

Understanding Slavery Initiative

Africa before Transatlantic Enslavement

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The Transatlantic Slave trade not only distorted Africa's economic development it also distorted views of the history and importance of the African continent itself. It is only in the last fifty years that it has been possible to redress this distortion and to begin to re-establish Africa's rightful place in world history.

The African continent is now recognised as the birthplace of humanity and the cradle of civilization. We still marvel at the great achievements of Kemet, or Ancient Egypt, for example, one of the most notable of the early African civilizations, which first developed in the Nile valley over 5000 years ago. However, even before the rise of Kemet it seems likely that an even more ancient kingdom, known as Ta Seti, existed in what is today Nubia in Sudan. This may well have been the earliest state to exist anywhere in the world. Africa can therefore be credited not only with giving rise to the many scientific developments associated with Egypt, engineering, mathematics, architecture, medicine etc but also with important early political developments such as state formation and monarchy. This demonstrates that economic and political development, as well as scientific development was, during this early period, perhaps more advanced in Africa than in other continents.

The African continent continued on its own path of development, without significant external intervention until the fifteenth century of our era. Some of the world's other great civilisations, such as Kush, Axum, Mali, and Great Zimbabwe, flourished in Africa in the years before 1500. In this early period Africans participated in extensive international trading networks and in trans-oceanic travel. Certainly some African states had established important trading relations with India, China and other parts of Asia long before these were disrupted by European intervention.

A North African conquest of the Iberian peninsular began in the 8th century and led to the occupation of much of Spain and Portugal for several centuries. This Muslim invasion re-introduced much of the knowledge of the ancient world to Europe and linked it much more closely with North and West Africa. It was gold from the great empires of West Africa, such as Ghana, Mali and Songhay, which provided the means for the economic take off of Europe in the 13th and 14th centuries and aroused the interest of Europeans in western Africa. Indeed it was the wealth of West Africa, especially as a source of gold, that encouraged the voyages of the early European explorers.



By the 15th century the African continent was already one of great diversity. The existence of great kingdoms and empires, such as Mali in the west and Ethiopia in the east were in many ways exceptional rather than typical. In many parts of the continent no major centralised states existed and many people lived in societies where there were no great divisions of wealth and power. In such societies there were generally more democratic systems of government by councils of elders and other kinship and age based institutions. As a consequence there was also a diversity of religious and philosophical beliefs. In many areas these beliefs remained traditional and stressed the importance of communing with common ancestors. The Ethiopian kingdom was unusual because the Orthodox Christian church, which was of ancient origin in that region, had increasingly important state functions. In Mali, and in some other areas of western and eastern Africa, as well as in throughout North Africa, Islam had already begun to play a significant role before 1500. Most importantly African societies were following their own patterns of development before the onset of European intervention.

Negative views

In the 18th century, racist views of Africa were most famously expressed by Scottish philosopher David Hume: 'I am apt to suspect the Negroes to be naturally inferior to the Whites. There scarcely ever was a civilised nation of that complexion, nor even any individual, eminent either in action or in speculation. No ingenious manufacture among them, no arts, no sciences.'

Whilst some changed slightly over time, there were still some who continued to hold these derogatory views. In the 19th century, the German philosopher Hegel simply declared: 'Africa is no historical part of the world.' Later, Hugh Trevor-Roper, Regius Professor of History at Oxford University, expressed openly the racist view that Africa has no history, as recently as 1963.

Early achievements

We now know that, far from Africa having no history, it is almost certain that human history actually began there. All the earliest evidence of human existence and of our immediate hominid ancestors has been found in Africa. The latest scientific research points to the fact that all human beings are likely to have African ancestors.

Africa was not just the birthplace of humanity but also the cradle of early civilisations that made an immense contribution to the world and are still marvelled at today. The most notable example is Kemet – the original name of ancient Egypt – which first developed in the Nile valley more than 5,000 years ago and was one of the first monarchies.

However, even before the rise of Egypt, an even earlier kingdom was founded in Nubia, in what is present-day Sudan. Ta Seti is thought to be one of the earliest states in history, the existence of which demonstrates that, thousands of years ago, Africans were developing some of the most advanced political systems anywhere in the world.



Egypt

Kemet, more commonly referred to as the Egypt of the pharaohs, is best known for its great monuments and feats of architecture and engineering, such as the planning and construction of the pyramids, but it also made great advances in many other fields.

