The Cruelest Commerce

Introduction

In a very real sense [slavery] began with Christopher Columbus's momentous voyages to the Americas. The first person of African descent to arrive, or the first for whom there is firm evidence, came in 1492 as a member of Columbus's crew. He was apparently a free man, probably a mulatto from Spain. In 1494, during Columbus's second expedition, at least two other blacks disembarked on the island of Hispaniola, where the Spaniards had established their first settlement.

There is no evidence to suggest that the Spaniards had planned to enslave Africans when they began to colonize the Caribbean. They intended to make the indigenous peoples they called Indians perform the manual labor they themselves disdained. But the Indian population declined precipitously as a result of mistreatment and epidemics of such diseases as smallpox, measles, and typhus, and the colonists had to look elsewhere for exploitable labor.

Slavery was not unfamiliar to the Spanish. They had long used slaves—Jews, Slavs, Africans, and other Spaniards—even though their body of laws that sanctioned slavery also held that it was "the most evil and the most despicable thing that can be found among men."

So it was that in 1501 the Spanish monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella granted permission to the colonists to import black slaves.

Section 1

From Hispaniola black slavery spread rapidly to the islands of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Jamaica, to the mainland colonies of Mexico and Peru, and then throughout Spanish America.

In 1619 a Dutch "man of warre" brought "20 and odd" blacks to ease a labor shortage in Jamestown, Virginia, inaugurating the use of black coerced workers in England's mainland colonies. Illness and inadequate diet had weakened many Jamestown settlers, although, as founder John Smith wrote, some given to sloth and idleness "never did know what a dayes worke was."

We can never be certain of the total number of Africans who arrived in the Americas as slaves. Scholarly estimates today range from 10 to 12 million. Countless others died on the African coast awaiting shipment or perished during the Atlantic passage. Of the survivors, most—about 95 percent—went to the Caribbean and Latin America. (map)

Portugal's Brazil received the largest share of Africa's children, perhaps five million, the Spanish colonies about two million. Most of the remainder went to British, French, Dutch, and Danish colonies in the Caribbean. Only about 500,000 slaves were delivered to the mainland north of Spanish Florida. Although the slave population of the United States numbered four million in 1860, most of these persons were American born. Spared the full impact of diseases that devastated slaves in the tropics, the North American slave population was able to stabilize and reproduce itself naturally from the early decades of the 18th century.

The colonists became more active in the trade as the demand for labor grew along with the plantation economies of the Americas. Accordingly, the years from 1740 to 1810 represented the heyday of the trade, when an annual average of about 60,000 slaves were delivered to the Americas.

To facilitate trade, forts were established along the West African coast. The Gold Coast (contemporary Ghana) saw construction of more than 50 such posts along 300 miles of coastline.

The larger forts were called castles. Among the best known, Elmina Castle in Ghana was built by the Portuguese in 1482 but fell to the Dutch in 1637. Cape Coast Castle, begun by the Swedes in 1653, was later held by the dey, or ruler, of the Fetu people; it was acquired by the Dutch in 1664 and by the English in 1665. This castle could accommodate more than a thousand slaves.

The forts included the residences and offices for the white traders, warehouses for the trade goods, and the quarters for the slaves. Traders built these forts with the permission of the local ruler and paid rent for the privilege. They had to be repeatedly defended from assaults by other Europeans and Africans as well.

When visiting the surviving forts, I could barely suppress my profound anguish. The massive structures attract even as they repel. As one enters these monuments of doom, with their thick walls and austere rooms that now lie empty, one can still hear the cries of the enslaved, punctuated by the sounds of the angry waves crashing against the shore.

The damp dark dungeons where the captives were imprisoned, chained and fearful, lying in their own excrement, still assault the sensibilities. Narrow tunnels from the dungeons to the waiting ships remain as terrifying today as they must have been for those who passed through them to begin their journey of no return. The tears flow as freely as one descends into these hells, and the gasps of the visitors remind us that the trauma of the trade has not yet been spent.

Section 2

Traders on the African coast acquired their slaves in various ways. Most of them, perhaps as many as 80 percent, were captives taken in wars. African states fought frequently over territory, succession, and commerce. Some nations, such as the Asante, extended their power over neighboring states on the Gold Coast during the 18th century and took captives in the process. As one trader observed, "Most of the Slaves that are offered to us are Prisoners of War, which are sold by the Victors as their Booty."

