

Humanizing African History

Africa and the Atlantic World

[CASPER BADOVINAC]

The role of Africa in the Atlantic world has often been reduced and decentralized. Historical perspectives are often plagued by Eurocentric biases that would render Africans irrelevant in their own history, or distorted through a dependent lens that would paint them as passive victims of European domination. Neither of these views offer Africans much agency in their own narratives, nor do they allow much room for the complexity that often makes for much more accurate history. Scholars such as Thornton, Rodney, Lovejoy, and Knight have made efforts to refocus such a massive part of African history back on Africa. They renarrate the Atlantic World as one as much defined by African culture, politics, and economics as European influences. Through this restructuring, it is easier to understand many of the economic reasons behind African participation in the slave trade, and to understand the massive impacts Africans had on the Atlantic world whether free or enslaved. It's possible to achieve a much more nuanced understanding of the slave trade and its effects on African development by grounding in the economically secure but politically complex Africa that entered the Atlantic trade. From there, through diving into the impacts the Haitian revolution had on the Atlantic world, the immense contributions of free and enslaved Africans to Atlantic history can be further unraveled. This overarching narrative of African actors consistently shaping the course of history in the Atlantic world undermines historical depictions of European superiority and myths of 'backwards' and inferior African societies. Instead we see Africans as equal players in the global game, showing movement and initiative that would come to define the Atlantic world.

The Africa that entered into Atlantic trade was neither backwards or passive, but was instead economically and militarily secure. In this way it was not European domination that precipitated the expansion of the slave trade, but African and European actors seeking capital and political gains. From the begin-

ning, “African manufacturing was... quite capable of providing for the continent’s needs.¹ In fact Europeans “offered nothing to Africa that Africa didn’t already produce” while Europe who “could not afford to release the labor required to tap the Americas,” desperately needed African labor to achieve her goals.² While Africans desired European products as symbols of wealth, Europeans came to Africa with a desperation to encourage the export of slaves. Rather than a backwards society, Europe encountered a self-sufficient one, not only in the matter of imports and exports, but on a military front. The West African navy was “fully capable of protecting its own waters,” and in many cases European raiders met ample resistance or complete defeat when attempting to obtain slaves via kidnapping.³ The Europeans were strong-armed by this military opposition into meeting the Africans on their own trade terms for the labor force they so desperately needed. In response, Europeans needed to turn the tides of trade in their favor through less direct means.

In this period of warring conflict throughout Africa, Europeans positioned themselves to be beneficiaries of these wars as African warlords sought to build their own fortunes through Atlantic trade. Africa was defined by “communalism [which] meant political fragmentation” along much smaller fracture points than European feudalism-entering-capitalism.⁴ This incredibly diverse period of smaller ethnic-kinship groups fighting to centralize power resulted in many wars in Africa’s interior.⁵ Normally, even in a society set up to enslave those defeated, those enslaved would go on to bolster the economy of their conquerors. Even if traded to neighboring states, their labor would have put Africa as a whole in competition with Europe within capitalism over time. Instead, with captured slaves now being sold to Europe for short term economic gain, the long term security of Africa’s economic growth was at stake. No matter who won the Baule wars, no matter if England or Portugal ended up with the slaves post-trading, “Europe benefitted from whichever of the two nations won the conflict.”⁶ In this way, individual warlords trading for monetary gain and personal interests that would normally build centralized feudal states over time only served to benefit Europe economically.

It is important to note that this feudal warring behavior is the exact type of capital accumulation and centralization that served Europe in earlier periods. To avoid playing into the “backwards” myth, it is important to clarify it is not the

1 John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World 1400-1800*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 44.

2 Thornton, *Africa and Africans*, 44; Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (D.C.: Howard University Press, 1974), 78.

3 Thornton, *Africa and Africans*, 37.

4 Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, 79.

5 Paul Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 56, 58.

6 Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, 79.

African states warring nature and warlord's quest for personal gain that weaponized the slave trade against Africa. Instead the natural progression through Marx's economic stages of development is interrupted by the exporting of labor accrued by war to Europe. In Rodney's table on page 97, the stagnation of the African population is compared to the growth in population of Europe and Asia. By exporting the labor force that could have allowed them to compete in the capitalist arena on a global scale, Africa's development is not hindered by "inferiority" but by the continual robbing of the means of production. While the slave trade was only "one sector in a complex, internal, African trade," its continuation was the only aspect capable of undermining the economic stability of the rest.⁷

The question then rises, then why engage in it at all? The personal gain of merchants and warlords cannot be understated, and in many ways must be emphasized to avoid dehumanizing Africans as passive actors in their own history. However, this is coupled with a fundamentally different understanding of slavery than the chattel slavery that would result in the Americas from the Atlantic slave trade. Beyond the societal structures of kinship systems, this arose from an "African social system... not backwards or egalitarian but only legally divergent."⁸ The African legal system recognized slaves, and not land, as "the only form of private, revenue-producing property."⁹ From this distinction arises two separate ways of owning the means of production. In the European practice, wealth is derived from landholding. In the African practice, where landholding was corporate, slaves served as the accumulation of wealth, "and were the functional equivalents of free tenants and hired workers in Europe."¹⁰

