

Slavery

(Traditions & Encounters: A Global Perspective on the Past, 2006, pages 706-710)

- As in other societies, most slaves in Central Africa came from the ranks of war captives, although criminals and individuals expelled from their clans often fell into slavery.
- Once enslaved, an individual had no personal or civil rights. Owners could order slaves to perform any kind of work, punish them at will, and sell them as chattel.
- African slaves usually worked as cultivators in societies far from their homes, although some worked as administrators, soldiers, or even highly placed advisors.
- Law and society often made African slavery different from bondage in Europe, Asia and other lands. African law vested ownership of land in communities. Thus, wealth and power in Africa came not from the possession of land but, rather, from control over the human labour that made the land productive. Slaves were a form of private investment – a means of measuring wealth. Those who controlled large numbers of individuals were able to harvest more crops and accumulate more wealth than others. Africans routinely purchased slaves to enlarge their families and enhance their power. Often they assimilated slaves into their kinship (family) groups so that within a generation a slave might obtain both freedom and an honourable position in a new family or clan.

How does this concept of ownership differ from a European world view?

How would a European's concept of ownership change the relationships described above?

- By the time Europeans ventured to sub-Saharan Africa in the 15th and 16th centuries, traffic in slaves was a well-established feature of African society (During the previous centuries the Islamic slave trade – which last until the 20th century - saw the capture of as many as ten million Africans).



Figure 10.1. Slave-trade regions of Africa. Map by Claudia Walters

- Europeans tapped into the slave market during the 15th century, expanding it dramatically (the Portuguese used slaves to develop their colonial empire – their population was far too small to do this on their own).
 - During the late 15th and early 16th century 2000 slaves left Africa annually.
 - By the 17th century this number had risen to 20,000 per year.
 - By the 18th century 55,000 Africans were being violently moved to the Americas. In 1780 the number hit 88,000 per year – in a few individual years the number exceeded 100,000.
 - All told, 12 million Africans were captured and enslaved. 4 million or more died resisting seizure or during captivity (before arriving at their intended destination).
 - Approximately 2/3 of all explored slaves were males.
- Following the establishment of the Spanish Empire in the Americas (and the decimation of the Indigenous Populations through disease and violence), slaves were being imported (the first captives arriving in 1518).
- By the 17th century the English had introduced slaves to their colonies in North America.

Explain this chart:

World Population Growth 1700-1900

Regions (in millions)	1700	1800	1900
Asia	436	646	902
Europe	125	195	422
Africa	106	101	118
North America	2	5	90
Central and South America	10	19	75
Oceania	3	2	6
World Total	682	968	1613

Source: Population et société, n°394, octobre 2003