Others likely to be sold into slavery included debtors and those convicted of such crimes as homicide, treason, and theft. Still others were simply unfortunate enough to be abducted and swiftly sold to traders. Individuals who engaged in this practice faced severe penalties from their own people if they were caught, since their atrocities could lead to war between the victim's home territory and that of the kidnapper. "Not

a few in our Country fondly imagine that Parents here sell their Children, Men their wives, and one Brother the other," wrote a Dutch trader. "But," he added, "those who think so deceive themselves."

Most of the persons placed on the slave market were men. Women and young children were less likely to be offered for sale. Females were highly valued as workers in African societies; they bore the brunt of the productive labor as well as fulfilling reproductive functions.

African traders brought their slaves to the coastal markets fettered in groups, or coffles. As one purchaser in the Gambia described it, "Their Way of bringing them is, tying them by the Neck with Leather Thongs, at about a Yard distance from each other, 30 or 40 in a String, having generally a Bundle of Corn, or and Elephant's Tooth (tusk) upon each of their Heads. In their Way from the Mountains, they travel thro' very great Woods, where they cannot for some days get Water, so they carry in Skin-Bags enough to support them for that Time." Some caravans thus brought "150 slaves plus gold and teeth."

In general the Africans who came to the Americas lived in the area between modern Senegal and Angola. In addition, some slaves came from Mozambique and, to a lesser extent, Madagascar.

A significant number hailed from the Senegambia; they were such peoples as the Wolof, the Mandinka, and the Bambara. Many more came from Sierra Leone and from the Gold Coast, home to the Akan and Fetu peoples, among others. Another important supply area encompassed the Bights of Benin and Biafra, a region that now includes the nations of Togo, Benin, Nigeria, and Cameroon. Major groups in this area included the Fon, the Yoruba, and the Ibo. The Congo-Angola region, represented by such peoples as the Bakongo and the Mbundu, supplied the greatest number of slaves to the Americas as a whole.

Today descendants of these slaves find it almost impossible to trace their lineage to any specific ethnic group. A remarkable—and controversial—exception was the late author Alex Haley, who apparently managed to link genealogical oral history on both sides of the Atlantic to track down an ancestor captured by slavers—a Mandinka from the Gambia—for his book *Roots*.

For the most part, however, adequate records simply do not exist. Slave traders invariably noted the geographic area from which the slaves were taken, such as "Congo" or "Angola," but seldom identified their ethnic backgrounds. The slaves were also renamed by their purchasers, complicating any genealogical search. Thus, their descendants, such as I, will peer in vain into a thousand faces in Africa for some glimmer of familial recognition, some point of ancestral connection. They and I will never know the liberating ecstasy of discovering what soil our ancestors walked, what ethnic group commanded their fealty, what cultural moorings gave meaning to their lives. That is unknowable.

Once the captives arrived at the coast, they were carefully examined by the prospective purchasers. As one trader expressed it, "The Countenance, and Stature, a good Set of Teeth, Pliancy in their Limbs and Joints, and being free of Venereal Taint, are the things inspected and governs our choice in buying." The enslaved person was branded with the purchaser's mark on the shoulder, the breast, or the buttocks.

The price of slaves followed the law of supply and demand. With the growth of the slave-based plantation economies in the West Indies, Brazil, and mainland North America from about the second half of the 17th century, prices rose rapidly. A large number of independent traders entered the market. Their competition in acquiring slaves contributed to the price increase.

Section 3

Slaves were held at the coastal forts until traders acquired full cargoes for the ships. The dismal wait could be long or short, depending on supply conditions. If wars were being fought in the interior, a flow of captives could be anticipated. As a white trader at Cape Coast Castle noted with satisfaction in 1712, "The battle is expected shortly, after which 'tis hoped the trade will flourish."

The many captives who died on the coast as they awaited departure fell victim to a variety of diseases and to infection of wounds suffered during their capture and branding. The damp dungeons in which they were kept certainly contributed to the high mortality.

The prisoners knew nothing of their destination or their ultimate fate. English trader William Snelgrave wrote that "these poor People are generally under terrible Apprehensions. . . many being afraid that we design to eat them."

As they waited, the slaves must have been racked by emotions—fear, anger, disbelief, defiance, resignation—each exacting a price. Yet, as their subsequent behavior would show, many also found an inner resolve not to be vanquished, not to yield control over one's inner sanctuary to one's captors.