It is in this legal and cultural difference, with slavery widely prevalent throughout Africa and structurally different, that African participation in the slave trade must be understood. As the main form of economic mobility in Africa, "when Europeans... offered to buy slaves, it is hardly surprising they were almost immediately accepted."¹¹ When this fundamentally different legal and economic structure is taken out of its African context and exported en masse to Europe and the Americas, the slave trade warps in Africa. Not because Africans were not economically successful, but rather because Europeans were not interested in participating in the same economic game. As Europeans gained ownership of two of the factors of production- labor and land- it became increasingly easier to maximize the wealth out of the Americas. As that labor was bought via completely culturally normative means in Africa and exported to a wholly different economic system, it drained the labor force that embodied African wealth. This would create a gap that would only continue to widen as the slave trade grew and European colonies used slave labor to bolster European wealth. Capital, which was "relatively

7 Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery*, 57.

8 Thornton, *Africa and Africans*, 76.

9 Thornton, *Africa and Africans*, 74.

10 Thornton, *Africa and Africans*, 87.

11 Thornton, *Africa and Africans*, 94.

unimportant before the Industrial Revolution” became yet another factor of production that was dominated by European ownership.¹² In the period leading to industrialization and colonial rule, African participation in the slave trade can be seen not as a result of European economic dominance, but rather a key factor in its development. In turn, the underdevelopment of Africa is not a base state of the continent but a direct result of European intervention.

Even within this context of industrialization and colonial rule, enslaved Africans’ contributions continue to shape the economic and political landscape of the Atlantic world. This can be illustrated in perhaps no clearer way than with the case of the Haitian revolution. Before Haiti, the Atlantic world was entrenched in the supremacist narratives that colonial rule and race based enslavement were the natural order. The reality of the Haitian Revolution undermined not just the planter class’ control over the economic system, but the fundamental tenants of liberty and equality so adored by white enlightenment thinkers. In “fifteen turbulent years... exploited slaves successfully liberated themselves and radically and permanently changed” the entire structure of Haitian society.¹³ Every element of this idea depicts a reason that this event created “a ‘terrified consciousness’ among the rest of the slave masters in the Americas,” and shook the Atlantic world as a whole.¹⁴ The speed at which over a hundred years of French occupation was ousted left even the longest running colonial institutions unnerved. The revolution’s radical nature, radical even in the aftermath of the French and American revolutions, struck fear into the hearts of white supremacists. Enlightenment ideals that spoke to the evils of political slavery and universal equality within the comfortable structure of white supremacy took on dangerous new forms within the black community. There was no greater threat to a society built on white supremacy than previously enslaved Africans with “personal freedom that undermined their relationship to their masters and the plantation, and jeopardized the wealth of a considerable number of those who were already free.”¹⁵

Perhaps nothing could be more frightening than the permanent changes to Haiti’s structure. This “living proof of the consequences of not just black freedom, but... black rule,” showed Africans free and enslaved throughout the world that black revolution and sovereignty was possible.¹⁶ It destroyed the notion that enslaved Africans were removed from their humanity and capability, and fundamentally undercut the narrative of white supremacy. The reality of the revolutionary consequences to enslavement haunted every slave owner the world over. Haitians did not just affect the slave-holding populations of the Atlantic world, in many ways they became the driving fear beyond political policies the world over

12 Thornton, *Africa and Africans*, 85.

13 Franklin Knight, “The Haitian Revolution,” *The American Historical Review* 105, no. 1 (February 2000): 104, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2652438>.

14 Knight, “The Haitian Revolution,” 113.

15 Knight, “The Haitian Revolution,” 110.

16 Knight, “The Haitian Revolution,” 114.

that sought to double down in an attempt to prevent similar revolts. The fear of black freedom, and more so of black rule, was matched in the bolster to enslaved populations' confidence throughout the Atlantic world. As a result "antislavery movements grew stronger... colonial slaves themselves became increasingly more restless... [and] whites lost the confidence... to maintain the slave system indefinitely."¹⁷ Haiti offered a view of what was possible, and the legitimacy of making that possibility a reality, in a way that would shape the Atlantic world forever after.

Far from passive participants in Atlantic history, Africa and Africans drastically shaped the Atlantic world. Recontextualizing Atlantic history with African narratives given the focus they deserve illustrates a complex and powerful Africa competing internally and on a global capitalist scale. Even within the slave trade itself, African agency cannot be denied as warlords competed for control of the continent and entered trade with Europe as economic equals. Beyond that, enslaved Africans continued to shape the course of history through events such as the Haitian revolution in ways that undermined the structure of slave-holding itself. Without considering Africans' robust effects on the Atlantic world, it is impossible to understand the history of the Atlantic accurately. Eurocentric historical accounts are not the product of a lived history of white supremacy, but rather white supremacist ideals warping the depiction of a rich international history including Africans' impact on a global scale. To recentralize African history in the Atlantic narrative is to continue a long history of combating racist practices by acknowledging that no amount of interference can rob Africans of their humanity. The story of human history, and Atlantic history, is also an African story.

17 Knight, "The Haitian Revolution," 114.