

# Slavery and the Slave Trade in Africa

Slavery in Africa was quite different from the slavery that developed later, especially in the Americas. Slaves were captives taken in warfare, criminals, or debtors. Slavery was not necessarily hereditary, and it was not seen as total ownership of another human being. Slaves had certain rights and might even be allowed to purchase their own freedom and own property.

The slave trade also existed in Africa before the Europeans arrived. Arabs captured slaves or took them in exchange for other goods and sold them in India, Egypt, Persia, and other places.

## EUROPEAN SLAVE TRADERS

The Portuguese were the first Europeans involved in the African slave trade. They began in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century. The slaves were not needed in Europe, instead they were used in the Caribbean and North America to grow sugar and tobacco on large plantations. Many workers were needed. The native Americans (“Indians”) did not survive the labor and *indentured servants* would eventually gain their independence. The slave trade increased greatly and became quite destructive by the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century.

*Triangular Trade.* Cheap European goods, usually cloth and trinkets were shipped from Europe to Africa where they were traded for African captives. The Africans were transported to the Americas (the *Middle Passage*) where they were traded for sugar and tobacco and related products. These items were shipped back to Europe and sold for a handsome profit.

## EFFECTS OF THE SLAVE TRADE

*Depopulation.* About 50 million Africans were lost to the slave trade. Many were killed in tribal warfare. Many died of disease in over-packed slave ships.

*Increased Tribal Warfare.* Villages and crops were destroyed in the warfare to provide captives for the slave trade. Bitterness among Africans themselves developed that still affects relations between ethnic groups in modern African nations.

*Insecurity and Fear.* Africans fearing the slave raids sometimes abandoned their villages and moved into the interior. Others lived in constant fear, more interested in avoiding capture than in the development of their own society.

*Economic Disruption and Decay.* Some African states abandoned their traditional ways of making a living and took part in the slave trade. They were wealthy and powerful while the trade lasted, but once it ended, their economies collapsed and the states disappeared.

*Trans-Saharan Trade Was Lost.* Because of the huge profits in the slave trade, the trans-Saharan routes of trade lost their importance, and kingdoms in the interior of West Africa declined.

*Racism.* To justify the slave trade, those involved believed that black Africans, because of their color, religion, and customs, were inferior.