Dr. Thomas Trotter, a ship's surgeon who watched the slaves being brought aboard, reported that they "show signs of extreme distress and despair from a feeling of their situation and regret at being torn from their friends and connections." Traders described their haunting moans as the ship began its journey into the unknown.

The Atlantic Passage tested bodies and souls to their limits. The human cargoes were arranged on wooden platforms "like books on a shelf" on various levels in the cramped hold. Rarely was there space for an adult to stand erect. Some had barely enough room to lie down. One ship's surgeon observed that the traders "wedged them in so that they had not so much room as a man in his coffin either in length nor breadth. It was impossible for them to turn or shift with any degree of ease."

Fearing rebellion, ships' crews generally chained the slaves securely in the hold, usually in pairs,

the right ankle of one connected to the left ankle of the other. James Penny, who commanded trading vessels for more than 20 years, recounted that when no danger "is apprehended, their fetters are by degrees taken off."

The crews did not always depend on harsh discipline, shackles, and whips to control the slaves. The more humane captains permitted music and drumbeating and encouraged singing and dancing. On the better-managed vessels, rum was provided as well as pipes and tobacco. Women were given beads and other trifles with which to adorn themselves. Contented slaves, it was presumed, would be more tractable.

With so many bodies closely packed together, the heat below-decks became unbearable. The air reeked of excrement and infected sores. By the 18th century, ships customarily had portholes to aid ventilation, "windsails to throw down a current of air and gratings on the decks." But to the human cargo the hold remained a fetid hell.

As an aid to good health, slaves were periodically taken on deck for exercise and fresh air. While they were being "danced" on deck, the crew cleaned and disinfected their quarters with vinegar. Although exercise helped, many still contracted disease during the passage. Measles, scurvy, and various "fevers" attacked slaves and crew alike. Many were sick before they embarked for the Americas. Some traders shipped slaves known to be carrying contagion. In 1726 two vessels—the *Sea Horse* and the *St. Michael*—lost more than 600 of the 1,030 slaves they carried from Madagascar to Cartagena.

Smallpox and the "bloody flux" (dysentery) were particularly feared; both created untold suffering. The *Katherine* brought "470 slaves in a miserable condition" to Barbados in 1708, the result of smallpox and "a tedious passage." In 1716, the *Indian Queen* had a disastrous voyage to Buenos Aires. It lost 140 slaves—almost half its cargo—to smallpox and delivered 88 others infected with the disease.

The construction of faster ships in the 18th century reduced the death rate. The slaves most likely received better medical care by then, and diet and sanitary conditions may have improved. In general, mortality declined from about 25 percent in the 17th and early 18th centuries to about 15 percent after 1730. By the 19th century the range was between 5 and 10 percent.

Section 4

In affirmation of their humanity, many of the captives struggled to liberate themselves from the moment of capture. Their best chance for escape was while they were still on African soil or aboard the ships on the coast, thus crews took elaborate precautions.

Thomas Phillips, who made a slaving voyage in 1693-94, reported that armed men guarded the vessels and there was "a chest full of small arms, ready loaden and prim'd, constantly lying at hand upon the quarter-deck, together with some Granada shells; and two of our quarter-deck guns, pointing on the deck thence, and two more out of the steerage."

Still, rebellions occurred. At least one indomitable African left his own tragic mark on the history of the time. In 1721 Captain Tomba, a remarkable man "of a tall, strong Make, and bold, stern aspect," was the leader of a few villages in Sierra Leone that refused to deal with slave traders. Tomba and his people killed other Africans and burned their houses because they had traded with the English.

Aided by villagers, a white trader known as Old Cracker ambushed and captured Tomba, but not before Tomba had killed two of his assailants in a fierce struggle.

Seemingly nothing could break Tomba's spirit. When Old Cracker presented him for inspection to the traders, Tomba refused to display his physique. Whipped nearly to death, the proud African endured the beating stoically, only "shedding a Tear or two, which he endeavored to hide as tho' ashamed of."

Captain Harding, commander of the *Robert*, out of Bristol, purchased Tomba. Once aboard the ship, Tomba conspired with a few other slaves, one of them a woman, to kill the crew and escape "while they had a Shore to fly to." With the woman and another man at his side, Tomba smashed the heads of three sleeping guards with a hammer before being felled himself. The three rebels were clapped in irons.

Normally, rebellious slaves, particularly at the start of a voyage, could expect the death penalty as a harsh example to others. But Captain Harding, his owner, considered Tomba and the other man too valuable to kill. Rather, he had them whipped. He vented his fury on the other, more expendable conspirators.

