

African Society and Slavery

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

African history before the Age of Exploration was both long and complex. Much like their counterparts in Europe, Asia, and the Americas, African empires rose and fell as time passed and different cultures and societies found their roots throughout the continent. This tutorial covers the most expansive of these African empires and societies, highlighting the ways that they interacted with European explorers in the Age of Exploration. European interaction also altered the role that slavery played in Africa and in the Atlantic World, with profound and enduring consequences.

Our discussion will break down like this:

1. The Major African Empires

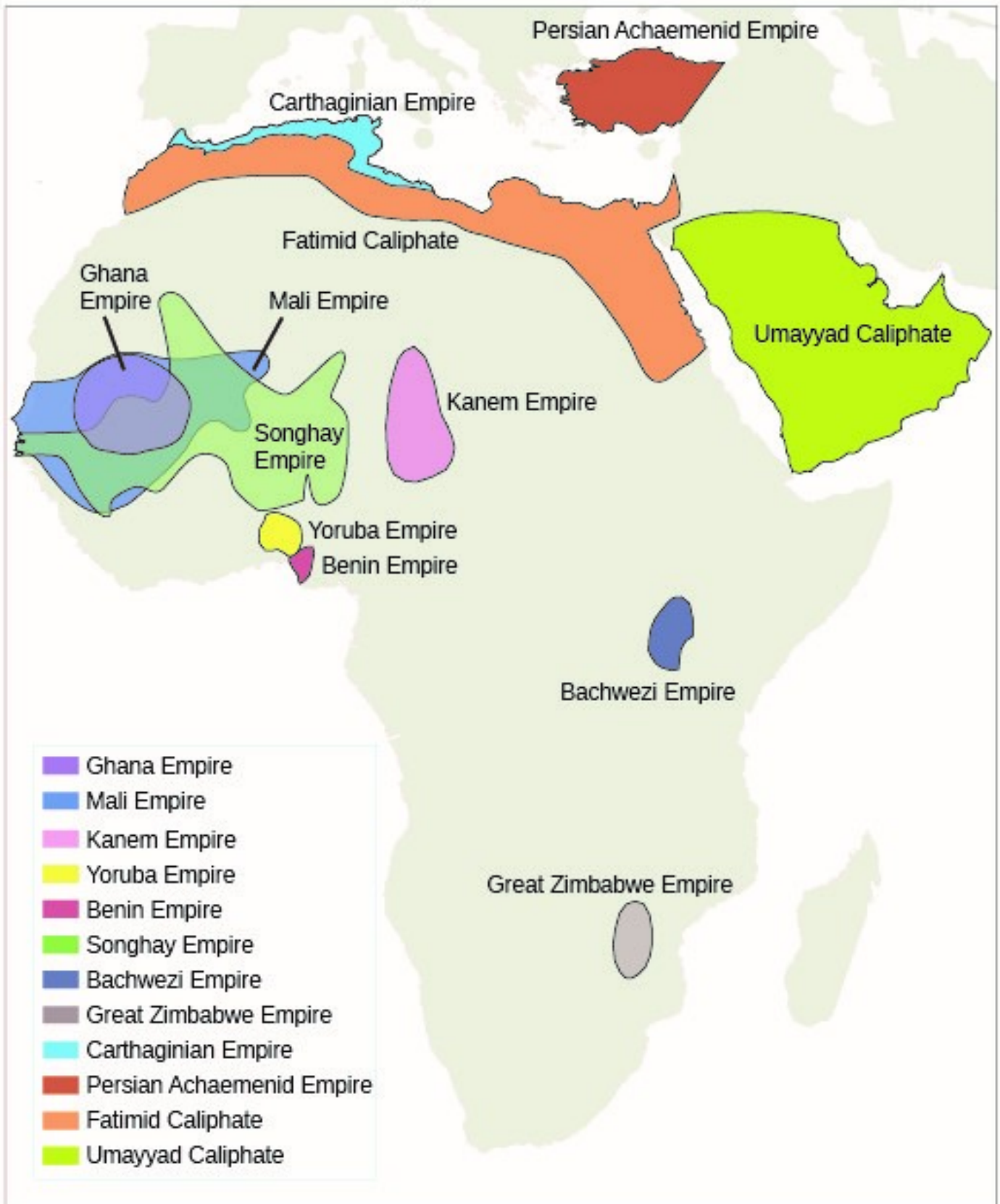
It is difficult to generalize the history of West Africa, which was linked to the rise and diffusion of Islam. This geographical area, central to the rise of the Atlantic World, stretches from modern-day Mauritania to the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It encompasses lush rainforests along the equator, savannas on either side of the forest, and much drier land to the north. Until about 600 C.E., most Africans were hunter-gatherers. Where water was too scarce for farming, herders maintained sheep, goats, cattle, or camels. In the more heavily wooded area near the equator, farmers raised yams, palm products, or plantains. The savanna areas yielded rice, millet, and sorghum. Sub-Saharan Africans had little experience in maritime matters. Most of the population lived away from the coast, which is connected to the interior by five main rivers—the Senegal, Gambia, Niger, Volta, and Congo.

