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Africa's role in slavery

This is absolutely the best of times to talk about the African participation in slavery. This is absolutely the worst of times to talk about the African participation in slavery.

There is strong preference for uncomfortable truths about the matter to be kept out of sight. But this is a good time to undertake a disinterment.

The great early 20th-Century black writer of the Harlem Renaissance, Zora Neale Hurston, bitterly complained that "the white people held my people in slavery here in America. They had bought us, it is true, and exploited us.

But the inescapable fact that stuck in my craw was: My people had sold me My own people had exterminated whole nations and torn families apart for a profit before the strangers got their chance at a cut. It was a sobering thought. It impressed upon me the universal nature of greed." And we might add, the universal nature of slavery.

African kings were willing to provide a steady flow of captives, who they said were criminals or prisoners of war doomed for execution. Many were not, but this did not prevent traders posing as philanthropists who were rescuing the Africans from death and offering them a better and more productive life.

When France and Britain outlawed slavery in their territories in the early 19th Century, African chiefs who had grown rich and powerful off the slave trade sent protest delegations to Paris and London. Britain abolished the slave trade and slavery itself against fierce opposition from West African and Arab traders.

According to Basil Davidson, celebrated scholar of African history, in his book **The African Slave Trade**: "The notion that Europe altogether imposed the slave trade on Africa is without any foundation in history Those Africans who were involved in the trade were seldom the helpless victims of a commerce they did not understand: On the contrary, they responded to its challenge. They exploited its opportunities."

Until the 18th Century, very few Europeans had any moral reservations about slavery, which contradicted no important social value for most people around the world. In the Arab world, which was the first to import large numbers of slaves from Africa, the slave traffic was cosmopolitan. Slaves of all types were sold in open bazaars. The Arabs played an important role as middlemen in the trans-atlantic slave trade, and research data suggest that between the 7th and the 19th centuries, they transported more than 14 million black slaves across the Sahara and the Red Sea, as many or more than were shipped to the Americas, depending on the estimates for the transatlantic slave trade.

Tunde Obadina, a director of Africa Business Information Services, has acknowledged the importance of Britain, and other Western countries, in ending the slave trade. "When Britain abolished the slave trade in 1807," he has written, "it not only had to contend with opposition from white slavers, but also from African rulers who had become accustomed to wealth gained from selling slaves or from taxes collected on slaves passed through their domain. African slave-trading classes were greatly distressed by the news that legislators sitting in Parliament in London had decided to end their source of livelihood. But for as long as there was demand from the Americas for slaves, the lucrative business continued."

"Slave trading for export," Obadina notes, only "ended in Nigeria and elsewhere in West Africa after slavery ended in the Spanish colonies of Brazil and Cuba in 1880. A consequence of the

ending of the slave trade was the expansion of domestic slavery as African businessmen replaced trade in human chattel with increased export of primary commodities. Labour was needed to cultivate the new source of wealth for the African elites. The ending of the obnoxious business had nothing to do with events in Africa. Rulers and traders there would have happily continued to sell humans for as long as there was demand for them."

Mali only legally abolished slavery in 1960 and hundreds of thousands of people are still enslaved there in 2015, despite the law.

As Thomas Sowell, a black conservative American scholar, has pointed out the efforts of the European nations to wipe out slavery have been virtually ignored. "Incredibly late in human history", he writes, "a mass moral revulsion finally set in against slavery - first in 18th-century England, and then during the 19th Century, throughout Western civilisation. But only in Western civilisation ... Africans, Arabs, and Asians continued to resist giving up their slaves. Only because Western power was at its peak in the 19th Century was Western imperialism able to impose the abolition of slavery around the world - as it imposed the rest of its beliefs and agendas, for good or evil."

The resistance put up by Africans, Asians and Arabs was monumental in defence of slavery and lasted for more than a century, Sowell writes. Only the overwhelming military power of the West enabled it to prevail on this issue, and only the moral outrage of Western peoples kept their Government's feet to the fire politically to maintain the pressure against slavery around the world.

Ghanaian politician and educator Samuel Sulemana Fuseini has acknowledged that his Asante ancestors accumulated their great wealth by abducting, capturing, and kidnapping Africans and selling them as slaves.

Ghanaian diplomat Kofi Awoonor has also written: "I believe there is a great psychic shadow over Africa, and it has much to do with our guilt and denial of our role in the slave trade. We, too, are blameworthy in what was essentially one of the most heinous crimes in human history."

In 2000, at an observance attended by delegates from several European countries and the United States, officials from Benin publicised President Mathieu Kerekou's apology for his country's role in "selling fellow Africans by the millions to white slave traders".

"We cry for forgiveness and reconciliation," said Luc Gnacadja, Benin's minister of environment and housing.

Cyrille Oguin, Benin's ambassador to the United States, acknowledged: "We share in the responsibility for this terrible human tragedy."

A year later, the president of Senegal, Abdoulaye Wade, who is himself the descendant of generations of slave-owning and slave-trading African kings, urged Europeans, Americans, and Africans to acknowledge publicly and teach openly about their shared responsibility for the Atlantic slave trade. Wade's remarks came shortly after the release of "the first African film to look at African involvement in the slave trade with the West" by Ivory Coast director Roger Gnoan M'bala.

"It's up to us," M'Bala declared, "to talk about slavery, open the wounds of what we've always hidden and stop being puerile when we put responsibility on others"

"In our own oral tradition, slavery is left out purposefully because Africans are ashamed when we confront slavery. Let's wake up and look at ourselves through our own image."

But African slaveholders and slave traders didn't think of themselves or their slaves as 'Africans'. Instead, they thought of themselves in tribal terms and their slaves as foreigners or inferiors.

What William Wilberforce and other abolitionists vanquished, one writer explains, was something even worse than slavery, something that was much more fundamental and could hardly be seen from where we stand today: They vanquished the very mindset that made slavery acceptable and allowed it to survive and thrive for millennia. They destroyed an entire way of seeing the world, one that had held sway from the beginning of history, and replaced it with another way of seeing the world.

Thomas Sowell notes that "the anti-slavery movement was spearheaded by people who would today be called "the religious Right" and its organisation was created by conservative businessmen. "Moreover, what destroyed slavery in the non-Western world was Western imperialism," he argues. "Nothing could be more jolting and discordant with the vision of today's intellectuals than the fact that it was businessmen, devout religious leaders and Western imperialists who together destroyed slavery around the world. And if it doesn't fit their vision, it is the same to them as if it never happened."

I am particularly indebted to the very politically incorrect work of Thomas Sowell and to Dinesh D'Souza's now famous 20-year old Policy Review essay, 'We the Slave Owners', for information on this horrible subject of slavery and African participation in it. But many other sources are freely available on the Web which I have tapped for this piece and which can be easily checked, if prejudice against these uncomfortable truths does not provoke a boycott.

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