

Slavery and Imperialism Reach Terrible New Heights in Africa

By Big History Project 06/14/2016

<https://newsela.com/read/BHP-10-africa-slavery/id/9608/>

A European colonizer is carried in a hammock by four African porters.



Slavery and imperialism had been around since the beginning of agrarian civilizations. However, the unification of the world zones brought them to terrible new heights.

Unification and global history

Ever since agriculture began 10,000 years ago, human history has played out in isolated world zones. Even though they had no contact, they followed a similar pattern. The transitions from agriculture, to small states, to large empires, happened separately for any region: Europe, the Middle East, East Asia, or Africa. But they all happened in about the same order. Only the details are different.

After about 1500 CE, however, things change. It then becomes increasingly difficult to discuss the history of one region in isolation from the rest of the world. The unification of the world zones led to an overlap of major events around the world. This overlap makes it difficult to understand the history of just one region. We now must know the history of others at the same time. This is true when it comes to studying the history of sub-Saharan Africa after 1500.

So far in our tale, sub-Saharan Africa was not “disadvantaged.” In the first millennium CE, West and East Africa’s empires were thriving. Technology was gradually improving. Africa was steadily tapping into the flow of world trade. As a result, its social hierarchies were becoming increasingly complex. African armies in this time were strong. They could defend themselves against other world powers.

Two phenomena changed all that for sub-Saharan Africa. The first was slavery. The second occurred later, it was the birth of industry.

Trans-Atlantic slavery

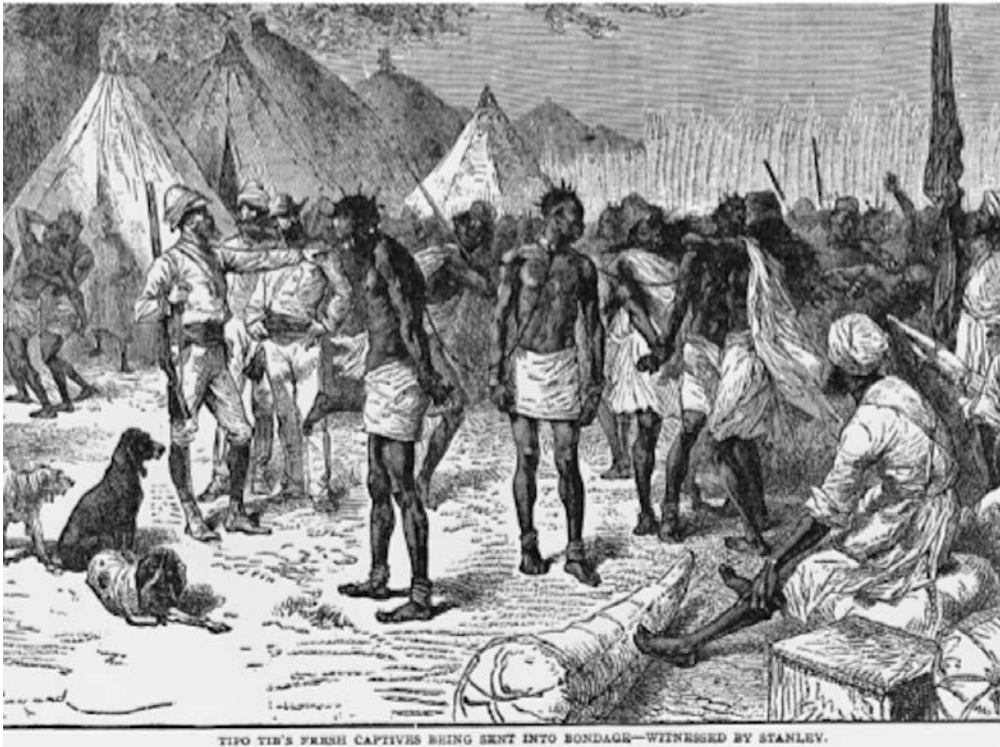
The slave trade came about because of the unification of the world zones. When we talk about slavery, we mean coerced labor. It is about as old as agrarian states. It might even be older. For example, the Romans had slaves. In the middle ages they became “serfs.” These unfree peasants lived lives that were little better than slaves. Even the word “servant” comes from the Latin word for “slave.” In medieval and early modern Europe, millions of servants were earning poor wages. In ancient and medieval Africa, it was common for people to be enslaved by an enemy kingdom when they were captured in war. In the 1400s, the Portuguese began trading with sub-Saharan Africa. It was no surprise that they were sold African prisoners of war as slave labor.

