transactions in females and children. Young girls and women were used as domestics and concubines, and often both, as the male slaveholder enjoyed the right of sexual access. The concubine is referred to in the Qurān as “that which your right hands possess” (mā malakat aymānīkum). Domestic work included cooking, cleaning, and wet-nursing (tasks that would become just as familiar to many African-descended women in the Americas), and there is evidence that some were (illegally) forced into prostitution. A slaveholder on occasion married an enslaved female, but in those instances she first had to be freed. As for concubines, the Muslim world had an order of preference, beginning with white females, many of whom were obtained from the Balkans and lands in the southwest of what was formerly the Soviet Union and referred to as the saqāhiba or Slavs (although the term would come to include non-Slavs). Next in order of preference were Ethiopian, Nubian, and other women from the Horn of Africa, called the ḥabashiyāt (or simply Habash when men were included), often found in the service of middle-class slaveholders. They enjoyed greater status and privilege than did other African women, who were allegedly the least preferred. According to Islamic law, the concubine who bore the slaveholder’s children (thereafter known as an ʿumm walad) could never be sold away, and she was automatically freed upon his death. In contrast to what would develop in the Americas, the children of a slaveholder and a concubine followed the status of the father and became free. An example of how this could work is found in imperial Songhay, where every one of the askias following Askia al-ḥājī Muhammad (d. 1529) was the son of a concubine. Yet another illustration concerns the ‘Alawid ruler Mūläy Ismā‘īl (reigned 1672–1727) of Morocco, whose mother was a black concubine.

Some concubines and female domestics were kept in large harems, where sexual exploitation was erratic and unpredictable. Women in such circumstances inhabited a world of instability, as advancing age and the failure to bear children or secure slaveholder interest could result in their sale. Central to the organization of such large harems was the eunuch or tawūšī, also referred to as ḥādīn (“servant”), jātā (“young man”), and aqgā (“chief”). The primary responsibility of the eunuch was to maintain order; his emasculation “perfected” him for such purposes, as he remained physically strong but incapable (for the most part) of posing a sexual threat. As was true of concubines, those transformed into eunuchs came from Europe and Asia and Africa, but in this instance it was the African eunuch who appears to have been preferred (at least in the Ottoman capital of Istanbul). Because they were privy to the inner workings of the household, these individuals could amass significant influence in both the household and the society (assuming a prominent family). The authority of the Kīsīr Aqgā, the Ottoman sultan’s head eunuch, was legendary. In apparent violation of Islamic law, such eunuchs were allowed to own other eunuchs and concubines. According to one nineteenth-century account of the chief African eunuchs of Mecca, they were even married to enslaved Ethiopians, a most curious arrangement.

The procedures by which males became eunuchs rank among the most inhumane. Young boys were commonly forced to endure the operation, which involved removal of the testes or both testes and penis.
Because the operation was abhorrent to Muslims, it was performed by Christians (and perhaps Jews) in such places as Baghirmi near Lake Chad, in Ethiopia, and in other locations. Accounts of the process veer toward the macabre, as young males were gelded and placed in the sand up to their navels to heal. Those able to urinate after some days were herded off through the Sahara; those who could not were left to die. In addition to serving in the harems, some were chosen to serve in the mosque of the Ka’ba in Mecca and in Prophet Muḥammad’s mosque in Medina. Many who began the desert trek did not complete it, expiring along the way. The number of eunuchs in the Muslim world is difficult to estimate, but the claim that the sultan Mūlāy Ismā‘īl personally owned over 2,000 suggests their numbers were significant. Indeed, so many more entered the mutilation process than exited; a credible estimate is that only 10 percent survived the operation, which meant that some 20,000 young males perished to achieve Mūlāy Ismā‘īl’s 2,000.

Africans were also used as laborers in large agricultural ventures and mining operations. They supplied the backbreaking, bloodcurdling labor for the salt mines of Taghāza in the western Sahara and the copper mines of Tegidda in what is now Niger. The model of exploiting sub-Saharan labor may have been provided by the Tuareg and Arabo-Berbers of the Sahara, who had a long-standing tradition of using sub-Saharan African slaves to herd animals and collect wood and water.

Agricultural projects in the Islamic world generally did not approach the magnitude of the American plantation until the emergence of clove cultivation in such places as Zanzibar in the nineteenth century, but African enslaved labor was used in date production in Saharan oases and in tenth-century Arabia, near Bahrain. African slave labor was also used in the cultivation of sugar in the Ahwāz province of what is now western Iraq in the ninth century, together with the large-scale use of East African slave labor in nearby southern Iraq and Kuwait, in what was called the Sawād. There, captives from the interior of East Africa, the Zanj, were expedited to drain vast marshlands. The conditions under which the Zanj labored were so stultifying, so deplorable, that they produced one of the most spectacular slave revolts in the history of both the African Diaspora and the world as a whole. Unifying under the charismatic leadership of ʿAlī b. Muhammad, son of an Iraqi father and a mother from Sind (the lower Indus valley), the Zanj waged insurrection for fifteen years, from 868 to 883, capturing the city of Basra and marching on Baghdad itself, center of the Muslim world. With their defeat, the Zanj were ruthlessly exterminated, the experiment using their labor in southern Iraq abandoned. In fact, some scholars speculate that the Zanj left such a bitter taste in the mouths of the Abūsids that it influenced the brutish depiction of blacks in The Thousand and One Nights.

One of the more visible uses of enslaved African labor was in the military, one of the few institutions allowing for any degree of upward mobility for persons of African descent throughout the history of the entire Diaspora. Slave armies were in a number of places in the Islamic world by the ninth century. The concept was to create a military that, as a result of its very foreignness and alienation, owed its total allegiance to the ruler. Those destined for such armies were usually acquired through purchase rather than war, and they included Turks, Slavs, Berbers, and other Africans. In fact, most military slaves were non-African and were often organized into separate units based on ethnic origin and background. Specific terms were used to identify armies as both servile and ethnically distinct: the Mamluks, a servile army that eventually seized power in Egypt and Syria from 1250 to 1517, were mostly from the Black Sea region; the Janissaries (or kūds), who took control of the Ottoman empire in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, hailed from the Slavic and Albanian populations of the Balkans. The term ʿabīd, however, was apparently used exclusively for sub-Saharan African slave armies.

The ʿabīd army was developed in Egypt under the Turkish governor Aḥmad Ṭūlūn (d. 884), who garrisoned them separately from the Mamlūk division. This particular ʿabīd army was probably Nubian. The immediate successors to the Ṭūlūnids also maintained servile black troops, as did the Fāṭimids, who began in North Africa (in 909) before moving their capital to Cairo in 969, maintaining large numbers of black servile soldiers in both places. In Egypt these soldiers grew powerful, and skirmishes between them and nonblack units increased in number and violence. A final conflict, the “Battle of the Blacks” or the “Battle of the Slaves,” took place in 1169, when Salāḥ al-Dīn led his nonblack forces against some 50,000 black soldiers and drove them out of Cairo into southern Egypt. All-black units would not be used again in Egypt until the nineteenth century under Muḥammad ʿAlī.

Black slave soldiers were also used in North Africa by the ninth-century Aghlabid dynasty and thereafter under successive regimes. Further west, in what is now Morocco, the Almoravid leader Yūsuf
b. Tāshīn (d. 1106) was surrounded by a bodyguard of 2,000 black soldiers, and the successors to the Almoravids, the Almohads, also used black soldiers. The ultimate in the use of servile black soldiers took place under Mūlāy Ismā‘īl (reigned 1672–1727), son of the black concubine, who along with his 2,000 black eunuchs was reported to have maintained 150,000 black troops, having ordered the seizure of all black males throughout the kingdom. The troops were provided black females and were forced to swear personal allegiance to Mūlāy Ismā‘īl upon the ḥadīth (traditions of Mūhammad) collected by al-Bukhārī, and they were therefore known as ‘abīd al-Bukhārī. This ‘abīd army grew enormously powerful, determining the succession to the throne for thirty years after the death of Mūlāy Ismā‘īl, choosing from among his 500 sons. In 1737 the ‘abīd army was brought under control by Mūlāy Muḥammad III using an Arab force. Black soldiers continue to serve in the Moroccan army to the present day, only no longer as slaves.

