

European colonialism and slavery

Our worldview maybe described as the principal way in which people define what is real in their everyday existence. This is largely done unconsciously, but it is the centre system of reality from which come our basic values. Each society teaches its particular worldview to its youth by imposing traditions upon them. One of the greatest overlooked sources for information about European colonialism and slavery has been the lives of the Europeans, themselves, before they sent their people to capture the rest of the world.¹ There had been different wars on the continent during the 1500s, which reached its high scale in the religious Thirty Year's War² (1618–1648). Its devastation was enormous, together with a series of plagues and diseases, which followed it. Europe's population was reduced to its half in many areas. It took decades for the continent to recover.³ During such hard times, the exploration of other continents became a question of survival. But of course, it doesn't justify their subjection and colonisation. Along with this, the European "Christians" created the largest slave trade in the history of humanity. There were leading figures in the Catholic Church, from St. Augustine⁴ to numerous popes, who considered the enslavement of human beings to be a perfectly acceptable practice sanctioned by God. This tradition was carried over by many Protestants, as well.

The land America was supposed to be the "Land of Freedom" for the oppressed and socially or religious disinherited people of Europe who wanted to seek a new life. History records 42 millions of immigrants who moved out from Europe to America, seeking political freedom and economic opportunities.⁵ When they arrived, these "European Americans" had to overcome new obstacles and disadvantages.⁶ Many of these were the conflicts they had with the Native Americans whom they called "Indians". Assimilations did not come easily to any of their ethnic groups. Nevertheless, none of them faced hardships like the African Americans. The European immigrants were seeking freedom, but they became the ones mainly responsible for the most brutal practise of enslavement, which we know, today. During this period other than in earlier times, slaves were not just servants who lived and worked under somehow good conditions. They were people who were owned and controlled after they had been captured or sold into slavery. Later, most of them were born into it.⁷ The slaves had no rights under the law.⁸ They were considered "things" or "property" and were treated as work animals. Their owners who could at any moment sell a mother from her child, a husband from his wife, governed their

¹ Daus, Ronald: *Die Erfindung des Kolonialismus*; pp. 33ff

² Arndt, Johannes: *Der Dreißigjährige Krieg 1618- 1648*; pp. 85ff

³ Mortimer, Geoffrey: *Perceptions of the Thirty Years War in Eyewitness Personal Accounts in Did Contemporaries Recognize a Thirty Years War?* in *The English Historical Review*, Bd. 116, Nr. 465; pp. 124-136

⁴ St. Augustine of Hippo: *City of God in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 2; 4th Ed.

⁵ Hanft, Sheldon: *English Americans* in Vecoli, Rudolph J.+ Sheets, Anna+ Young, Robyn V.: *Gale Encyclopedia of Multicultural America*, Vol. 1; pp. 474.475

⁶ Daniels, Roger: *Coming to America- A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life*; p. 33

⁷ Hurd, John C.: *The Law of Freedom and Bondage in the United States*, Vol. I; p. 249

⁸ *Ibid*; p. 263

movements. It was a brutal institution which denied that all humankind have been created into the image of God. While the owners viewed slaves as less than they viewed human beings, the slaves themselves knew different. Of course, they had the entire range of human thoughts and feelings. To be whipped until their blood flowed like water or to stand on an auction block and be sold like a horse or a thing was most torturous and humiliating. To be owned by another human being who had absolute power over his or her life and death, was a lifetime prison. Until the slaves were able to resist, it took them efforts to maintain at least a sense of their worth in their own eyes as God created beings. Out of their struggle came the so-called Negro Spirituals, Gospel Music, and Jazz.⁹

The transatlantic slave trade

The transatlantic slave trade was a most shameful and drastic era in world history, which was so far-reaching in its evil impacts, that even our modern society, today, is suffering from its after pains. Three continents were involved in the inhuman traffic: Europe, Africa and America. This notorious commerce in human beings altogether lasted for more than four hundred years, since it did not end until the late 1870ies. Some historians claim that the rulers of Africa were in full political control of what happened during this period. Nevertheless, to what extent did they have control, or did they have any? When we go into this matter, Gold Coast, today Ghana deserves special attention: There were many fortifications and castles built, here, on a rather small land. They reached approximately 80 of different types, constructed over 300 years by the Portuguese, Dutch, English, Danish, Swedish, French, and the Brandenburg- Prussia traders. Today, 32 of these have remained. The first contact between Europe and the Gold Coast dates from 1470, when a party of Portuguese landed. In 1482, the Portuguese raised a castle in Elmina, a fishing village, as their permanent trading base. In 1503, on the slopes of a hill near the castle, they built a small chapel dedicated to Santiago and constructed the Fort of Santo António de Axim. They maintained intermittently a trading post at Shama and in 1576, a short-lived fortress at Accra.¹⁰ Elmina Castle was very important for trade purposes. Therefore, in 1596, the Dutch started to attack the Portuguese. They made many attempts, but only in 1637 with the help of 1.200 African allies, they were able to defeat the Portuguese so that finally after 150 years, a new European power, the Netherlands, ruled on the Gold Coast. Two British warships failed to take Elmina in 1780, but the next year, Captain Shirley took the forts at Mori, Apam, Kormantine, and Beraku from the Dutch. One year later, a joint British military operation also captured Kommenda, but in the 1783 peace treaty of Versailles the status quo was restored. In 1792, the Danish governor at Christiansburg asked Osei Kwame for Asante's mercenaries to fight the Fante and conquer the whole Gold Coast. The British intervened, but then, the Danish governor died

⁹ Ibid; pp. 25- 30

¹⁰ Decorse, Christopher: *An Archaeology of Elmina- Africans and Europeans on the Gold Coast 1400-1900*; pp. 132ff

and his successor paid the Asante to go home. Between 1750 and 1807, the British imported gunpowder to West Africa and in exchange, took slaves whom they exported to America. Some historians say that the numbers of this reached a value of 49.130.368 pounds for the gunpowder and 53.669.184 pounds for the slaves.¹¹ Through this enormous expansion of inhuman trade, “Gold Coast” turned to be a “Slave Coast”. The trading for gold had given way to the trading for slaves. Despite the claims by some historians, the Africans were not in control of what was going on. At a time when in Europe, people had started capital trade with money; in West Africa, people traded by exchange of goods. The Europeans had used the little conflicts between the tribes to fight one another. This way, they had caused an ongoing tribal war in which their guns were involved. Therefore, the natives needed more guns and in exchange, the Europeans demanded very high and increasing numbers of slaves¹².

¹¹ Evans, E.W.+ Richardson, David: *Hunting for Rents- The Economics of Slaving in Pre-Colonial Africa* in *The Economic History Review* 48; pp. 665- 686

¹² Gemery, Henry A.+ Hogendorn, Jan S.: *The Atlantic Slave Trade- A Tentative Economic Model* in *The Journal of African History* 15; pp. 223- 246