

# Introduction

In a year in which there has been much endeavour spent in marking the 200th anniversary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act by Britain in 1807, the discussion of African history and culture has invariably been reduced to a footnote to the study of slavery and the slave trade and sometimes, more narrowly, to a footnote to the study of abolition. What has often been missing is a systematic and accurate overview of the 447 years of slaving during which Europe sought to bend the will of Africa to that of Europe. Without this overview it seems inconceivable how a debate about legacies can meaningfully take place. In our **Three Continents, One History** Project, we have felt it necessary to deliver a varied programme that places the period of slavery and the slave trade in some historical context. Slavery and the slave trade have been defining moments in the experience of Africans on the continent and in the diaspora, but African history and culture cannot be contained by this experience.

This publication is meant to provide the reader with a sample of the varied topics that our project has addressed over a period of fifteen months. Our weekly Three Continents Radio Shows on New Style Radio 98.7fm., presented by Ankhobia Carvalho and Ebony Matthews, opened quite appropriately with a survey of the various civilisations that have shaped the continent and the region from which the vast majority of enslaved Africans were taken. If this history was well-appreciated and marvelled at by scholars and travellers visiting the region, by the end of the period of European trafficking in Africans, it was as if this Golden Age had never existed. Having plundered the region, and set African against African in a spiral of violence that seemed almost to become an end itself, Europeans now came to see Africans as 'savage' and 'childlike'. Scholars have been reluctant to make the link between the impact of 447 years of trafficking in human beings, the political destabilisation that it entailed, and the fact that no significant regional empire emerged after the downfall of Songhai in 1591.

For Africa, worse was to follow. Having distorted and perverted the course of historical development of African societies, Europe now turned around and said that Africa could only progress by being broken up into different spheres of European influence within which Africans would assume a kind of *statu pupillari*. The workshops and radio shows that the project has put on have tried to get to the heart of this complex history.

Almost every maritime European nation sought to participate in and benefit from a trafficking in Africans

that had been given a veneer of legitimacy and acceptability by the various papal bulls issued in the fifteenth century by the Vatican. These papal bulls effectively declared war and enslavement of Africans a religious duty. In the infamous *Illius Qui* doctrine, the slave trade was elevated to the status of a crusade which, when performed, allowed the deplorable actions of those by such ideologies, almost every country that fell on hard times as a result of the wars and conflicts that pervaded the European continent considered it axiomatic that the means were justified in acquiring a few slaving ships, some forts/factories in Africa, and an island or two in the Americas. Chapter 2 gives an insight into the breadth and depth of this European involvement and how they viewed themselves as paragons of human rights.

The deportation and enforced migration across the Atlantic Ocean and the Middle Passage respects come to symbolise the experiences of millions of Africans. The Middle Passage regime in which Africans were considered as nothing more than good or bad cargo, packed like sardines with utter disregard for personal dignity, and subjected to a regime of violence. Violence was wantonly exercised as part of a larger political ordering of the world, and Africans were reduced to an insurance statistic. All of these characteristics of the Middle Passage are the presence of an extraordinary event in history, a veritable crime against humanity (see Chapter 2 for word). After 1807, this crime intensified and another million and a half Africans were deported.

The Middle Passage served only to prepare Africans for a plantation system in the Americas whose sole motive was the making of money/profit. The complex system of slavery that allowed for the extraction of this profit worked on the economic principle that the planter or mine owner to economise labour. Indeed rational capitalist accumulation required to work the African to death and trust to replacements from Africa. If the purpose of the Middle Passage of the African, it was equally designed to make the European into a 'master' and the African relationship are evident today in the pigmentocracy and the circumscribed rights of African descent in the Americas. World Bank statistics reveal that Africa is still suffering from pervasive discrimination and racialised inequality. In many countries in Latin America, it is to take their place as citizens of the countries in which they live and which they are expected to empower Africans and compensate them for their injuries and injustices brought about by the Middle Passage introduced by Europeans stayed in place, and continued to work to the advantage of the dominant in each society.

It must be said though that, despite the social, psychological and sexual violence, many Africans resisted in varied ways at every stage of the journey from the interior of Africa to the Americas. The evidence that is now emerging makes it urgent that we should explore the various strata in African societies in aiding and abetting the trafficking in human beings.

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ordinary people to a system that placed their own lives in constant danger wherever they lived. In the Americas, Africans sought, where possible, to create spaces inside and outside the plantation system where they could preserve their culture and identity, and fashion a community that provided them with the tools and resources to resist the inhumanity of slavery. In this book, particular attention has been paid to the musical landscape of the Caribbean in allowing us to explore the rich heritage that Africans were able to preserve and recreate. Like music, traditional forms of African religions have provided a central arena for articulating an oppositional politics. This was nowhere more evident than in the Revolt of the Malês in 1835, the Sam Sharpe Christmas Rebellion of 1831-32, and the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) where Africans struggled for thirteen years against a succession of European armies to free themselves of the incubus of European enslavement.

The heart of our project has been to disclose the threads that have bound the city of Birmingham (UK) to Africa and the Caribbean through the slave trade. The book appropriately references this focus by starting with an examination of the manufacturing connection. The emergence of the city as the premier industrial city of the country was intimately connected with economic links that were forged from the beginning of the eighteenth century. The gun industry has come to symbolise this transformation of the city. Birmingham made and assembled the guns that armed the slave trade by fuelling internecine warfare between African countries. There were companies within the city that specialised in providing the one-stop service necessary for a successful slaving voyage. The fetters and the shackles, the steam engines, the articles of everyday consumption, the decorative ornaments produced in Birmingham ensured that the city benefited from every leg of the Triangular Trade.

The irony is that a number of those whose businesses benefited from the trafficking in Africans appeared also to express support for the Abolitionist cause, gradual abolition that is. Belatedly it fell to women in the city to take a more radical stance on slavery: immediate abolition. In discussions about the contribution of the city to the wider Abolitionist struggle, inadequate attention has been paid to the role played by black residents of and visitors to the city. A section of the book fills this void.

There has never been an empire in history without an accompanying army to defend it. A section of the book explores the particular role that regiments from the West Midlands region, sometimes recruited in Birmingham, played in the preservation of the Caribbean slave order, both by putting down rebellions and in defending the sugar economies of each European country from the predations of other European powers. Particular attention is paid in the book to the Haitian Revolutionary Period when it seemed that conflagration threatened British investment in the Caribbean region.

A key element of the work that we have done has been designed to get us to a position when questions can be posed about the legacies that we wish to leave, and the different ways in which the history addressed by this project can be remembered collectively and individually. We see this as a key challenge that faces us all.

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