Iberia

Mention of the Almoravids and Almohads redirects our attention to Iberia (Spain and Portugal), site of a remarkable Muslim civilization from 711 to 1492. When Muslim forces crossed Gilbraltar into Spain in 711, it was a combined army of Berbers, subsaharan Africans, and Arabs. The invading Muslim armies renamed the peninsula al-Andalus (an apparent corruption of the term Vandal, from the former occupiers). By 720, the Muslims laid claim to territory south of the Pyrenees and parts of southern France, and in 732 they encroached further into France, where they were engaged outside of Tours and defeated at the Battle of Poitiers by Charles Martel. Celebrated in Europe as a major victory over Islam, the event known as the “Highway of the Martyrs” (Balāṭ al-Shuhadā‘) by the Muslims was, from their perspective, little more than an insignificant border raid. The “land of the Franks,” as France and much of western Europe were known, was culturally unremarkable, economically unimportant, and of little interest to Muslims.

Those portions of Iberia under Muslim control answered to the Umayyads of Damascus until 750, when the Abbasid caliphate arose and shifted the center of the Muslim world to Baghdad. A member of the Umayyad family fled to Iberia where he restructured the Umayyad caliphate, rupturing the dream of a single Muslim empire. Muslims would conquer Sicily between 827 and 902 and move into parts of southern Italy, but the eleventh century saw the return of Sicily to Christian control, as well as the slow erosion of Muslim power elsewhere in Italy and Iberia.

Al-Andalus was a Muslim state controlled by Arabs in command of Berbers and subsaharan Africans. However, conflict between Berbers and Arabs stemmed from an almost uninterrupted history of invasion and occupation of North African territory, beginning with the Carthaginians and followed by the Romans, the Vandals, the Byzantines, and lastly the Arabs. Berbers resisted Arab domination militarily, but they also resisted by embracing an aberrant form of Islam, Kharijism, which advocated democratic and egalitarian principles. The strategy of adopting altered expressions of an oppressor’s religion, thereby transforming it into a tool of liberation, would also be used in the New World. Berbers further resisted by creating politically autonomous space, establishing a number of Kharijite states in North Africa after 750; Kharijite communities remain in the mountains and remote areas of Algeria and Tunisia. In this way, they were not unlike the maroons of the Americas.

Yet another path of resistance was direct confrontation, a road leading back to ancient Ghana. The West African savannah was crucial to the rise of the Berber Almoravid movement in the eleventh century.
Berbers in southern Morocco noted Ghana’s spectacular growth and trade, and they concluded that it was the key to both the trans-Saharan trade and al-Andalus. Like the leaders of Egypt’s eighteenth dynasty, who secured their control over Nubian resources before launching campaigns into Palestine and Syria, the Almoravids began their activities by first focusing on West Africa. Their bid for power became part of a religious reform movement, and by the mid-eleventh century the Almoravids seized control of the southern and northern termini of the trans-Saharan trade. Financing their operation with West African gold, the Almoravids also used West African soldiers, slave and free. By century’s end, the Almoravids succeeded in bringing not only all of Morocco and western Algeria under their control, but also al-Andalus as well, founding Marrakesh as their capital. For the first time in history, a single Berber power controlled much of North Africa and Iberia, and Africans would rule the “kingdom of the two shores” for nearly 300 years.

The Almoravids were succeeded by the Almohads (1146–1269), who also used West African soldiers. Like Mūlāy Ismā‘īl of the seventeenth century, al-Manṣūr (reigned 1184–1199) was a leader who was possibly of West African ancestry. Another was Abū al-Ḥasan (reigned 1331–1351) of the later Marinid dynasty. Earning a reputation for cruelty, Abū al-Ḥasan exchanged embassies with Mūsā al-Maḥfūz prior to the latter’s death, and he was a great patron of the arts. The examples of Abū al-Ḥasan, al-Manṣūr, and Mūlāy Ismā‘īl demonstrate the difficulties in distinguishing between Berbers and sub-Saharan Africans, as extensive, centuries-long interaction between these regions necessarily meant a significant sharing of genes; an ostensibly Berber-looking individual may have in fact had considerable sub-Saharan ancestral ties. Europeans could and did distinguish between African groups, but their tendency to label all as Moors (literally, “blacks”), suggesting all Africans were part of a continuum of related characteristics, is not without warrant. Whatever the nature of their congenital relations, Africans of varying backgrounds in Iberia tended to participate in cultures knitted together by Islam. In this way, it may be better to read the designation Moor as a cultural rather than racial or ethnic qualifier.

Africans were present in al-Andalus throughout the 800-year period of Muslim domination, contributing to an intense period of intellectual and cultural production. It was during the Muslim domination of Iberia that the sciences and technology and the arts, including astronomy, medicine, alchemy, chemistry, physics, mathematics, literature, and philosophy, received a tremendous boost. Indeed, the knowledge of the ancients, including Greek philosophy, had been lost to Europe for hundreds of years, as Latin and Greek had nearly disappeared. Muslim, Jewish, and Christian scholars uncovered and translated the mostly Greek texts into Arabic, by which Europe reconnected with its past. The works of Plato, Aristotle, Ptolemy, Euclid, and the physicians Hippocrates and Galen were among the many reintroduced to Europe during this period. Prominent scholars of the period include Ibn Sinā (or Avicenna) and Ibn Rushd (also known as Averroës), who was born in Córdoba under Almoravid rule in 1126 and went on to translate and comment on the works of Aristotle as well as establish a reputation as a scientist, mathematician, philosopher, and poet. Made possible by the support of Almohad ruler al-Manṣūr, Ibn Rushd’s work, some thirty-eight volumes of it, became popular largely through Spanish Jewish scholars, a circle that included Mūsā ibn Maymun (or Maimonides). Students from all over Europe, including France, Germany, England, and Italy, came to study in al-Andalus, often becoming literate in Arabic. The intellectual productivity of Muslim Iberia, as well as other parts of the Muslim world, was an important foundation for the Renaissance of western Europe.

In addition to their contribution to various branches of knowledge, Muslims introduced styles of architecture resulting in stunning blends of structure and landscape, of which al-Hambra is a prime example. Cities they founded include Córdoba, Seville, Toledo, and Granada, each known for a particular quality. Córdoba was a city of libraries; Seville was associated with music. Muslim cities were well planned, featuring aqueducts, gardens, public baths, and fountains to embellish mosques, hospitals, and other buildings public and private. Supplying the urban centers were fields given enhanced fertility through revamped irrigation systems and the introduction of such crops as cereals and beans. However, the Muslim geographic imagination was by no means confined to the Iberian city and countryside; rather, Muslim scholars refined geography by more accurately measuring distances (although they remained hampered by ancient models), and they introduced to the Western world seafaring tools and techniques such as the astrolabe, the lateen sail, and the method of tacking. Some of these innovations were modified from their use in the Indian Ocean, and in any event they proved critical to the development of European seafaring and subsequent commercial and imperial expansion.
India

While there are numerous scholarly works on al-Andalus or Moorish Spain, what is known about the sub-Saharan African contribution to this brilliant civilization is far from satisfactory. Research on the African presence in India is similarly in its infancy. Matters are complicated by an ancient, pre-Islamic society in which the four major castes (Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra) are hierarchically arranged in a manner corresponding with color (vārṇa). Thus, the lowest, servile caste, the Shudra, is characterized in the ancient Vedic literature as “black” and “dark complexioned,” but as there are many dark-skinned populations throughout the world, attempting to locate Shudra origins in Africa may be pointless.

Given the historicity and expanse of Indian Ocean trade, Africans necessarily voyaged to the Indian subcontinent prior to the rise of Islam. However, it is with that religion’s movement into the subcontinent that the African presence becomes better documented. India initially experienced Islamic incursions as early as 711, and in the late tenth century Muslim forays from what is now Afghanistan and Iran resulted in considerable plundering. Islam reached its political zenith in the subcontinent under the Delhi Sultanate (1206–1526) and the Mughals (1526–1739).