Yet the Atlantic slave trade might not have grown so widely had the Europeans not begun unifying the world zones. They did it by “discovering” and colonizing the Americas. Europe around 1500 was full of poor laborers. They did all sorts of unpleasant and back-breaking tasks. Work was hard and wages were low. There was no room there for a huge amount of slave labor. In the Americas, it was a different story. There was money to be made. The Americas had cotton, sugar, and tobacco to be grown. Silver and other mineral resources could be mined. But doing this work is extremely unpleasant. Europeans might be willing to work unpleasant jobs at home to survive. But would they travel across the world to do an equally hard job? No, Europeans preferred to stay home. So European immigrants were not an option. The owners of mines and plantations faced a labor shortage. The Europeans tried enslaving the natives of South America. However, they often died of European diseases. If the natives survived, they could escape easily. They still knew the countryside and could hide easily.

And so began the inhumane practice of transporting millions of unwilling Africans to brutal lives of slavery. The first African slaves were prisoners of war in the 1400s. But the situation soon deteriorated. The demand for more slaves was growing monstrously large. Every day, citizens were being kidnapped, sold, and shipped across the Atlantic at an alarming rate. Farmers, bureaucrats, even members of African aristocracy were disappearing. Slavery was an ancient practice. All agrarian civilizations in history enslaved to some degree. But the unification of world zones expanded it to never-before-seen levels.

The Atlantic slave trade was not just about getting labor from prisoners of war or from the lowest classes. African society was robbed of its members from all levels. Sub-Saharan Africa’s ability to innovate via collective learning was deeply hurt by this robbery. It also robbed the world of African innovations. Educated members of society had their knowledge cast aside. Their roles in life were reduced to manual labor when they were enslaved. Entire generations of their descendants were kept ignorant on purpose. They were kept ignorant in order to keep them in chains. Millions of people who could have become innovators over several centuries in the Americas were not granted the opportunity to invent. There was no possibility of them contributing their innovations to the human pool of learning. They were instead forced to toil in the fields or at housework and

nothing more. The slave trade did not just rob Africa. It robbed the entire world of collective learning. Who even knows what was lost?



Slave traders capture African villagers to be sold into slavery in the Americas.

Even worse, the Atlantic slave trade associated the idea of slavery with race. Compare this with the slavery of Rome or of the Kingdom of Kongo. In those societies prisoners of war and people of all origins and ethnicities became slaves. Yet the Atlantic slave trade was different. Many Europeans believed that the Africans were “inferior.” They believed this because Africa seemed so very far behind the agrarian civilizations of

Europe. It became a common justification for treating these human beings like animals. By the mid 1800s, a form of scientific racism spread. Racist scientists put forward the idea that Africans were a separate species.

Slavery had been in Africa for thousands of years. A slave trade across the Sahara had existed for centuries. But the discovery of the Americas brought a new element. Now the Europeans wanted to develop large areas there. Without the Americas to develop, there would have been no labor shortage. It was the unification of the world zones that resulted in millions of Africans dying on the journey across the Atlantic. It was the unification of the world zones that led to enslavement of generations of human beings. It continued later as discrimination against them because of the shade of their skin.

Industry and imperial Africa

The history of any region after 1500 cannot be studied on its own. Such is the case with the second great blow to Africa: European industry and imperialism. Europe's imperial domination of Africa reached its height in the late 1800s. It was around the time Europe went through the Industrial Revolution. It was true that sub-

Saharan Africa had been “behind” other world regions in its development of agriculture and states. But it had suffered no major disadvantage by lagging behind. Then came the appearance of the Industrial Revolution. Suddenly Africa (and much elsewhere in the world) were put at an extreme disadvantage. The power politics of the globe changed overnight.

European states were already in Africa after 1500. They had held trading posts, coastal territories, and settlements. However, their total domination of sub-Saharan Africa came later. French and Spanish conquests were underway in Muslim Northwest Africa in the early 1800s. The Portuguese were active in Angola and Mozambique. The British and Dutch-speaking Boers established themselves in South Africa. But the takeover of most territory by Europeans only happened in the late 1800s. This takeover became known as the “Scramble for Africa.”

Industrial production started in Britain in the 1700s. It represents a major leap in the power of a society. British industrialization began around 1750. Britain had a major head start in industrialization. It was well ahead of the rest of Europe and the United States. They only began to catch up in the mid-1800s. This was one of the reasons why the small island of Britain was the world’s richest and most powerful country for much of the 1800s. In the mid-1800s, places like France and the Germanic states started catching up.

The “scramble” for imperial domination began in 1884. European states gathered at the Berlin Conference to divide up Africa. The Europeans were able to take over many regions of Africa for one major reason. The majority of the world, including Africa, was still made up of agrarian civilizations. Britain's actions were particularly interesting. Only after it was starting to lose its industrial edge against other European powers and the United States, did it make aggressive attempts to control more of Africa.