The Egyptians produced early types of paper, devised a written script and developed a calendar. They made important contributions in various branches of mathematics, such as geometry and algebra, and it seems likely that they understood and perhaps invented the use of zero. They also made important contributions to mechanics, philosophy and agriculture, especially irrigation.

In medicine, the Egyptians understood the body's dependence on the brain more than 1,000 years before the Greek scholars came up with the same idea. Some historians now believe that Egypt had an important influence on ancient Greece, pointing to the fact that Greek scholars such as Pythagoras and Archimedes studied there and that the work of Aristotle and Plato was largely based on earlier Egyptian scholarship. For example, what is commonly known as Pythagoras' theorem was well known to the ancient Egyptians hundreds of years before Pythagoras' birth.

The rise of Islam

The continent progressed on its own path of development without major external intervention apart from the Arab invasions of North Africa that began after the rise of Islam in the mid-7th century. Those invasions and the introduction of Islam served to integrate North Africa, as well as parts of East and West Africa, more fully into the Muslim-dominated trading system of that period and generally enhanced the local, regional and international trading networks that were already developing throughout the continent.

Although sometimes spread by military means, Islam's expansion was often facilitated by trade and the desire of African rulers to utilise Islamic political and economic institutions. The Arabic language also provided a script that assisted the development of literacy, book-based learning and record-keeping.

The empire of Songhay – which stretched from modern-day Mali to Sudan – was known for, among other things, the famous Islamic university of Sankoré based in Timbuktu, which was established in the 14th century. The works of the Greek philosopher Aristotle were studied there, as well as subjects such as law, various branches of philosophy, dialectics, grammar, rhetoric and astronomy. In the 16th century, one of its most famous scholars, Ahmed Baba (1564–1627), is said to have written more than 40 major books on such subjects as astronomy, history and theology and had a private library that held over 1,500 volumes.

One of the first reports of Timbuktu to reach Europe was by the North African diplomat and author Leo Africanus. In his book *Description of Africa*, published in 1550, he says of the town: 'There you will find many judges, professors and devout men, all handsomely maintained by the king, who holds scholars in much honour. There, too, they sell many handwritten North African books, and more profit is to be made there from the sale of books than from any other branch of trade.'

The North African, or Moorish, invasion of the Iberian peninsula and the founding of the state of Córdoba in the 8th century had begun the reintroduction of much of the learning of the ancient world to Europe through translations into Arabic of works in medicine, chemistry, astronomy, mathematics and philosophy, as well as through the various contributions made by Islamic scholars. Arabic numerals based on those used in India were also transplanted, which helped to simplify mathematical calculations.

This knowledge, brought to Europe mainly by the Moors, helped to create the conditions for the Renaissance and the eventual expansion of Europe overseas in the 15th century.

Slavery in Africa

Between the 7th and 15th centuries, the external Muslim trading demand for African goods also included a demand for captives.

Forms of slavery have existed on all continents at different times in history – for instance, as a means of exploiting those captured in war – especially where there were labour shortages and an abundance of land. Slavery was certainly present in some African societies before the rise of Islam. In ancient Kemet, for example, there are descriptions of European slaves being branded. Later, in other African societies, especially those that were powerful states, enslaved or unfree people could be found, although generally their status was little

different from that of poor farmers. It may indeed have been similar to that of the serfs of medieval Europe, who were required to produce an agricultural surplus or perform other duties for a particular ruler.

But when an external demand for enslaved people arose, some African societies could and did supply slaves. There was, for example, an export 'trade' in enslaved people, taking them via the Sahara from West to North Africa, following a similar route to other trade goods, such as gold and salt. Enslaved Africans were also forced to go to parts of the Middle East, to India and perhaps even as far as China. The most well-known slave of East African origin is Malik Ambar (1549–1626) who was born in what is now Ethiopia. Enslaved at an early age, he eventually became the regent of the Indian kingdom of Ahmednagar, famous for his military campaigns against the Mughals.

The development of states in Africa, increased the levels of inequality – between men and women, rich and poor, free and servile. In fact, inequality and economic exploitation were particularly prevalent in some of the most powerful and developed states, such as the Ethiopian kingdom. Indeed, historians generally consider Ethiopia to be a feudal society with many features similar to those of feudalism in Europe – that is, economic and political power was based on land ownership and the exploitation of those who were forced to work on that land.