Free Africans (as well as non-Africans) operated in Muslim-ruled India as merchants, seafarers, clerics, bodyguards, and even bureaucrats. Regarding slavery, African women and men assumed familiar roles as concubines and servile soldiers; in 1459, for example, some 8,000 served in Bengal’s army. Called “Habshis” (from the word ḥabashyyāt) and “Siddis” (from the title sayyid, afforded captains of vessels), Africans settled in a variety of locales. Enclaves of Siddis can presently be found in such places as Gujarat (western India), Habshiguda in Hyderabad (central India), and Janjira Island (south of Bombay); the names Habshiguda and Janjira reflect an African ancestry.

During the time of the Mughals, there were a number of African Muslim rulers in the subcontinent. At least several Habshi rulers were in the breakaway province of Bengal (eastern India), including Mālik Andil (or Saifuddin Firuz, 1487–1490) and Nāširuddin Maḥmūd II (1490–1491). There were also several rulers in the Deccan breakway province of Ahmadnagar who were of African descent, including Chand Bibi (d. 1600), a princess who led Ahmadnagar resistance against the Mughals. Perhaps the most famous of all was Mālik Ambar (d. 1626), who supported Chand Bibi’s struggle against the Mughals until her assassination. Mālik Ambar, possibly Ethiopian born, was brought to India as a slave and eventually served as a highly educated military commander. Noted for his religious tolerance and patronage of the arts and learning, he ruled for twenty years and earned the admiration of Indians and Europeans alike.

The Image of the African in the Islamic World

The Muslim view of the African was an evolutionary process, informed by changing circumstances over time. Whatever the initial attitude toward the African, the trade in slaves via the Sahara, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean had some impact, but the fact that enslaved Europeans and Asians were also imported into the Islamic world, and in greater numbers until the eighteenth century, suggests that the slave trade alone was not solely responsible for a less than complimentary view of the African. Other factors, essentially cultural, must have played a role.

There is no trace of racism in the Qur’ān. Rather, there is the assertion that difference is of divine decree:

And among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity of your languages and colors. In that surely are signs for those who know.

(sūra or chapter 30, al-Rūm, verse 23)

This nonevaluative acknowledgment of what is now called racial diversity is indicative of the early Muslim period in the Arabian peninsula. There, color was both insignificant and variable, depending upon who was being compared. While Bedouins were usually described as brown or olive, Arabs at times characterized themselves as black vis-à-vis red Persians, but in comparison with black Africans these same Arabs became red or even white. Furthermore, the concept of red took on metaphoric meaning with Islam’s early expansion, as the hated red Persians were now the subjects of the Arabs, and redness took on a pejorative connotation. In this way, Greeks, Spaniards, and other Mediterranean populations also became red.
It is not surprising that the Qur’an is devoid of racial bias, or that Arabs depicted themselves as black and brown. Seventh-century Arabia was surrounded by far more powerful Sassanian (Persian), Byzantine, and Ethiopian empires, who fought each other for influence in the peninsula. The dominant peninsular power was Yemen in the southwest (called Arabia Felix by the Romans), which was distinct from the rest of the peninsula because of its urban-sustaining agriculture and because of extensive ties with Ethiopia. The latter had both invaded and conquered southern Arabia in the fourth century, taking control of the spice and silk trade between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean that passed through Arabia. With Sassanian help, the Yemenis pushed the Ethiopians out around 375, but the Ethiopians returned triumphantly in 512. The subsequent defeat of Ethiopian garrisons led to another Ethiopian expedition around 525. A few years later, divine intervention, according to the Qur’an (sūra 105, al-Fil, or “the Elephant”), turned back an Ethiopian assault on Mecca.

Ethiopian incursions are but one example of interaction between the Horn of Africa and Arabia that has existed for millennia; related languages and cultures are another. Such interconnectedness suggests that Ethiopians and Nubians made contributions to the Yemeni and Arab gene pool, along with other populations from the Horn. It is therefore no surprise that one of the greatest poets of pre-Islamic Arabia was ʿAntara (or Antar), son of an enslaved Ethiopian or Nubian mother and an Arab father. Born in the pre-Islamic jahiliyya period (“time of barbarism”), ʿAntara followed his mother’s status and was a slave, but he earned his freedom through military prowess. His background is similar to that of another figure of the early Islamic period, Khūfāf b. Nadba, son of an Arab father and enslaved black mother who rose to become head of his (Arab) group or “tribe.” On the other hand, many Arabs had black skin but apparently were not descended from Africans; such was true of “Ubāda b. al-Šāmit, an Arab of noble birth and a leader of the Arab conquest of Egypt.

The impression that blackness was no barrier is bolstered by the example of Muḥammad himself, who, facing mounting opposition to his message, sent seventy of his followers to seek asylum with the Ethiopian ruler in 615, presaging the official hijra or “flight” to Medina in 622. Muḥammad’s action revealed his esteem for the piety of the Ethiopians, a sentiment consistent with Homer’s much earlier characterization of the “Ethiopians.” There were also a number of persons of Nubian or Ethiopian descent among the Companions of the Prophet, perhaps the most famous having been Islam’s first muezzin (who calls the faithful to prayers), Bilāl b. Rabīḥ, born into slavery in Mecca and an early convert to Islam. Purchased and manumitted by Abū Bakr (Islam’s first caliph or successor to Muhammad as well as his father-in-law), Bilāl became the Prophet’s personal attendant. In addition to Bilāl, notables of known African descent include the caliph ‘Umar (634–644), the grandson of an Ethiopian or Nubian woman, and the conqueror of Egypt and ‘Amr b. al-Āṣ, similarly descended from an Ethiopian or Nubian female ancestor. The Prophet himself may have been of partial African descent, as his grandfather and paternal uncle Abū Tālib were both reputed to be “black.” Therefore, significant Ethiopian or Nubian influences were circulating at the very core of Islam’s foundation. Given Ethiopia’s ascendance, if anyone felt inferior in the seventh century, it would have been the Arabs.

And yet, there is something unsettling about these relations. One wonders if the potential for bias was not already present in pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arabia, for, despite the prominence of all of these men of Ethiopian or Nubian descent, it is striking that so many of them descend from enslaved mothers. Perhaps free Nubian or Ethiopian-born males were much rarer in Arab society than enslaved Nubian or Ethiopian women, so that the most common African figure in Arab society was a female slave. If so, Arab society may have begun associating Africans with slavery before the rise of Islam. ‘Antara reflects an Arab acceptance of difference, but his own background suggests that Africans within the Arab world largely entered by way of the servile estate.

The expansion of Arab armies in the seventh and eighth centuries was probably the period during which Arab views of Africans began to change. Arabs were already suffering from ethnocentricity, as Islam had been revealed to an Arab and the revelation forever sealed in his language. It was not even clear that Islam was meant for non-Arabs. With the world now divided into believers and infidels, the rise of the trans-Saharan, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean slave trades did not bode well for Africans, especially those with whom Arabs had little experience. Their high regard for the Ethiopian and Nubian continued, but they were distinguished from other Africans such as the Nūba, Buji (Beja), Zanj, and the Sudān (from West Africa). Lack of familiarity played some role, but since most Africans entered Islamic lands as young females, the Arab view of Africans was also informed by the perception of African women. Whatever the answer, Muslim societies became
increasingly accustomed to seeing Africans as enslaved menials. The struggle over the meaning of blackness in early Islamic society can be seen in the poetry of “the crows of the Arabs” (aghribat al-Arab), men who lived during the pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods and who were dark-skinned but not necessarily of African ancestry. These poets alternately bemoaned and defended their blackness. One Sulaym (d. 660), whose name means “little black man,” wrote this:

If my color were pink, women would love me
But the Lord has marred me with blackness.

Though I am a slave my soul is nobly free
Though I am black of color my character is white.

A century later, one of the most popular of these poets, Abū Dulāmā (d. ca. 776), was a court jester for the Abbasids in Baghdad; he wrote the following in derision of his mother and family:

We are alike in color; our faces are black and ugly, our names are shameful.

One hundred years later, one of the best-known composers of prose in classical Arabic literature, Jāhiz (d. 869), also alleged to be of partial African ancestry, wrote (among other things) that the Zanj “are the least intelligent and the least discerning of mankind.”