One man was put to death, and two others were coerced into eating the first victim's heart and liver before they too were killed. The ultimate cruelty was reserved for the woman. She was hoisted by the thumbs, whipped, and slashed with knives until she died. The rest of the slaves were forced to watch the entire ordeal. Unfortunately, we do not know how Captain Harding eventually disposed of Tomba. He may have ended up in any one of the colonies.

So Africans arrived in the Americas, to be sold yet again, to end up in the cane fields of the Caribbean and northeastern Brazil, the tobacco cultivations of Virginia, the rice fields of South Carolina, and households everywhere.

Many slaves rejected their condition, continuing a struggle that had begun on the African coast. Some resisted passively, malingering, pretending not to understand the masters' orders, deliberately breaking tools, or feigning illness. Others, in a long history of violent protest, chose open revolt.

The first recorded slave rebellion in the Americas, on the island of Hispaniola in 1522, was suppressed. Other major conspiracies occurred in Mexico in 1608 and again in 1612.

Jamaica experienced a major rebellion in 1673, when 200 slaves rose and killed 12 whites. Uprisings were planned in Barbados and Antigua. Slaves in New York rebelled in 1712, killing nine whites. The authorities responded by executing 21 blacks, burning some to death, hanging others, and breaking one at the wheel. South Carolina's blacks

posed several violent challenges, most notably in 1739, when they rebelled at Stono, killing whites and setting fire to their houses. The last major rebellion in the United States was led in 1831 by a charismatic slave preacher, Nat Turner, who was hanged after his band of rebels had killed some 55 whites in southeastern Virginia.

Among all such efforts, however, only the slaves of Haiti managed to fight their way to freedom, after a protracted struggle that ended in 1804. While rebellions largely failed, escapes at times succeeded. Known variously as Maroons, Cimarrons, or Bush Negroes, fugitives established free settlements in remote and inaccessible areas in a number of countries.

In North America they found haven in the Great Dismal Swamp in Virginia and North Carolina and in mountainous and swampy locations throughout the Deep South. As early as 1605 Brazilian runaway slaves established a series of settlements in Pernambuco in the northeast. Known collectively as Palmares or Little Angola, the community may have numbered as many as 20,000 at its peak. It was eventually destroyed by the Portuguese.

Jamaican Maroons—the word comes from the Spanish *cimarron*, or runaway—bedeviled the English until peace treaties between their leaders and colonial authorities were signed in 1739 and later. Contemporary Maroon villages such as Moore Town and Accompong each year enthusiastically reenact the struggle against the slave regime.

Conclusion

As a people, black slaves drew upon their African heritage, their daily experience in the slave quarters, their interaction one with the other, and the physical landscape to create a series of vibrant cultures uniquely their own. The new cultures afforded slaves crucial psychological space and helped preserve their identity in the face of the abuse and atrocity visited on them as human property.

The richness of those cultures can be observed in the contemporary societies of the Americas. The Caribbean islands with their black majorities bear an unmistakable African imprint in their styles of religious expression, art, music, culinary habits, dance, and folk beliefs.

Brazil remains the country with the largest number of people of African descent in the Americas—probably as many as 70 million, or nearly half the population. Any visitor to its northeastern states will readily agree with the 17th-century priest Antonio Vieria that "Brazil has the body of America and the soul of Africa."

"Every Brazilian," said the late scholar Gilberto Freyre of his compatriots, "even the white with blond hair, carries in his soul, if not his body, the mark of the Negro. In all that is a sincere expression of life, we bear the unmistakable stamp of Negro influence."

The slave trade legally ended in the British Caribbean in 1807 and in the U.S. in 1808; Brazil enforced prohibition in the 1850s. Yet the trade lives on in the children of Africa found in the societies of the Americas today, sometimes representing the majority of the population.

Refusing to be defeated, these people and those before them have contributed their sweat, genes, and cultures to the making of their societies. Theirs is a poignant tale of the infinite capacity of the human spirit to confront and survive adversity.

The millions of blacks who continue to live quietly productive lives, weather life's storms, and seize its opportunities, provide ample evidence that the African peoples in these new lands were never vanquished. They, and all Africa's children, must draw strength from this history of travail, transcend its awful burden, and command the future.

Palmer, Colin. "African Slave Trade: The Cruelest Commerce." National Geographic Sept. 1992: 63-91.