West and East Africa both had long-standing agrarian civilizations. Central and South Africa were just beginning to develop states from 1000 to 1500. As such, in the 1800s almost all of Africa fell under European imperial rule. Two exceptions were Ethiopia and Liberia. Industrial Europe was able to create new inventions. The new inventions made Europeans more powerful. The European invaders found new defenses against previously devastating African diseases. They produced new military weapons like machine guns. In truth, industry is a relatively “recent” divergence between human societies. Only now is that gap rapidly being made up.

But in the 1800s, a small number of Europeans could dominate thousands of square miles in Africa and millions of people. Regions were not divided into African language or ethnic groups. Instead, territories were based on which European power dominated them. This had a ripple effect even after colonialism ended. The borders of African countries today still do not much reflect the cultures within them. They are still the lines

drawn by Europeans. One extreme case was Rwanda. Its borders placed two hostile ethnic groups within the same country. The result was war and genocide in the 1990s.

During the period of European imperialism, raw materials were exported from Africa. Local African economies were not able to develop. Regions were sapped of their wealth. More people became trapped in subsistence living. They had to scrape by day by day. In contrast, an economy with resources can offer new jobs. In this kind of economy, collective learning can bloom. In this way, European imperialism in Africa deprived the entire world of the collective learning of millions of Africans.



Two colonists examine the rubber collected by the workers on a plantation in French Central / Equatorial Africa.

Sub-Saharan Africa had agriculture and agrarian civilizations for thousands of years. Yet, it was again placed at a disadvantage to the rest of the world. It was the second time it had happened in a few centuries. Rising complexity was happening everywhere else. In all, however, the height of imperialism in Africa only lasted from the late-1800s to the mid-1900s.

The period of domination was just a few decades. It was not long compared to the centuries of the slave trade. Nevertheless, the legacy of European colonialism echoes into Africa's troubles and challenges today. How Africa will recover and progress in the modern age is uncertain.

Future prospects?

From a Big History perspective, sub-Saharan Africa's misfortunes are "recent." They are much more recent than the long period where Africa played a large role in the "rise of human complexity." The first humans came from Africa. For thousands of years, we foraged there. Sub-Saharan Africa independently developed agriculture and spread it across the entire continent. Very powerful states and kingdoms arose in East and West Africa. New ones were just starting to build strength in Central and South Africa as well. For thousands of years, sub-Saharan Africa was at the forefront of rising complexity in human history.

In contrast, the past several centuries since 1500 have been more painful. We do not yet know the long-term effects of the unification of world zones. Did it just cause temporary “growing pains”? Or did it mark the beginning of a long and terrible new trend? For thousands of years, Africa has been host to some of the most complex things: the human species, large brains capable of collective learning, the energy bonanza of agriculture, and the rise of powerful empires. The next few centuries will determine whether Africa plays a central role in the next great transformation of our narrative – the Anthropocene. Now, humans wield ever increasing control over the complexity of the Earth.

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A European colonizer is carried in a hammock by four African porters

A few hundred years ago, European countries began buying and stealing slaves from Africa. Millions were shipped across the world and forced to work under terrible conditions. Many died along the way.



Later, European countries began taking over large parts of Africa. Their domination of Africa and other parts of the world was called imperialism.

Today, the history of the slave trade and the history of imperialism haunt Africa like ghosts.

Ocean travel and trade

Humans started farming about 10,000 years ago. At that time, people in different parts of the world were more separated than they are today. They did not mix with people in other parts of the world.

Farming came about slightly earlier in some parts of the world, and slightly later in others. For example, people in Europe started farming a few thousand years before people in Africa.

Then, about 500 years ago, the whole world experienced an important change. It became easier to travel over the ocean to different parts of the world. People started to mix. Countries in different parts of the world began communicating and trading materials.

Life for the people of Africa would never be the same.

Millions are enslaved

The slave trade came about soon after. Slavery is as old as farming. It might even be older. For example, the Ancient Romans had slaves. In Africa, it was common for people to be enslaved by an enemy kingdom when they were captured in war.

The slave trade was something new, though. It caused the number of slaves in the world to rise sharply. It made slavery even more terrible than it was before.

In the 1400s, the Portuguese began trading with sub-Saharan Africa. It is made up of countries below the Saharan Desert in the North Africa. The Portuguese started to buy African prisoners of war as slaves. The modern slave trade began. From there, it quickly grew.