Some of this literature comes out of the Persian Gulf, where one of the consequences of the Zanj revolt may have been an anti-Zanj backlash of sentiment. Some scholars see the revolt as the principal cause of antiblack expressions, but the revolt did not begin until 868, well after many of these black poets were already dead. Yet another argument is that Persian Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism, with their emphasis on conflict between darkness and light, associated darkness with dark skin and light with white skin and influenced Muslim thinking. While this is all speculative, one source makes clear the view of the African in the Persian Gulf. The Thousand and One Nights, an apparent compilation of stories developed by Persian, Indian, and Chinese travelers and merchants, is associated with the early days of Baghdad’s Abbadid caliphate. Black folk are mentioned frequently in the book, principally as slaves or servants of some kind. Enslaved black men are also featured at the book’s beginning, engaged in sexual escapades with King Shahrizâmân’s wife and twenty other female members of his household. Some of the most pervasive stereotypes of black folk known in the

Western world were therefore already taking shape in ninth-century Iraq and elsewhere in the Islamic world.

Those Muslims arriving at a negative assessment of the African did not do so on their own, but in dialogue with other traditions and preceding opinions. One influence was Galen (fl. 122–155), whose work on anatomy remained the seminal text in medicine for both Christians and Muslims through the medieval period. Galen was the official physician for gladiators at the Pergamum circus, and there presumably came into contact with blacks. In an interesting and fateful conjunction, it was the famous al-Masʿūdī (d. 956) who introduced Galen to the Muslim world by quoting the Greek physician’s observations of black men. Galen, al-Masʿūdī stated,

mentions ten specific attributes of the black man, which are found in him and no other; frizzy hair, thin eyebrows, broad nostrils, thick lips, pointed teeth, smelly skin, black eyes, furrowed hands and feet, a long penis and great merriment. Galen says that merriment dominates the black man because of his defective brain, whence also the weakness of his intelligence.

Besides Galen, other sources were interpretations of Christian and Jewish texts condemning black skin as the curse of Ham.

Not all Muslims adopted unfavorable views of blacks. There were those who respected Africans, citing their roles as Companions of the Prophet as well as their virtues. The “defenders of the blacks” included such leading intellectuals as Jamāl al-Dīn Abūʾl-Faraj b. al-Jawzī (d. 1208), who wrote The Lightening of the Darkness on the Merits of the Blacks and the Ethiopians; and the Egyptian scholar Jaʿlī al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505), who wrote The Raising of the Status of the Ethiopians. Individuals such as al-Suyūṭī had substantial experience with sub-Saharan Africans and knew a number of their scholars and political leaders personally. One must therefore be careful not to paint the entire Muslim world with the same broad stroke.

Furthermore, it is not clear that prior to the sixteenth century the Muslim view of Europeans was any better than their assessment of Africans. The idea that geography and climate determined group characteristics was popularized by the tenth-century Persian physician Ibn Sinā. Because of western Europe’s cold climate and cultural unattractiveness, Muslims by and large held little respect for it, enslaving many from southeastern Europe. Arab and Persian Muslims who may have
felt contempt for Africans also felt superior to Europeans, as the following quote from an Arab living in eleventh-century al-Andalus reflects:

For those who live furthest to the north . . . the excessive distance from the sun in relation to the zenith line makes the air cold and the atmosphere thick. Their temperaments are therefore frigid, their humors [dispositions] raw, their bellies gross, their color pale, their hair long and lank. Thus, they lack keenness of understanding and clarity of intelligence, and are overcome by ignorance and dullness, lack of discernment, and stupidity. Such are the Slavs, the Bulgars, and their neighbors.

In view of the symmetry in opinions toward select Africans and Europeans, the divergence in the Muslim view between the two groups may well have come after the sixteenth century, when the trade in Europeans began to diminish as its counterpart in Africans continued. By the eighteenth century, there was a fast association between subsaharan Africans and slavery in the central Islamic lands, whereas the enslavement of Europeans had largely become a thing of the past, confined to memory and books.

**Slavery's Aftermath**

What became of all these African slaves in the Islamic world? The answer is by no means obvious, as descent traced through the free male line obscures if not erases African maternal ancestry. A look at contemporary Arab populations in North Africa, Palestine, the Arabian peninsula, and even the Saudi royal family reveals discernible African features, but studies are insufficient to make conclusive statements. In Morocco the fate of subsaharan blacks is clearer, as the descendants of slaves, the harafln (called bella further east), continue in servile subjection to Arabic- and Berber-speaking masters to the present day. The free descendants of the harafln also continued in subordination and second-class citizenship through the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries, heavily dependent upon patron families. Like their American cosufferers, large numbers of the harafln found themselves sharecropping in southern Morocco, along the fringes of the Sahara, effectively barred from any meaningful social mobility and virtually shut out of systems of education. Nevertheless, also like their American counterparts, the dispossessed of Morocco have experienced changes for the better with the twentieth century's progression. One famous community of blacks in Morocco are the gnawa, noted for their distinct musical traditions. In Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria, the descendants of subsaharan Africans (and North Africans, for that matter) practice Islam along with bori, a cosmology concerned with the spirit world's interaction with the corporeal. Bori is a mixture of spirits — infants, nature gods, spirits of deceased Muslim leaders, Muslim jinn (spirits), and so forth — who cause illness and who are appeased through offerings, sacrifice, and dance possession. West African communities practicing bori, such as the Songhay, Bambara, and Hausa, were distinguished in North Africa at least through the mid-twentieth century. The practice of bori within dominant Muslim societies parallels a similar persistence of subsaharan African religions in the Christian-controlled Americas, and it is a testimony to the tenacity of African culture even under duress.

In India and Pakistan, the descendants of the Habshis and Siddis no longer speak African languages, but their worship and music and dance are suffused with African content, influencing adherents of both Hinduism and Islam. Hindu Siddis in India, for example, use only Siddi priests for guidance in life, who have expertise in engaging Siddi spirits; in Pakistan, the “Sheedis” venerate the Shi'ite leader Imam Husain (martyred at Karbala in 680) in a way that transforms the latter into an active force. In addition to those of clear African decent are the vast millions of Dalits, with whom the former may have intermingled, along with the Shudra caste. Dalits, formerly referred to as “untouchables,” were considered ritually polluting and outside of the caste system, even below the Shudras. The Shudras, Dalits, and Siddis have all experienced severe discrimination, their darker skins not unrelated to their suffering.

Perhaps the greater mystery concerns the old Ottoman empire. Approximately 362,000 Africans were imported into its heartland during the nineteenth century alone. The slave trade was abolished there in 1857, at which point all freed persons were required to serve as domestics in designated households (presumably to preserve slaveholder interests). Perhaps the disproportionate use of eunuchs, combined with the high ratio of females to males, explains the apparent disappearance of blacks there. It should be noted, however, that diffused settlements of “Negroes” existed along the western slope of the Caucasus mountains, in what is now Abkhazia and Georgia, until recent times. They may have been descendants of the enslaved brought to the Black Sea region by the Ottomans; alternatively, they may be related to the ancient
people of “Colchis,” as the area was called by the Greeks, where, records Herodotus, the inhabitants were “black-skinned with woolly hair.”

Suggestions for Further Reading


CHAPTER 4

Transatlantic Moment

European engagement with the Muslim world contributed to a cultural awakening and commercial expansion resulting in profound political transformations. An energetic Europe burst upon the world scene in the fifteenth century, ushering in a new era. Labor exploitation was key to the expansion, and critical to such labor was the capture and enslavement of Africans. African captives in the Muslim world were important and numerically significant, but the transatlantic trade was exceptional for its high volume and compact duration, with the overwhelming majority of Africans transported in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The consequences for Africa and its exported daughters and sons were catastrophic.

Like the inner workings of a clock, the interconnectedness of several global developments gave rise to the transatlantic slave trade. Christian-Muslim conflict, international commerce, sugar, and New World incursions were foremost in creating circumstances whereby the African emerged as principal source of servile labor, laying the foundations of the modern world.

Reconquista

Muslim forces in al-Andalus, never in control of the entire Iberian peninsula, were continually threatened by Christian enemies during their nearly 800-year rule. The latter stages of the struggle for Iberia, referred to as the “reconquest” by the Christians, unfolded at the same
time as an equally momentous contest between Christian and Muslim powers raging near the Black Sea. There, Muslims fought for control of the old Byzantine or eastern Roman empire (referred to by the Muslims as Rūm). In both Iberia and the Black Sea region, Muslims and Christians sold their captives into slavery.