Although there were large trading centers along these rivers, most West Africans lived in small villages and identified with their extended family or their clan. Wives, children, and dependents (including enslaved people) were a sign of wealth among men, and polygyny—the practice of having more than one wife at a time—was widespread. In times of need, relatives, however far away, were counted upon to assist in supplying food or security. Because of the clannish nature of African society, “we” was associated with the village and family members, while “they” included everyone else. Hundreds of separate dialects emerged; in modern Nigeria, nearly 500 dialects are still spoken.

Following the death of the prophet Muhammad in 632 C.E., Islam spread quickly across North Africa, bringing not only a unifying faith but political and legal structures as well. As lands fell under the control of Muslim armies, they instituted Islamic rule and legal structures as local African chieftains converted, usually under penalty of death. Only those who had converted to Islam could rule or be engaged in trade.

The first major empire to emerge in West Africa was the Ghana Empire. By 750, the Soninke farmers of the sub-Sahara had become wealthy by taxing the trade that passed through their area. For instance, the Niger River basin supplied gold to the Berber and Arab traders from west of the Nile Valley, and the traders brought cloth, weapons, and manufactured goods into the interior. Huge Saharan salt mines supplied the life-sustaining mineral to the Mediterranean coast of Africa and inland areas. By 900, monotheistic Muslims controlled most of this trade, and they had converted many of the African ruling elite. The majority of the population, however, maintained their tribal animistic practices, which gave living attributes to nonliving objects, such as mountains, rivers, and wind. Because Ghana's king controlled the gold supply, he was able to maintain price controls and afford a strong military.

African Empires Prior to 1500 CE



Locations of the Major West African Empires Before 1492: Note that along the Mediterranean coast, Muslim states prevailed.

By 1200, under the leadership of Sundiata Keita, Mali had replaced Ghana as the leading state in West Africa. After Sundiata's rule, the court converted to Islam, and Muslim scribes played a large part in administration and government. Miners then discovered huge new deposits of gold east of the Niger River. By the 14th century, the empire was so wealthy that while on a pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca, called a hajj, Mali's ruler Mansu Musa gave away enough gold to create serious price inflation in the cities along his route. Timbuktu, the capital city, became a leading Islamic center for education, commerce, and the trade of enslaved people.

Thus, by the time Europeans first reached the coast of West Africa, large trading empires had been in existence for centuries, complete with urban settlement, advanced architecture, elaborate art, and complex political organizations. Africans were already involved in extensive trade networks throughout the continent. Increased trade with Europeans expanded networks that were already in place, including those that pertained to slavery.

2. The Role of Slavery in History

The institution of slavery is not a recent phenomenon. Most civilizations have practiced some form of human bondage and servitude, and African empires were no different. Famine or fear of stronger enemies might force one tribe to ask another for help and to give themselves in a type of bondage in exchange. Prisoners of war between rival empires or tribes might be enslaved. Similar to the European serf system, those seeking protection or relief from starvation could become the servants of those who provided relief. Debt might also be worked off through a form of servitude.

In contrast to the system of slavery that later developed in the Atlantic World, slavery in western and central parts of Africa was often a temporary condition. Enslaved people had a greater chance of being freed within their lifetime. Moreover, an enslaved person was not necessarily permanently removed or separated from their biological family or original community. Even so, these servants typically became a part of the extended tribal family, or kinship group, in which they were enslaved.

There is some evidence in the Nile Valley of the practice of chattel slavery, in which people are treated as personal property to be bought and sold. It appears there was a route for the trade of enslaved people through the Sahara that brought sub-Saharan Africans to Rome, which had enslaved people from all over the world.

TERM TO KNOW

Chattel Slavery

A form of involuntary servitude where a person is owned as property.



Traders With a Group of Enslaved Africans: Muslim traders brought enslaved people to the North African coast, where they would be sent to Europe or other parts of Africa.

As Islam spread across North and West Africa, Muslims utilized these trade networks and enslaved not only Africans but also Europeans, especially from Spain, Sicily, and Italy. Generally, religion was a defining feature of the Arab slave trade, as Islam did not permit enslaving other Muslims. Male captives were forced to build coastal fortifications and serve as galley workers. Women were added to the harem.