Trading systems and gold

Before 1600, a massive regional and international trading system stretched from the coast of West Africa, across the Sahara to North Africa and beyond. It was sustained by the mining of gold in West Africa, as well as the production of many other goods there. For many centuries, it was dominated by powerful empires such as Ghana, Mali and Songhay, which often controlled both gold production and the major trading towns on the southern fringes of the Sahara.

A 9th-century historian wrote: 'The king of Ghana is a great king. In his territory are mines of gold.' When al-Bakri, the famous historian of Muslim Spain, wrote about Ghana in the 11th century, he reported that its king 'rules an enormous kingdom and has great power'. He was also said to have an army of 200,000 men and to rule over an extremely wealthy trading empire.

In the 14th century, the West African empire of Mali, which was larger than western Europe, was reputed to be one of the biggest, richest and most powerful states in the world. The Moroccan traveller Mohammed Ibn Batuta, when giving his very favourable impressions of this empire, reported that he had found 'complete and general safety' there. When the famous emperor of Mali, Mansa Musa, visited Cairo in 1324, it was said that he brought so much gold with him that its price fell dramatically and had not recovered its value even 12 years later.

It was gold from these great empires of West Africa that prompted the early Portuguese voyages of exploration.



Traditional societies



In the centuries before 1500, some of the world's other great civilisations, such as Kush (in present-day Sudan), Axum (in present-day Ethiopia) and Great Zimbabwe, flourished in Africa.

However, although the history of the continent before the transatlantic slave trade is often viewed as one of great empires and kingdoms, many of its inhabitants lived in societies with no great state apparatus. They were often governed by councils of elders or by other kinship- or age-based institutions. Religious and philosophical beliefs concentrated on maintaining communication with ancestors who could intercede with gods on behalf of the living and ensure the smooth functioning of society. (The Ethiopian kingdom was unusual because there the orthodox Christian Church, which was of ancient origin, performed increasingly important state functions.)

Many of these societies were small scale, occupied with farming, herding and producing enough from agriculture to survive and exchange in local markets. They could also be part of larger empires and, as such, were expected to produce a surplus or perform other duties for an overlord. In short, while these societies varied greatly and were governed in different ways, they were all developing according to their own internal dynamics.

The Igbo people, who still live in Nigeria, are an example of a society that was not part of a centralised state. They ruled themselves in village communities that, at different times, used slightly different political systems. As in many other African societies that used similar methods, everyone was taught rules and responsibilities according to age and groupings – men or women together in age sets – that cut across family or village loyalty. Sometimes the extended family was responsible for organising and training people and for liaising with other similar extended family groups, through councils of elders or elected chiefs. Therefore relationships based on age and kinship were often very important.

Even societies that had kings and more centralised political structures also used these other political institutions and ways of organising people. What is important about them is that they involved many people in decision-making and, in this respect, were African forms of participatory democracy. Religious ideas generally supported and underpinned these systems of government, most importantly giving

people their own specific ways of understanding the world and the rules of their own society.

On the eve of the transatlantic slave trade

In most parts of Africa before 1500, societies had become highly developed in terms of their own histories. They often had complex systems of participatory government, or were established powerful states that covered large territories and had extensive regional and international links.

Many of these societies had solved difficult agricultural problems and had come up with advanced techniques of production of food and other crops and were engaged in local, regional or even international trading networks. Some peoples were skilled miners and metallurgists, others great artists in wood, stone and other materials. Many of the societies had also amassed a great stock of scientific and other knowledge, some of it stored in libraries such as those of Timbuktu, but some passed down orally from generation to generation.

There was great diversity across the continent and therefore societies at different stages and levels of development. Most importantly, Africans had established their own economic and political systems, their own cultures, technologies and philosophies that had enabled them to make spectacular advances and important contributions to human knowledge.

The significance of the transatlantic slave trade is not just that it led to the loss of millions of lives and the departure of millions of those who could have contributed to Africa's future, although depopulation did have a great impact. But just as devastating was the fact that African societies were disrupted by the trade and increasingly unable to follow an independent path of development. Colonial rule and its modern legacy have been a continuation of this disruption.

The devastation of Africa through transatlantic slavery was accompanied by the ignorance of some historians and philosophers to negate its entire history. These ideas and philosophies suggested, that among other things, Africans had never developed any institutions or cultures, nor anything else of any worth and that future advances could only take place under the direction of Europeans or European institutions.

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