The means by which captives were marketed underscores the period's expansive commercial activity. Maritime innovations allowed the Italian city-states of Pisa, Genoa, and Venice to participate in an eastern Mediterranean trade principally involving silk, spices, and sugar; but they also trafficked in war captives. The Genoese, for example, sold Christian captives to Muslims, and Muslim captives to Christians, by the thousands, while the Venetians purchased captives from the Black Sea. Many, mostly women, were brought to Italy, where they performed agricultural and domestic tasks left undone by an Italian population reeling from the Black Death. The newly enslaved joined the ranks of the similarly exploited in Crete and Cyprus, but especially in Sicily, southern Italy, Majorca, and southern Spain, where slavery was of a considerable vintage. The enslaved in Sicily were mostly Muslim and, like Venice and other Italian sites, female.

If the fourteenth century saw increased reliance upon captive labor in the Mediterranean, the fourteenth and fifteenth witnessed changes in the source of that labor. The reconquest of Portugal in 1267 signaled the beginning of the end of territorial disputes between Muslims and Christians. Muslim power in Spain also began to gradually decline as a result of battles and treaties. Iberia as a source of servile labor dried up, forcing Europe to turn elsewhere. By the end of the fourteenth century, the demand for slaves was largely met by captives from the Black Sea. But the struggle for Byzantium ended in 1453 with the Muslim conquest of Constantinople (henceforth Istanbul) and the consolidation of lands in Anatolia (Asia Minor) and adjoining the Black Sea. Captives were thereafter funneled to Muslim markets. Some forty years later, the combined forces of Castile and Aragon defeated the last Muslim bastion in Iberia, Granada, bringing the reconquest to an end in 1492.

With these reservoirs of servile labor tapped out, the northern Mediterranean was in need of workers, a demand occasioned by, among other projects, the cultivation of sugarcane. Spreading from southeast Asia to India in antiquity, sugarcane was introduced to Persians and Arabs during Islam's early years. They transferred its production to Syria and Egypt, and later to North Africa, southern Spain, Sicily, Cyprus, and Crete. European crusaders first came into contact with sugar in the Holy Lands, and they developed their own sugar plantations in Cyprus, Crete, and Sicily by the early thirteenth century. Europe gradually acquired a taste for sugar (although expensive until the nineteenth century and frequently used for medicinal purposes), having known only honey as a sweetener. Italian merchants spearheaded its production by supplying the capital and technology for its expansion into southern Iberia and (eventually) Madeira and the Canary Islands off the West African coast.

While the Italians provided the financing, the Portuguese supplied the labor. How the Portuguese secured the labor, however, is very much connected to Indian Ocean commerce. Both the Italians and the Portuguese had long been interested in accessing its lucrative trade directly, as opposed to going through the Red Sea and Arabian peninsula. This long-range goal of eliminating the Muslim middleman, together with such short-term objectives as securing outlets for West African gold, led the Portuguese and Italians to explore the West African coast during the first half of the fifteenth century. By 1475, the Portuguese had crossed the equator, and by 1487 they had rounded the Cape of Good Hope. By then, the Portuguese were exporting as much as 700 kilograms of West African gold in a peak year, and averaged 410 kilograms per year in the first twenty years of the sixteenth century, accounting for nearly one-fourth of all West African annual gold production. Vasco da Gama's 1497–1498 voyage signaled Portugal's entrance into the Indian Ocean; by 1520 the Portuguese were an Indian Ocean power.

Busy with gold and empire, the Portuguese also tapped into West African labor. The Guanches, the indigenous population of the Canaries, were taken by the Portuguese and enslaved in both Madeira and the Mediterranean in the early fifteenth century. Lisbon began importing as many as 1,000 West Africans annually from 1441 to 1530; from there they were dispersed to southern Spain, Portugal, and elsewhere in the Mediterranean. However, it was Madeira that emerged as the most important Portuguese possession, with its cultivation of sugarcane, initially with Guanche and then West African mainland labor (the Guanches were eventually extinguished as a group by European diseases). By the 1490s, Madeira was a wealthy Portuguese colony, exporting sugar throughout Europe and the Mediterranean. In 1495, the planters of Madeira began operations in the West African islands of São Tomé and Príncipe, operations so successful that the Old World
slave trade remained numerically dominant until the middle of the sixteenth century.

The use of black slaves to cultivate sugarcane therefore did not begin in the Americas, but in the Mediterranean and on West African coastal islands. Columbus's 1492 voyage to the “Indies” (to avoid circumnavigating Africa) set into motion a process that, among other things, transferred a system of slavery from the Old World to the New. The gradual exploitation of African labor was consequently not the result of some far-reaching European design to demean and debilitate Africans and Africa – at least not by the fifteenth century. In a real sense, Africa was a casualty of geography as much as greed.

**Scope of the Trade**

The trickle of African captives in the second half of the fifteenth century turned into a veritable flood by the seventeenth century. Columbus made his “discoveries,” and in 1501 Pedro Cabral returned to Portugal with claims to Brazil. The movement of the Portuguese and Spanish into the New World saw the rise of mining and agricultural industries and an increased reliance on captive African labor that was due, most importantly, to epidemiology. In sum, Europeans introduced an entirely new disease environment into the Americas, from which indigenous peoples had no immunity. The latter were subjected to smallpox, measles, influenza, diphtheria, whooping cough, chicken pox, typhoid, trichinosis, and enslavement, and the results were catastrophic: In central Mexico alone, an estimated pre-Columbian population of 25 million fell to 1.5 million by 1650, after which it slowly recovered; in Hispaniola, native Arawak numbers plummeted from approximately 7 million to less than 500 by the 1540s. In total, an indigenous population as high as 100 million (or less than 20 million, depending on the estimate) was decimated by as much as 90 percent by the late eighteenth century, a process referred to as the Great Dying.

Africans, in contrast to the indigenous population, shared with Europeans a certain proportion of the Old World disease environment. African mortality rates in the Americas were alarmingly high as a result of other factors, as were those for Europeans in places like seventeenth-century Virginia, but neither was quite as devastating as those visited upon the indigenous. The Great Dying, European familiarity with African enslaved labor, and the cost-effectiveness of transporting Africans to the Americas explains their enslavement in the Americas, one of the most extensive mass movements in history, a displacement to beat all displacements.

Within ten years of Columbus’ 1492 voyage, enslaved Africans were in the New World, along with sugarcane and experienced planters from Portugal and the Canaries. Hispaniola (current day Haiti and the Dominican Republic), Cuba, and other Spanish-claimed territories were early destinations, and by the 1520s, Africans were replacing the indigenous Taino in servile capacities, including gold and silver mining. From 1521 to 1594, from 75,000 to 90,000 Africans were brought to Spanish-held territories, with over half going to Mexico. Approximately 110,525 Africans entered Mexico and Peru between 1521 and 1639; by the time of formal emancipation in 1827, some 200,000 Africans had labored in Mexico alone. By 1560, Africans outnumbered Europeans in Cuba and Hispaniola, and by 1570 they equaled the number of Europeans in Mexico City and Vera Cruz.

Not all Africans entering the New World in the sixteenth century were enslaved. Free Africans took part in the military conquest alongside white conquistadores. Africans and their descendants had long resided in various Spanish towns, where they often experienced a freedom qualified by substantial financial hardship. The opportunity to sail for the New World was welcomed by individuals like Juan González de Léon, who among other things served as an interpreter of the Taino language, and Juan Garrido, who came to Seville in 1496 and thereafter enlisted for service in the Americas. Garrido fought against the Taino in Hispaniola, and both men participated in Ponce de Léon’s conquest of Puerto Rico beginning in 1508. From Puerto Rico, Ponce de Léon raided the Caribs for captives in Santa Cruz, Guadalupe, and Dominica, with the assistance of both men. The two even accompanied Juan Ponce de Léon to Florida in 1513 and 1521, mining for gold for a time.