3. The Beginnings of Racial Slavery

The major European slave trade began with Portugal's exploration of the west coast of Africa in search of a trade route to the East. By 1444, the Portuguese made use of existing inland trade networks to bring enslaved Africans to work on the sugar plantations of the Madeira Islands, off the coast of modern Morocco. The Portuguese also began exporting people to other European nations. Historians believe that by the year 1500, 10% of the population of Lisbon and Seville consisted of enslaved Africans. Because of the influence of the Catholic Church, which frowned on the enslavement of Christians, European traders further expanded their reach down the coast of Africa.

In 1482, Portuguese traders built Elmina Castle (also called São Jorge da Mina, or Saint George of the Mine Castle) in present-day Ghana, on the western coast of Africa.



Elmina Castle on the western coast of Ghana was used as a holding pen for kidnapped men, women, and children before they were forcibly carried across the Atlantic and sold. Originally built as a fortified trading post by the Portuguese in the 15th century, it appears in this image as it was in the 1660s, after being seized by the Dutch in 1637.

The Portuguese originally used the fort for trading gold, but by the early 1500s, they shifted their focus. The fort's dungeon became a holding pen for Africans from the interior of the continent, while Portuguese traders ate, slept, and prayed in a chapel on the fort's upper floors. Enslaved people were held in the dungeon for weeks or months until ships arrived to transport them to Europe or the Americas.

The Atlantic slave trade expanded greatly in tandem with the growth of European colonies in the Americas. These colonies demanded an ever-increasing number of workers for the extensive plantations growing tobacco, sugar, and eventually rice and cotton. Most Spanish and Portuguese settlers in the New World were gentlemen who did not perform physical labor. They came to "serve God, but also to get rich," as noted by Bernal Díaz del Castillo. However, Native Americans tended to sicken and die from disease, so the indigenous peoples proved not to be a dependable source of labor for the Europeans. Bartolomé de Las Casas suggested that the Spanish forcibly send African laborers to the New World for fear that indigenous populations would go extinct.

Thus, a new form of slavery defined by race developed in the Atlantic World, propelled by a complex interplay of economic, political, and social forces.

