



World History

Reading 1.2 – Colonization, and the Slave Trade

Name:

Section:

Outsiders around Africa: 16th century

The story of Africa from the 16th century is that of outsiders prying round its coasts in search of plunder or trade.

The north receives the attention of the two most powerful Mediterranean nations. The so-called Barbary Coast, stretching from Algeria to modern Libya, is disputed between the Spanish and the Turks - with the Turks prevailing. Around the rest of Africa, from Morocco down to the Cape and then up the east coast, European interest is pioneered by the Portuguese.

The Beginnings of Portugal's empire: 15th - 16th c.

The Portuguese, in their bold exploration along the coasts of Africa, have an underlying purpose - to sail round the continent to the spice markets of the east. But in the process they develop a trading interest and a lasting presence in Africa itself.

On the west coast their interest is in the slave trade, resulting in Portuguese settlements in both Guinea and Angola. On the east coast they are drawn to Mozambique and the Zambezi river by news of a local ruler, the Munhumutapa, who has fabulous wealth in gold.

In their efforts to reach the Munhumutapa, the Portuguese establish in 1531 two settlements far up the Zambezi - one of them, at Tete, some 260 miles from the sea. The Munhumutapa and his gold mines remain beyond the grasp of the intruders. But in this region of east Africa - as in Guinea and Angola in the west - Portuguese involvement becomes sufficiently strong to survive into the 20th century.

Throughout the 16th century the Portuguese have no European rivals on the long sea route round Africa. The situation changes in the early 17th century, when both the Dutch and the British create East India companies. The Dutch, in particular, damage Portugal's eastern trade.

Dutch and British trade: 17th-18th century

The commercial interest of the East India companies is focused on the spice islands of the East Indies. Africa is merely a large object to be sailed around. But sailing ships need secure ports where they can take on water and fresh meat and vegetables.

The British ships make the island of St Helena, far out in the Atlantic, their main port of call. The East India Company forms a settlement there in 1659; it has remained a British possession, but a place of little consequence, ever since. By contrast the Dutch choice of a similar settlement has had momentous repercussions in history. They select in 1652 a harbor at the southern tip of Africa, nestling beneath Table Mountain at the Cape.

Cape Town: 1652

Ships sailing to and from the east make a habit of calling in at the bay below Table mountain - to barter with the Khoikhoi tribes of the region for fresh food, and to engage in an informal postal system. Letters and news sheets

are left under marked stones, to await a particular recipient or to be carried in the appropriate direction by the next passing ship.

There has even been a feeble attempt by the English to settle the Cape, in 1615, leaving ten criminals reprieved from the gallows as the founding colonists. But the first serious effort to establish a settlement comes in 1652, with the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck and ninety employees of the Dutch East India Company.

They arrive in three ships, well equipped with seeds and with tools for agriculture and building. Their purpose is to establish a secure fort, to acquire cattle from the Khoikhoi and to develop a vegetable garden to provision passing Dutch ships. During the ten years which van Riebeeck spends in the settlement (and records in detail in his journal), these aims are fulfilled. A fort is built, of earth ramparts and wooden palisades, and eight miles of coast are brought under cultivation.

Van Riebeeck also initiates two developments of great significance for the future.

Free burghers and slaves: 1657

By 1657 it is clear that there is more work at the Cape than can be done under central direction by the company's employees. Van Riebeeck proposes that it will be more effective to release married men from their contracts and to give them farms of their own to cultivate. This development is approved by the company. The independent farmers become known as free burghers.

The second innovation, also put into effect from 1657, is van Riebeeck's purchase of slaves to do domestic and agricultural work. At the start many of the slaves are brought from the company's eastern stations, in Indonesia and India; later Mozambique becomes the main source of supply.

By the mid-18th century half the white adult males in the Cape colony own at least one slave. In this society slavery forms, from the start, an integral element.

With adult male slaves outnumbering their free counterparts by two to one, and a high purchase price prevailing in the market, both the penal code for slaves and the level of work demanded from them become brutally harsh in the developing Dutch settlement.

Cape Dutch and Trekboers: 18th century

Until 1707 the Dutch East India Company makes some effort to encourage immigration to the Cape. Yet by that time, half a century after the first settlement, the burgher families still number only 1779 men, women and children - consisting of Dutch, German and a minority of Huguenots. Together they own 1107 slaves, mainly adult males.