Though there were black explorers and conquerors (dubious distinctions to say the least), slavery in sixteenth-century Spanish-claimed lands was far more significant, and even more so in Portuguese-held Brazil. Sugarcane was planted as early as the 1520s in the northeastern region of Pernambuco, and with the arrival of planters from Madeira and São Tomé, the industry grew slowly. Portuguese involvement in Kongo and Angola saw a dramatic increase in the importation of African captives, and by 1600 Brazil had outstripped Madeira as the world’s leading sugar producer. Brazil was the port of call for the vast
majority of captive Africans for the whole of the seventeenth century, accounting for almost 42 percent of the total.

The early African presence in the Americas was but the beginning of woes. The export figure remains a matter of debate, with some arguing for estimates that trend toward 100 million (including losses in Africa). The scholarly consensus, however, is that approximately 11.9 million Africans were exported from Africa, out of which 9.6 to 10.8 million arrived alive, translating into a loss during the Middle Passage of about 10 to 20 percent. Some 64.9 percent of the total were males, and 27.9 percent children. The transatlantic slave trade spanned 400 years, from the fifteenth through the nineteenth centuries. The apex of the trade, between 1700 and 1810, saw approximately 6.5 million Africans shipped out of the continent. Some 60 percent of all Africans imported into the Americas made the fateful voyage between 1721 and 1820, while 80 percent were transported between 1701 and 1850. In comparison with the trade in Africans through the Sahara, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean, the bulk of the Atlantic trade took less than one-tenth of the time.

Many European nations were involved in the slave trade. Britain, France, Sweden, Denmark, and Holland all joined Spain and Portugal at different points in time, as did Brazil and the United States. From the fifteenth century through the middle of the seventeenth, Spain and Portugal controlled the trade; Spain transported relatively few captives under its own flag, relying instead upon foreign firms to supply its territories under a licensing system called the asiento. From the mid-seventeenth century, a number of European entities entered the slaving business in addition to those previously mentioned, including the Brandenburgers, Genoese, and Courlanders. Throughout the eighteenth century and into the first decade of the nineteenth, the height of the trade, British and French involvement accounted for at least 50 percent of the trade.

Of all the voyages for which there is data between 1662 and 1867, nearly 90 percent of captive Africans wound up in Brazil and the Caribbean; indeed, Brazil alone imported 40 percent of the total trade. That part of the Caribbean in which the English and French languages became dominant yet transformed through African inflections, syntaxes, and vocabularies, was not far behind Brazil, receiving 37 percent of the trade in more or less equal proportions. Spanish-claimed islands accounted for 10 percent of the Africans, after which North America took in 7 percent or less.

**African Provenance**

Nearly 85 percent of those exported through the Atlantic came from one of only four regions: West Central Africa (36.5 percent), the Bight of Benin (20 percent), the Bight of Biafra (16.6 percent), and the Gold Coast (11 percent). The busiest ports in these regions were Cabinda and Luanda (West Central Africa), Cape Castle and Anomabu (Gold Coast), Bonny and Calabar (Bight of Biafra), and Whydah (Bight of Benin). Slavers (slave ships) often took on their full complement of captives in single regions of supply, and Africans emanating from the same regions tended to be transported to the same New World destinations. Captives from West Central Africa comprised the majority of those who came to Saint Domingue (present day Haiti) and South America, accounting for an astounding 73 percent of the Africans imported into Brazil. The Bight of Benin, in turn, contributed disproportionately to Bahia (northeastern Brazil) and the francophone Caribbean outside of Saint Domingue; six out of every ten from the Bight of Benin went to Bahia, while two out of every ten arrived in francophone areas. The Bight of Biafra constituted the major source for the British Leeward Islands and Jamaica, although the Gold Coast supplied 27 percent of those who landed in Jamaica and was clearly the leading supplier to Barbados, the Guyanas, and Surinam. Sierra Leone (a region that includes the Windward Coast in this discussion) provided 6.53 percent of the total export figure, followed by Southeast Africa and Senegambia at 5.14 percent and 4.3 percent, respectively. Transshipments between New World destinations could be substantial.

A review of these regions reveals considerable complexity not only with respect to language and culture, but also as it concerns forms of government, agriculture, regional and transregional commerce, and technologies relating to each of these categories. Stated differently, while there were many similarities, there were appreciable differences of every kind among the captives.

West Central Africa was a vast region dominated by the states and populations of Congo and Angola. Life conformed to the four ecological zones (river, swamp, forest, and savannah) of the Congo River basin, the people further linked by closely related Bantu languages. Statecraft in the region ranged from kingdoms to villages, with Kong, Ndongo, Kasanje, and Loango representing states of substantial size and elaboration. Agriculture, the material basis for these societies,
was usually performed by women (except land clearing), whereas men hunted and tended fruit and palm trees.

Communities throughout West Central Africa believed in a supreme deity, often referred to as Nzambi a Mpungu, and related spiritual entities. Since the fifteenth century, a tradition of Christianity was established in the region, the result of Portuguese commercial activities. The social history of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Kongo arguably revolved around the exchange between Christianity and Kongolesque religion, giving rise to an Africanized Christianity best symbolized by the life of Dona Beatrice Kimpa Vita (1682–1706), leader of a religious movement that sought to reconstruct a Kongo reeling from war. A prophet-priest or kitomi, her claim to be the incarnation of St. Anthony, combined with her teachings that Jesus, Mary, and the prophets were all Kongolesque, are examples of the way Christianity was reconfigured to accommodate West Central African values. Dona Beatrice Kimpa Vita was burned at the stake for heresy.

In West Central Africa, spirits of the dead who had led good lives were believed to live in mpemba, a subterranean realm separated from the living by a large body of water, or kalunga. The deceased changed color within ten months of their demise, becoming white. It is therefore
no surprise that Europeans were initially viewed as departed spirits, having crossed the kalunga of the Atlantic.

The Bight of Benin, the second leading source of captives, was the land of the Fon, Ewe, and Yoruba groups. The Ewe (concentrated in present-day Togo and southeastern Ghana) were organized into more than 100 autonomous states, whereas the Fon of Dahomey (contemporary Benin) absorbed Weme, Allada, and Whydah to form a single centralized power in the eighteenth century. The Yoruba of what is now southwestern Nigeria also witnessed expansionist policies, but they were more centered on their respective towns and thereby much more urban than others. There are many exceptional features of Fon–Ewe–Yoruba cultures, not the least of which are the bronzes and sculptures of Benin and Ife. However, the gods of the Fon–Ewe (vodun or loas) and the Yoruba (orishas) are so numerous and unique that they further distinguish the region. The Yoruba orishas include Olodumare (high god), Oshun (goddess of fresh water and sensuality), Ogun (warrior god of iron), Eshu–Eleigba (or Ellegua, trickster god of the crossroads), Shango (god of thunder and lightning), and Yemanja (mother of all orishas and goddess of the oceans); and they correspond in some instances to the Fon–Ewe loas of Mawu–Lisa (high god), Aziri (a riverain goddess), Gu (god of iron and warfare), and Legba (god of the crossroads; keeper of the gate). Mawu–Lisa, for example, is a composite of female and male characteristics, representing the Fon–Ewe ideal.

These beliefs would become central to practices in such places as Haiti, Brazil, and Louisiana.

In contrast to the Yoruba, most of the Igbo, Ibibio, Igala, Efik, Ijo, Ogoni, and other groups of the Bight of Biafra (southeastern Nigeria) were organized into villages. The Igbo, Ibibio, and Ijo were the largest, and the Igbo in particular were marked by dense populations and agrarian economies. For the most part, theirs were independent “village democracies,” in which important decisions were made by a male peasantry individually distinguished by varying statuses of achievement. Men conducted long-distance commerce, but women controlled local trade, keeping any money they earned in communities that were
mostly patrilineal (tracing descent and inheritance through the male line). Women also regularly fought to defend their villages. Above all else, though, women were revered as mothers, wives, and keepers of the soil. Regarding the latter, they enjoyed a special connection to Ala (or Ana), the earth mother. Ala and the land (ala) were highly esteemed and inextricably interwoven, forming the basis of Igbo law. Ala was functionally the most important deity in Igbo society, although she was not the high, creator god. That honor was held by Chineke or Chukwu, who, like the Fon–Ewe’s Mawu–Lisa, was a blend of male and female components (chi and eke), and from whom sprang powerful spiritual forces known as the alusi or agbara as well as the personal guardian spirit or chi of each individual. The ancestral dead, the ndichie, added to the realm of the disembodied.

