**The Atlantic Slave Trade**

The Atlantic slave trade or trans-atlantic slave trade took place across the Atlantic Ocean from the 16th through to the 19th centuries.

The vast majority of slaves transported to the New World were Africans from the central and western parts of the continent, sold by Africans to European slave traders who then transported them to the colonies in North and South America. The numbers were so great that Africans who came by way of the slave trade became the most numerous Old-World immigrants in both North and South America before the late eighteenth century.

The South Atlantic economic system centered on making goods and clothing to sell in Europe and increasing the numbers of African slaves brought to the New World. This was crucial to those European countries who, in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, were vying in creating overseas empires.

The first Africans imported to the English colonies were also called “indentured servants” or “apprentices for life”. By the middle of the seventeenth century, they and their offspring were legally the property of their owners. As property, they were merchandise or units of labor, and were sold at markets with other goods and services.

The **Portuguese were the first to engage in the New World slave trade**, and others soon followed. Slaves were considered cargo by the ship owners, to be transported to the Americas as quickly and cheaply as possible, there to be sold to labor in coffee, tobacco, cocoa, cotton and sugar plantations, gold and silver mines, rice fields, construction industry, cutting timber for ships, and as house servants.

The Atlantic slave traders, ordered by trade volume, were: the **Portuguese, the British, the French, the Spanish, the Dutch, and the Americans**. They had established outposts on the African coast where they purchased slaves from local African tribal leaders. Current estimates are that about 12 million were shipped across the Atlantic, although the actual number purchased by the traders is considerably higher.

The slave trade is sometimes called the Maafa by African and African-American scholars, meaning “holocaust” or “great disaster” in Swahili. Some scholars, such as Marimba Ani and Maulana Karenga use the terms African Holocaust or Holocaust of Enslavement. Slavery was one element of a three-part economic cycle—the triangular trade and its Middle Passage—which ultimately involved four continents, four centuries and millions of people.

**African slavery**

Slavery was practiced in some parts of Africa, Europe, Asia and the Americas before the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade. There is evidence that enslaved people from some African states were exported to other states in Africa, Europe and Asia prior to the European colonization of the Americas. The African slave trade provided a large number of slaves to Europeans.

The Atlantic slave trade was not the only slave trade from Africa, although it was the largest in volume and intensity. As Elikia M’bokolo wrote in Le Monde diplomatique, “The African continent was bled of its human resources via all possible routes like Across the Sahara, through the Red Sea, from the Indian Ocean ports and across the Atlantic. At least ten centuries of slavery for the benefit of the Muslim countries (from the ninth to the nineteenth). … Four million enslaved people exported via the Red Sea, another four million[20] through the Swahili ports of the Indian Ocean, perhaps as many as nine million along the trans-Saharan caravan route, and eleven to twenty million (depending on the author) across the Atlantic Ocean.”

According to John K. Thornton, Europeans usually bought enslaved people who were captured in endemic warfare between African states. There were also Africans who had made a business out of capturing Africans from neighboring ethnic groups or war captives and selling them. People living around the Niger River were transported from these markets to the coast and sold at European trading ports in exchange for muskets (matchlock between 1540–1606 but flintlock from then on) and manufactured goods such as cloth or alcohol. However, the European demand for slaves provided a large new market for the already existing trade. Further, while those held in slavery in their own region of Africa might hope to escape, the ones shipped away had little chance of returning to Africa.