Enslaving the millions: the African slave trade

Image of Kordofan slave traders and a Babuckur slave.
Case Study 1: How did so many Africans become slaves?

**Source 1. Evidence of John Barnes, ex-Governor of Senegal.** Taken from Abridgement of the Minutes of Evidence taken before a Committee considering the Slave Trade, 1789.

Witness Examined—John Barnes, Esq.

Governor of Senegal from 1763 to 1766. Thirteen 1789.

years in Africa, (p. 21). Negro government with

which he was acquainted, in general, a kind of mixed P. 5.

monarchy.

There have been slaves in all Africa, as far back P. 6.

as he has heard of; they become so by capture in war (not a great proportion, p. 8.), by conviction for theft, murder, adultery, witchcraft; also for debt.

Has been told of many by gambling. Polygamy

universally allowed. Witchcraft frequently charged;

the trial always full and fair, before the elders of

the town. Understand principal were put to death, rest of the family made slaves. Does not believe it possible, that crimes should have been imputed, from the fairness and openness of the trial. Persons convicted generally sold for the benefit of the party injured.

A

Never

Never heard of princes going to war, or breaking

up villages, to make slaves. Make war there as in

other countries. If prisoners cannot ransom them-

selves, must be sold.

Never knew of kidnapping by blacks; is con-

fident it would not pass unpunished.

People in the country possess slaves; some an in-

credible number. Believes they have not any power over their lives, except prisoners of war in the act of capture.

Great numbers brought by slave-merchants from interior parts. Much trade in slaves to North Barbary and Egypt. Neighbourhood of coasts and rivers extremely populous. War is very little de-

structive (as he always understood from the natives, p. 18.)
Source 2. Extract describing how enslavement is used as a punishment.

The third class consists of such, as have been said to be convicted of crimes. The Africans, before they were visited by the Europeans, punished their delinquents much in the same manner as other people in the same stage of society; but, since the introduction of the slave-trade, all crimes have been punished with slavery.

But this change, though it greatly increased the number of slaves, was found insufficient either to answer the demands of the Europeans, or the avarice of the African princes. They were reduced therefore to the difficulty of inventing new crimes, that a greater number of criminals might be made and sold. Nor did the princes stop here. New distinctions began to be made in crimes, that a still greater number of punishments might succeed. The offender, in the first stage or degree of his offence, now forfeits his own freedom; in the second, that of the male part of his family together with his own; in the third, the whole family suffer; and, in the fourth, the relations of the offender as far as they can be traced.

These refinements in judicial punishments and in
In another part of the country, we learn from the most respectable testimony, a practice prevails called Village-breaking. It is precisely the Tegria of Mr. Parke, with this difference, that though often termed making war, it is acknowledged to be practised for the express purpose of obtaining victims for the Slave market. It is carried on, sometimes by armed parties of individuals; sometimes by the soldiers of the petty kings and chieftains, who, perhaps in a season of drunkenness, the consequences of which when recovered from the madness of intoxication they have themselves often most deeply deplored, are instigated to become the plunderers and destroyers of those very subjects whom they were bound to protect. The village is attacked in the night; if deemed needful, to increase the confusion, it is set on fire, and the wretched inhabitants, as they are
are flying naked from the flames, are seized and carried into slavery. This practice, especially when conducted on a smaller scale, is called *panyaring*; for the practice has long been too general not to have created the necessity of an appropriate term. It is sometimes practised by Europeans, especially when the ships are passing along the coast, or when their boats, in going up the rivers, can seize their prey without observation; in short, whenever there is a convenient opportunity of carrying off the victims, and concealing the crime: and the unwillingness which the natives universally shew to venture into a ship of war, until they are convinced it is not a Slave ship, contrasted with the freedom and confidence with which they then come on board, is thus easily accounted for.

But these depredations are far more commonly perpetrated by the natives on each other; and on a larger or a smaller scale, according to the power and number of the assailants, and the resort of ships to the coast, it prevails so generally, as, throughout the whole extent of Africa, to render person and property utterly insecure.
Case Study 2: Why were so many Africans enslaved?

Source 1. A defence of the slave trade by Colonel Tarleton. Taken from The Debate on a Motion for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1791.

Colonel Tarleton next came to the function of Parliament, which had always countenanced the Trade, and could not, without a breach of faith, be withdrawn; and here he recollected what had fallen from a Right Hon. Gentleman on a former occasion, and which he thought applicable to those concerned in the African Trade; it was, that upon no occasion, short of absolute necessity, ought private property to be seized by public acts, without granting a compensation. The Colonel contended, that the Africans themselves had no objections to the Trade; and many people who were prejudiced against it, had been led away by mistaken humanity, and often by misrepresentation. With regard to the number of deaths, which happened on the passage, he had access to examine, and could distinctly state, to the Committee, that they never had exceeded in the Liverpool ships, on an average, five out of an hundred; whereas, in regiments sent out to the West Indies or America, the average was about ten and a half in the hundred.

Many attempts had been made to cultivate the lands in the different Islands, by white labourers; but it was found, that from the difference of climate, and other causes, population had decreased, and that those who took the greatest pains to accomplish this, found that, in ten years' time, they could not have any proportion of Whites capable of purposes of cultivation at all. He therefore agreed in the necessity of the Slave Trade, if we meant to carry on the West India Commerce and Cultivation; and he quoted the opinions of Gov. Parry, Adm. Campbell, Sir John Campbell, and a long list
Col. Phipps then described the nature of the Governments of Africa, from whence the Negroes, who were the objects of the Slave-Trade, were originally procured. The African Governments, he said, were not like those of Europe: they were neither limited Monarchies, Aristocracies, nor Democracies. They were founded in absolute Despotism, and every subject was an actual Slave. The great men of the country were Slaves to the Governor, their dependents were Slaves to those great men, and so on, downwards. All their customs, in like manner, were different from those of other countries. The prisoners of war too were subject to Slavery, and, such being the case, he saw no more cruelty in disposing of them to our merchants, than to those of any other nation. The life of any subject of another prince, was forfeitable, if he were taken captive in war. Criminals also, in cases of adultery and witchcraft, were subject to Slavery in Africa.
Source 3. Extract from a list of resolutions sent to Earl Grey by West Indian planters on the subject of slavery, April 1831.

That it be resolved that in this vital question is involved the existence of the property of a numerous body of His Majesty's subject, and of a very large portion of British Commerce and of British Naval power connected with these great and ancient colonies, the destruction of which would effect the ruin of all connected with those colonies, and reduce Great Britain from the Ranks of the first commercial country in the world to a state of comparative insignificance.