According to Igbo beliefs, the individual in consultation with his or her chi undertook a plan of action that resulted in high individual achievement, guided by a philosophy and value system stressing success and known as ihenga. The individual drive of the Igbo, together with their regard for the earth and belief in destiny, would clearly influence the direction of African-derived cultures in the Americas.

Regarding the Gold Coast, its southern half was dominated by Akan and Ga speakers, the former in turn divided into Twi and Baule speakers. As was true of the Igbo, women were prominent in Akan societies, as is evident in the belief that their ancestresses came from the sky or earth to found the first Akan towns in the forests. Matrilineal for the most part, Akan clans each claimed descent from a common mother. Each clan had a male and a female head, and women played critical roles as advisors and heads of the matriclans. Similar to the Igbo, the Akan espoused belief in the earth mother, Asase Yaa, who, together with the high god Onyame (or Onyankopon), created the world. In keeping with most African theologies, the Akan high gods were remote, but the next order of deity, the abosom (who numbered in the hundreds), were accessible.

Akan societies contributed to the wide variety of political contexts out of which captives were taken. In this case, Akan speakers were either a part of the expansionist Asante empire (established around 1680) or they lived in its shadow. Asante was a vast realm ruled by the Asantehene (king) and a bureaucracy intent on maximizing trade with both the African hinterland and with Europeans on the coast. Gold, in addition to captives, was a key export; gold dust was the standard currency of Asante. One of the most militarily powerful and structurally complex states in all of Africa, Asante’s political union was symbolized by the Sika Dova, the Golden Stool.

Sierra Leone was a region whose interior was dominated by the large Muslim theocracy of Futa Jallon, and by a series of independent, small-scale villages along the coast composed of multiple groups. A discussion of the coast underscores the rural existence of a majority who were farmers, fishers, and hunters. Although many groups were patrilineal, women tended to wield extraordinary influence through their roles as expert agriculturalists and leaders of “secret societies.” Concerning the former, women cultivated rice, cotton, and indigo, skills that would be coveted in North America. Secret societies, in turn, were instrumental in intervillage diplomacy and commerce, and they were critical to the maintenance of social order. The Sande or Bundu society of women was one of the better known organizations, but women also played leading roles in such male societies as the Poro. What therefore emerges from the Sierra Leonian region are gender relations that may have been more egalitarian than elsewhere.

While located in Sierra Leone’s hinterland, Futa Jallon was also vitally connected to the Senegambian region. We have already discussed Islam in Africa, so it is sufficient to observe that from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, militant or reformist Islamic states were founded in Senegambia (and indeed throughout West Africa), and Futa Jallon was a key participant in this development. Muslims captured non-Muslims in wars and were themselves captured, and captives from both sides wound up in the Americas. Muslims were exported through Senegambia, Sierra Leone, and the Bight of Benin, the latter mostly the result of conflict between Muslim Hausa-Fulani (related groups in contemporary northern Nigeria) and Yoruba combatants (some of whom were Muslims themselves). Muslims were also exported from the Gold Coast, but to a lesser extent. A number of Malagasy and Swahili captives from the coast of Southeast Africa were probably Muslim, but many would have been from the interior and therefore non-Muslim.

**Belly of the Whale**

The transatlantic transport of all of these various Africans to the Americas qualifies as the quintessential moment of transfiguration, the height
of human alienation and disorientation. It is a phenomenon unlike any other, with millions forcibly removed from family and friends and deposed in lands foreign and hostile. It cannot be compared with the millions of Europeans who voluntarily crossed the Atlantic, a journey which for all of their troubles was their collective choice. Words will never convey the agony, despair, and bewilderment of these innocents, the depth of their suffering, the pain of their separation. The transatlantic voyage, also called the Middle Passage, was an unspeakable horror.

The movement across the Atlantic actually began on African soil, where those captured in the hinterland were brought to coastal holding stages, or barracoons. Between initial capture and the barracoon, anything was possible, including escape. Alternatively, they could have been taken north to the transsaharan trade, or retained in Africa as slaves, where eventual export to the Americas (or the Mediterranean) was a continual possibility. Welcome to the realm of uncertainty and fear, gateway to the land of the macabre.

Reference to captives points to the debate over the capture itself. Do scholars who maximize African involvement in the capture and sale of other Africans do so for the purpose of minimizing Western culpability? Are those who are appalled by the very suggestion of African participation in the slave trade motivated by the same logic, only in reverse? The truth of the matter may be more nuanced than straightforward. There can be no doubt that European and American demand for slave labor drove the entire enterprise. It is also the case that Europeans entered Africa and hunted humans like prey, especially in the case of the Portuguese in Angola and Mozambique. But it is equally undeniable that, as was true of the transsaharan trade, there were African groups and governments involved in the capture of other Africans, together with instances of cooperation between European and African traffickers. At Bonny in the Bight of Biafra and points along the Gold Coast, for example, Europeans used “boating,” or the sailing of small vessels upriver to purchase captives from villages along the banks, a practice also found along the Windward Coast. While other African states and groups resisted the slave trades and may have been successful in defending some, they clearly could not save nearly 12 million others.

Notions of African unity, and even “race” for that matter, were alien to Africa until relatively recently. As has been discussed, Africa was inhabited by people of differing cultures, religions, and political agendas, and these differences were exacerbated (or created) to feed the slave trade. Raids, kidnapping, and warfare produced most captives, while individuals found guilty of crimes, or sold into bondage to pay debts, were also taken. Indeed, with the acceleration of the slave trade came a corresponding surge in the number of persons convicted of crimes. Can African participation in the slave trades be divorced from the engines of European and American demand? Culpability was shared, but was it symmetrical, and does the answer matter?

Captured Africans, in their forced march from the hinterland to the sea, could cover substantial distances, anywhere from 100 to 700 kilometers, depending upon place and time. They could take four months or longer to reach the coast. Loss of life during the trek is conservatively estimated to have averaged 10 to 15 percent, and in Angola it reached an obscene 40 percent. Captives who reached the shore could remain there for months, as a result of poor health and the need to convalesce, or to wait for the next slaver. Ports with established
traffic attracted larger numbers of slavers with greater frequency and differed, along with other barracoons, in type and size. Some barracoons were simply pens exposed to the elements, sometimes adjacent to European factories (trading posts). Others ranged from weather-protected dwellings to fortified castles. Still others, according to Mungo Park’s late-eighteenth-century observation along the Gambia, were compounds attached to nearby communities, for “if no immediate opportunity offers them to advantage, they are distributed among the neighbouring villages until a slave ship arrives, or until they can be sold to black traders who sometime purchase on speculation.” Park described their circumstances, stating that “the poor wretches are kept constantly fettered, two and two of them being chained together, and employed in the labours of the field; and I am sorry to add, are very scantily fed, as well as harshly treated.”

The Gambian experience paralleled that of the Angolan. The latter involved coffles averaging 100 captives from the interior. They were fed the cheapest food, often rotten, which they were forced to carry. Bound and brutalized, they were taken to Luanda, where conditions remained deplorable, and there branded three times: on the right breast with a royal coat of arms, on the left breast or arm to indicate individual ownership, and on the chest with a small cross, as captives were baptized before embarking for Brazil. They then waited for weeks if not months, chained and exposed, with little to eat and little to wear, eating, sleeping, and eliminating in the closest of spaces. As many as 12,000 captives arrived annually in Luanda for export; between 6,000 and 7,000 survived for eventual shipment. The “putrid miasmas” of human filth and disease and death filled the air, circulating throughout the city.

The boarding of captives did not necessarily mean that the voyage was underway. There were often further delays of weeks if not months, as the slaver sailed from barracoon to barracoon until a full complement was achieved. A Middle Passage of only two or three month’s duration was not the experience of many; rather, the total amount of time from the initial capture to embarkation could last the better part of a year.