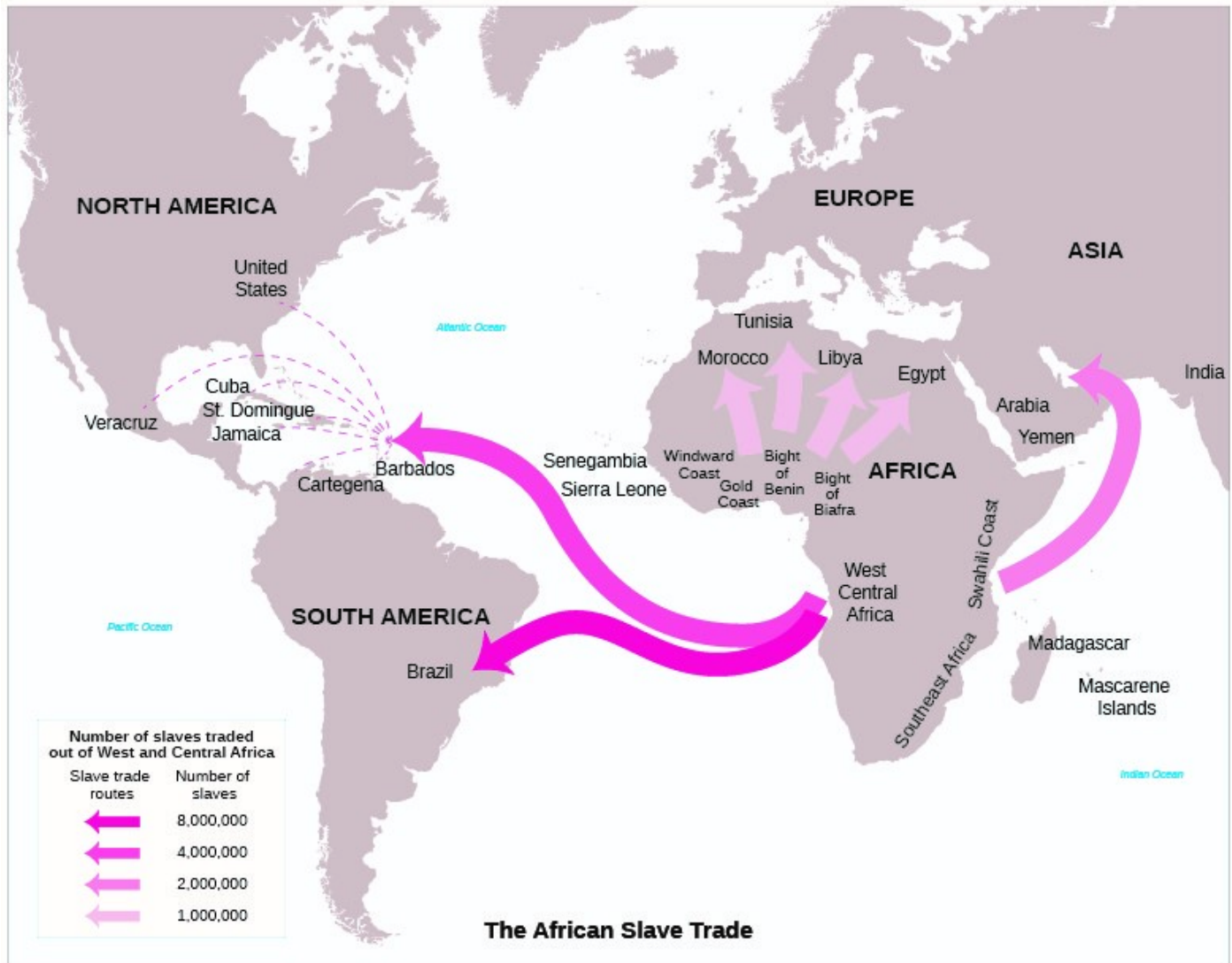
TERM TO KNOW

Racial Slavery

A form of involuntary servitude associated with race, where a person is owned as property because of outward appearances, such as skin color.

By the 1600s, the introduction of grueling labor-intensive crops like sugar, coffee, tobacco, and rice in the New World drove an insatiable demand for a massive labor force that could produce these profitable commodities. European monarchs distributed enormous land grants to entice settlement in the Americas, and European settlers and merchants established large plantations in the Caribbean and elsewhere. The success of these plantations depended upon the availability of a permanent, plentiful, and skilled labor supply. As Africans were already familiar with animal husbandry as well as farming, were less susceptible to diseases that ravaged Native peoples, and could be supplied by existing trade networks, Europeans viewed them as the solution to this need. Over time, racism and racial stereotypes developed that enabled Europeans to continue to justify their exploitation of Africans and people of African descent.

All of these factors contributed to the creation of a race-based system of slavery in the Americas unlike any form of human bondage that had come before. Whereas in Africa permanent, inherited slavery was unknown, and children of those bound in slavery usually were free and intermarried with their captors, this changed in the Americas; slavery became permanent, and children born to enslaved people became enslaved as well. This development, along with slavery's identification with race and its distinctly economic purpose, forever changed the institution and shaped its unique character in the New World.



The map shows the routes that were used in the course of the African slave trade and the number of enslaved people who traveled each route. As the map indicates, most enslaved Africans were bound for Brazil and the Caribbean. While West Africans made up the vast majority of the enslaved, the east coast of Africa also supplied people for the trade.



THINK ABOUT IT

How did the association of slavery with race change how the institution was practiced?



SUMMARY

In this tutorial, we discussed the role that slavery played in Africa and the Americas both prior to and after 1492. Before 1492, Africa, like the Americas, had experienced the rise and fall of many cultures, but the continent did not develop a centralized authority structure. African peoples practiced various forms of slavery, which differed significantly from the racial slavery that ultimately developed in the Atlantic World. After the arrival of Islam, but before the Portuguese came

to the coast of West Africa in 1444, Muslims controlled the trade of enslaved people out of Africa, which expanded as European powers began to colonize the New World. Driven by a demand for labor, slavery in the Americas developed a new form: it was based on race, and the status of enslaved people was both permanent and inherited.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Chattel Slavery

A form of involuntary servitude where a person is owned as property.

Racial Slavery

A form of involuntary servitude associated with race, where a person is owned as property because of outward appearances such as skin color.



DATES TO KNOW

632

Islam spreads out from the Arabian Peninsula into North Africa.

700–1200

The Ghana empire dominates the trans-Saharan trade.

900

Muslims increasingly control trade in northern Africa.

1200

Mali replaces Ghana as the leading state in West Africa, and its rulers convert to Islam.

1440

The Portuguese begin importing enslaved African people to their Atlantic islands to work on sugar plantations.

1482

Portuguese traders build Elmina Castle in present-day Ghana, which becomes an important trading post for the trade of enslaved people.

1500

The Songhay empire replaces Mali as the leading state in West Africa.