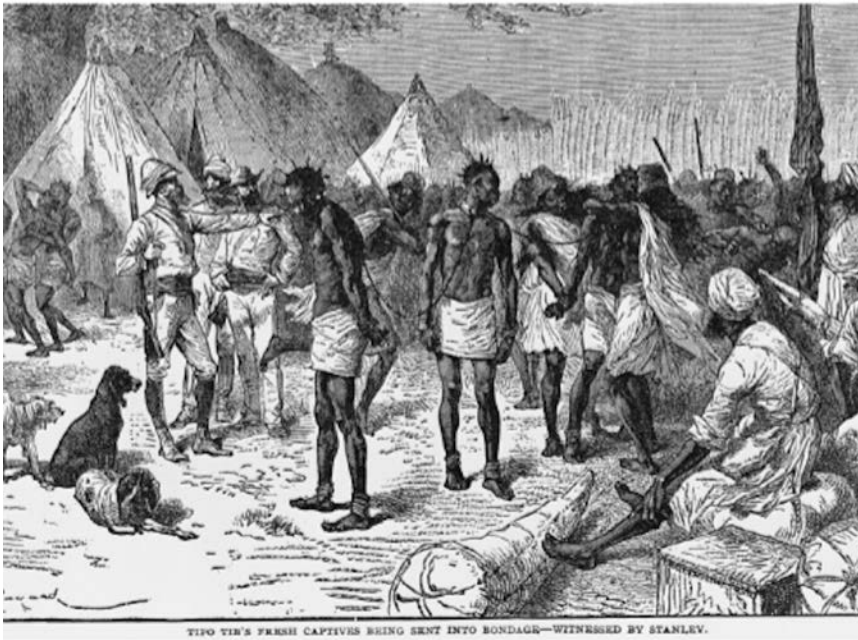
During this period, Europeans were traveling all over the world and taking new lands. They "discovered" and took over North and South America. In the Americas, there was plenty of land to use for farming. There was cotton, sugar, and tobacco to be grown. There was silver to be mined. Doing this work was going to be very difficult, though. The Europeans needed workers.

They decided to use African slaves. Because so many workers were needed, the slave trade got much bigger. Africans started being kidnapped by slave traders. They were sold and shipped across the Atlantic Ocean. Millions were enslaved.

As a result, African societies were robbed of many of their best people. It made it harder for these societies to grow and improve as time went on. Meanwhile, the slaves who were taken from Africa had their knowledge and skills cast aside. As slaves, they were not allowed to learn or think for themselves.

Racism and slavery

The slave trade robbed slaves of their freedom and robbed Africa of its people. It also robbed the entire world of learning and knowledge. Who knows what the millions of African slaves would have invented or created if they had been allowed to be free?



Slave traders capture African villagers to be sold into slavery in the Americas.

The slave trade was different than older forms of slavery in another way. It made slavery about race. Before the slave trade, people of all origins and ethnic groups could become slaves. Now, almost all of the slaves being traded were from Africa.

At the time, Europeans thought that Africans were racially worse than them. They believed this because Africa seemed to be "behind" European countries in their technology.

As the slave trade grew and slavery became more terrible, racism became even worse. Europeans believed that people from Africa were less than human. They used racism as an excuse to treat their slaves like animals.

Taking over Africa

Africa experienced another crime at the hands of European countries: imperialism. Imperialism was the spreading of Europe's power to other continents. A few small countries in Europe started to control most of the world.

This took place around the time Europe entered the Industrial Revolution. This was the transition to the age of machines. When Europe made this transition, Africa and the rest of the world were put at a disadvantage. They did not yet have the same technology. As a result, European nations became the most powerful countries almost overnight. With weapons like machine guns, their armies were unstoppable.

European countries wanted to rule Africa because it would bring them money and power. In 1884, they came together for a conference. They divided up Africa and made deals about who would rule which region. Their armies took over most of the continent within a few years. This became known as the "Scramble for Africa." Only two African countries, Ethiopia and Liberia, remained independent.

Imperialism destroyed African societies and re-drew the African map. Regions were not divided based on language or ethnic groups. Instead, they were based on which European power controlled them. This caused problems even after imperialism ended. The borders of African countries today are still not based on the cultures within them. They are the lines drawn by European invaders.

Imperialism also took wealth away from Africa. Raw materials were dug up and sent away. Africans were left with few ways to make money. Many became so poor that they could barely live.



Two colonists examine the rubber collected by the workers on a plantation in French Central / Equatorial Africa.

The height of imperialism in Africa only lasted from the late-1800s to the mid-1900s. It was just a few decades. Still, even today, Africa is still recovering from the damage that was done.

Future prospects?

Africa played a large role in human progress. The first humans came from Africa. Africans developed farming on their own and built powerful kingdoms.

The slave trade and imperialism, however, caused great suffering for the people of Africa. Today, African countries are still dealing with the effects.