The *James* departed England on April 5, 1675 and did not arrive in Barbados until May 21, 1676. Having reached Assini (on the Gold Coast) on August 30, the *James* exchanged commodities for both gold and captives at several points along the coast until January 11, 1676, when the vessel arrived at the English factory near Wyemba. There the slaver boarded captives each day for about a week, most of whom were described as “very thin ordinary slaves,” indicative of the preceding ordeal onshore. The *James* made yet another stop at Anomabo and did not set sail for Barbados until March 8, 1676.

Similarly, the Dutch slaver *St. Jan* began loading captives at Ardra in the Bight of Benin, also called Slave Coast, on March 4, 1659. The ship continued east, picking up additional captives and supplies in the Bight of Biafra. By the time the *St. Jan* left the Biafran area for the Cameroon River on May 22, it had boarded 219 Africans. From that time to August 17, the vessel journeyed along the coast in search of food as far as Cape Lopez (just south of the equator). The search for provisions was a major preoccupation for slavers, and the captain of the *James* complained that his search for food was a “great trouble.” His concern was echoed by the captain of the *Arthur* operating in the Biafran Bight in February of 1678: “This day we sent our Boat att Donus to see what might be done there, wee finding negroes to be Brought on Board of us fast enough but wee nott free to deal in many fearing lest wee should take in negroes and have noe provitions for them.” It was Barbot’s calculation at the beginning of the eighteenth century that a “ship that takes in five hundred slaves, must provide above a hundred thousand yams; which is very difficult, because it is hard to stow them, by reason they take up so much room.”

Once purchased by European slavers, captives were often branded with the company’s coat of arms. These became their only coats, as they were usually stripped of all clothing. In 1699, Bosman recorded that “they came aboard stark naked as well women as men; in which condition they are obliged to continue, if the master of the Ship is not so charitable (which he commonly is) as to bestow something on them to cover their nakedness.” Some 128 years after Bosman, Mayer noted in 1827 that two days before captives were loaded onto the slaver, the heads of both males and females were shaved. And then:

On the appointed day, the *barracoon* or slave-pen is made joyous by the abundant ‘feed’ which signalizes the negro’s last hours in his native country. The feast over, they are taken alongside the vessel in canoes; and as they touch the deck, they are entirely stripped, so that women as well as men go out of Africa as they came into it – naked. This precaution, it will be understood, is indispensable; for perfect nudity, during the whole voyage, is the only means of securing cleanliness and health.

While slavetraders may have been primarily concerned with hygiene, they were not oblivious to the psychological implications of denuding. Contrary to popular ignorance, most Africans did not go about butt naked, swinging through trees, but in fact placed great value on textiles, the primary commodity for which captives were traded to Europeans in the first place. The humiliation of prolonged nakedness before captors, the opposite sex, and children seared into the psyche an overwhelming sense of vulnerability.

Captives did not suffer silently. To the contrary, they often rebelled. To prevent mutiny and escape, male slaves were chained together at the wrists and ankles in groups of two as soon as they were boarded. Women and girls were physically separated from the males and usually unfettered, an arrangement that became standard procedure by the last quarter of the eighteenth century. The segregation of the sexes was maintained throughout the voyage except under certain circumstances on deck. Europeans had learned to prepare for rebellion as early as 1651, when captain Bartholomew Haward was told that “there is put aboard your Pinck Supply 30 paire of shackles and boults for such of your negers as are rebellious and we pray you be very careful to keepe them undr and let them have their food in due season that they ryse not against you, as they have done in other ships.”

The separation of male and female captives also facilitated the long, sordid history of the rape of African women and girls by European men, a humiliation that began before they were ever sold to New World planters (who promptly went out and did the same). In point of fact, crews were given sexual access to captive females as a matter of policy. Even a small number of females violated infrequently was sufficient to establish the assailability of the captive population.

In addition to fetters, captives were often kept below deck, in the hold of the slaver, until the African shoreline was no longer in sight. This was done to discourage revolt, for the African maintaining visual contact with her homeland was sorely tempted to return. The Hanmi-bale’s Captain Phillips poignantly records the African response: “The negroes are so wilful and loth to leave their own country, that they have often leap’d out of the canoes, boat and ship, into the sea, and kept under water till they were drowned to avoid being taken up and saved by our own boats, which pursued them; having a more dreadful apprehension of Barbadoes than we have of hell.”

That the African viewed the New World as hell is related to her fear that Europeans were cannibals. Barbot records that it “has been
if we were not to be eaten by these white men with horrible looks, red faces, and long hair.” Equiano’s apprehensions were consistent with those in West Central Africa (Equiano was an Igbo from what is now southeastern Nigeria), where Europeans were seen as spirits, their advent a portent of death. Such was the fear of the New World, so overwhelming was the sense of separation from family and land, that many chose to starve themselves; refusing to eat was an option so pervasive that crews often had to use force. Those who resisted were given a “cat,” or flogging. In the face of their past capture, present suffering, and less-than-bleak future, many chose suicide by other means. Those who could went over the side; those who could not often went insane.

But many did not go insane or over the side, and because the slave trade was, in the final analysis, a business transaction, the African had to be maintained in some fashion. Captives were therefore usually fed twice a day aboard the slavers. Their diet included horse beans, rice, yams, limes, lemons, ground Indian corn, and palm oil. Meat was extremely rare, though fish caught along the voyage was occasionally provided. Water was obviously highly valued and rationed.

Medical practitioners called surgeons were often included among the crew to attend the medical needs of the captives. Of dubious ability and questionable reputation, these surgeons were further restricted by few resources. They monitored the health of the captives on a regular basis, segregating those with serious illnesses and treating them with such physics as wine or sago, a starchlike substance. The surgeons examined captives on African coastal shores to determine their fitness, and they prepared them for market once the New World was reached.

The consequences of the surgeons’ limitations and the cramped, filthy conditions aboard the slavers was nothing short of ruinous. Diseases assailing the captives included dysentery (the “flux” or the “bloody flux”), measles, scurvy, and “fever.” Ophthalmia, a condition leading to blindness (possibly related to river blindness), was widespread. Yaws was as prevalent and potentially fatal. Intestinal worms added to the collective misery. Aside from the bloody flux, contracted from food and water contamination, smallpox was of greatest concern; whole ships were quarantined upon reaching New World destinations until the pox had run its course and was no longer contagious.

Spacing also contributed to captive misery, and “tight packing” occurred frequently aboard slavers. Scholars disagree over its precise frequency and over its impact on the health of the captive population, but there can be little doubt that tight packing contributed to suffering, and suffering is definitely a health issue.

In addition to those who did not survive the Middle Passage, many perished in Africa itself. Depending upon the specific region in question, from 10 to 40 percent of those captured in the interior died en route to the sea, at which point at least another 10 percent expired while awaiting export along the coast, during the barracoons phase. When mortality rates from points of capture through the Middle Passage are combined, rates that do not take into consideration those initially killed in slaving raids and wars, from 30 to 70 percent of those captured for eventual export to the Americas never arrived. Mutinies and shipwrecks added to the hosts of the dead. Slave ships, in the Dutchman Bosman’s words, were “always foul and stinking.” The “stench of a slave ship could be scented for miles,” the slave deck “so covered with blood and mucous that it resembled a slaughter-house.” The surgeon Isaac Wilson was convinced that two-thirds of the 155 who perished aboard the Elizabeth (out of 602) died from “melancholy,” observing that once the captives were taken aboard, “a gloomy pensive-ness seemed to overcast their countenances and continued in a great many.” The sounds emanating from slaves usually included a “howling melancholy noise.” To combat this mother of all blues, captives were brought on deck and forced to dance and sing, and sometimes had to be beaten to get them to comply. An early form of minstrelsy, this feigned animation in the midst of such sorrow demonstrates the deep and complicated history of black performance, its relationship to coercion both disturbing and instructive.

From the belly of the whale, the sons and daughters of Africa were dispersed all over the New World, occupying every conceivable place, performing every imaginable task. The terror of the passage would be forever seared into the memory of the dispersed, a memory passed on to descendants. But for all of the horror of the transatlantic slave trade, it did not completely rupture ties to the homeland. Africa would remain a central consideration in the hearts and minds of many, the dream of reconnection, of reversing sail, one of the Diaspora’s central challenges.

Suggestions for Further Reading

The best place to begin examining the volume of the transatlantic slave trade is the database compiled by David Eltis, Stephen D. Behrendt,