Thereafter the growth of the settler population is by natural expansion - reaching about 15,000 (with approximately the same number of slaves) by the end of the 18th century. Something approaching a full-scale Dutch colony has developed by accident rather than design, in place of the original depot for the provisioning of ships.

During the 18th century the colony's territory expands more dramatically than its population, for a reason directly connected with the reliance on slaves. Free burghers come to regard manual labour as slaves' work. But for many of them there is no other available employment.

The response of the unemployed is to move away from the coast, into vast open expanses sparsely occupied by Khoikhoi and San tribes. In these regions the Dutch live as semi-nomadic herdsmen, fiercely independent, fighting the native tribes for their land and their cattle.

By the 1770s the Dutch nomads have penetrated as far as Graaff-Reinet, some 400 miles northeast of Cape Town. They become known as Trekboers (Dutch for 'wandering farmers'), a word subsequently often shortened to Boers. When they go on raids, to rustle the cattle of the tribes, the Trekboers form themselves into armed bands of mounted gunmen known as commandos.

At first the commandos make short work of tribal opposition. Between 1785 and 1795 they kill some 2500 San men and women and take another 700, mainly children, into slavery. But by this time the Boers, approaching more fertile territory near the Great Fish River, are meeting stronger opposition from Bantu-speaking Xhosa tribes.

A series of frontier wars between Boers and Xhosa begins in 1779. The Boers appeal to Cape Town but get little help. In their frustration, in 1795, they declare Graaff-Reinet an independent Boer republic.

The Boers are by now, both in their own estimation and in reality, a people different from the Dutch at the Cape. They call themselves Afrikaners, proudly emphasizing their birth in Africa. Their language, Afrikaans, already differs from Dutch. Their fierce independence is accompanied by an equally uncompromising variety of Calvinism. But in the very first year of their new republic a wider conflict intervenes. In 1795 the British seize Cape Town.

The Slave Coast: 15th - 18th century

The arrival of the Portuguese, in the 15th century, has brought to the west coast of Africa a trade previously limited to the center and north of the continent. This is the trade in slaves. In earlier centuries the captives were taken through the Sahara to Mediterranean and Muslim markets. Now they are shipped north in European vessels. The first staging post is the Cape Verde islands, where in 1466 Portuguese settlers are granted a monopoly of the new slave trade. On the coast of Guinea trading stations are set up to buy Africans.

Some of these slaves are used to work the settlers' estates in the Cape Verde islands. Others are sent north for sale in Madeira, or in Portugal or Spain.

The labor of the slaves in the Cape Verde Islands primes a profitable trade with the African region which becomes known as Portuguese Guinea or the Slave Coast. The slaves work in the Cape Verde plantations, growing cotton and indigo in the fertile valleys. They are also employed in weaving and dyeing factories, where these commodities are transformed into cloth.

The cloth is exchanged in Guinea for slaves. And the slaves are sold for cash to the slaving ships which pay regular visits to the Cape Verde Islands.

This African trade, together with the prosperity of the Cape Verde Islands, expands greatly with the development of labor-intensive plantations growing sugar, cotton and tobacco in the Caribbean and America. The Portuguese enforce a monopoly of the transport of African slaves to their own colony of Brazil. But other nations with transatlantic interests soon become the main visitors to the Slave Coast.

By the 18th century the majority of the ships carrying out this appalling commerce are British. They waste no part of their journey, having evolved the procedure known as the triangular trade.

Portuguese Africa: 16th-19th century

Portugal, after initiating the European slave trade in Africa, plays a decreasing role in it over the next few centuries. Similarly the Portuguese, although the first Europeans to establish trading settlements in sub-Saharan Africa, fail later to consolidate their advantage. Nevertheless they retain a clear presence in those three regions which received their particular attention during the original age of exploration.

The closest of these, on the sea journey from Portugal, is Portuguese Guinea - known also, from its main economic activity, as the Slave Coast.

The local African rulers in Guinea, who prosper greatly from the slave trade, have no interest in allowing the Europeans any further inland than the fortified coastal settlements where the trading takes place. The Portuguese presence in Guinea is therefore largely limited to the port of Bissau.

For a brief period in the 1790s the British attempt to establish a rival foothold on an offshore island, at Bolama. But by the 19th century the Portuguese are sufficiently secure in Bissau to regard the neighboring coastline as their own special territory.

Thousands of miles down the coast, in Angola, the Portuguese find it even harder to consolidate their early advantage against encroachments by Dutch, British and French rivals. Nevertheless the fortified towns of Luanda (established in 1587 with 400 Portuguese settlers) and Benguela (a fort from 1587, a town from 1617) remain almost continuously in Portuguese hands.

As in Guinea, the slave trade becomes the basis of the local economy - with raids carried ever further inland to procure captives. More than a million men, women and children are shipped from here across the Atlantic. In this region, unlike Guinea, the trade remains largely in Portuguese hands. Nearly all the slaves are destined for Brazil.

The deepest Portuguese penetration into the continent has been from the east coast, up the Zambezi, with an early settlement as far inland as Tete. But this is a region of strong and rich African kingdoms. The coastal area is also much visited by Arabs pressing south from Oman and Zanzibar. From the 16th to 19th century the Portuguese and their merchants are just one among many rival groups competing for the local trade in gold, ivory and slaves.

Nevertheless, even if the Portuguese hold on these three African regions is tenuous, they are unmistakably the main European presence. It is natural to assert their claim in all three when the scramble for Africa begins.

French and British in West Africa: 15th - 19th century

After the Portuguese open up the African coast to trade, in the 15th century, the other European nations of the Atlantic coast are soon sending their ships into the region. The first motive is piracy. As on the Spanish Main in America, ships returning to Europe laden with booty are attractive prey.

As early as 1492 a French vessel arrives off Elmina, a fortress built ten years earlier by the Portuguese in what is now Ghana, and seizes a shipment of gold setting off for Lisbon. During the next few centuries the Portuguese face competition on these coasts from the Danes, the Dutch and the British as well as the French.

Increasingly these rival European nations sail south not to plunder Portuguese vessels but to win a share in the rich trade which the Portuguese have pioneered - in gold, ivory, gum and above all slaves. To do so they need to build their own fortified trading stations, or (a more frequent course) to seize such places already established by

rivals.

The story of European involvement in West Africa, from the Senegal river down to the Cape, is one of small markets and harbors along the coast tenuously held and frequently changing hands. The only settlement of any real permanency, and the only one where the settlers penetrate any distance inland, is the Dutch colony at the Cape of Good Hope.

Elsewhere a great deal of ruthless and profitable trade is carried on, including the eventual export of some twelve million slaves to the Americas. Nevertheless the Europeans do little more than scratch the surface of the continent. They thrive like leeches, attached to the outer skin. Where they first choose to bite is often accidental. Yet the eventual pattern of colonial Africa, from the 1880s, depends very largely on where each nation's representatives happen to be located.

The estuaries of the great rivers are the natural place for these European trading posts. Captives, brought from the interior of the continent in canoes, can here be transferred to ships for the Atlantic crossing.

Fluid though the situation often is, various coastal regions of northwest Africa gradually become a particular sphere of interest of one nation or another. And by the 18th century the main rivals are France and Britain, the two greatest colonial powers of the time.

The Senegal River becomes associated with the French, who build their first trading station on its estuary in 1638. Further along the coast a 17th-century settlement at Ouidah begins a lasting French presence in Dahomey. Beyond this again, the Niger becomes of particular interest to the British - as evidenced in the late 18th century by the explorations of Mungo Park.

It is the 19th century which brings a consolidation of French and British interests in West Africa, and the reason is no longer slavery. It is the very opposite, the campaign to end slavery.

The first early step in this direction is the British establishment of Freetown in Sierra Leone as a settlement for freed slaves. Subsequently the French adopt a similar scheme, and the same name, in founding Libreville on the estuary of the Gabon river in the 1840s.

Meanwhile British merchants have been pressing inland from the Gold Coast (modern Ghana) and up the Niger river in search of economic ventures to replace the slave trade. The result, in both regions, is increasing British involvement at an official level - to protect the legitimate traders and to discourage the clandestine activities of the slavers.

These various semi-accidental events create the final placing of the French and British pieces in the African board game. When the scramble begins (after the great explorations of Livingstone, Stanley and others), each nation presses inland from its own sections of the coast to stake out its colonial claims.

Gascoigne, Bamber. "History of Sub-Saharan Africa." History of Sub-Saharan Africa. HistoryWorld.net, n.d. Web. 17 June 2014.