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## Slavery in Africa and the Spanish Slave Trade at Bonny

By Idenze Ezeme

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FEATURE  
IMAGE

### The Celebrated Piratical Slaver L' Antonio with others of the Black Craft lying in the Bonny River

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

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SLAVERY IN AFRICA AND THE SPANISH SLAVE TRADE AT BONNY

# Slavery in Africa and the Spanish Slave Trade at Bonny

*By Idenze Ezeme · Historical Studies · Ozikoro.com*

Slavery played a significant role in African history, influencing societies, economies, and interactions with European powers. While many African kingdoms traditionally practiced slavery for domestic purposes, the arrival of European traders changed the nature of this system. The transatlantic slave trade turned human lives into commodities, fueling wars, wealth, and suffering. This article explores the Spanish slave trade in Bonny, the role of African slave owners, and how slavery shaped different regions, from Dahomey and Songhay to the Swahili coast and Zanzibar. It also examines how colonial powers used the abolition of slavery as a tool for domination.

01

## The Spanish Slave Trade at Bonny

In the early 19th century, the Spanish merchant schooner L'Antonio was seen in the Bonny River (now in Nigeria), waiting to load African Slaves. Other slave ships were also present in the background. The scene appeared calm, but in reality, it was a part of the brutal transatlantic slave trade.

A small boat can be seen in the foreground, transporting captured Africans to the waiting ship. A crew member with a whip ensured that the captives remained under control. This lithograph was created in 1845, years after Britain had abolished the slave trade. However, at the time, countries like Cuba and Brazil were still importing enslaved

Africans. The British Royal Navy worked to stop these activities by intercepting ships and repatriating freed Africans to places like Sierra Leone.

## 02

# African Slave Owners

Slavery existed in Africa long before European involvement. Many African societies, especially those with kings and hierarchical governments, kept Slaves as a symbol of power and wealth. However, these enslaved individuals were mainly used for domestic work, not for large-scale commercial trade.

With the arrival of Europeans seeking labour for plantations in the Americas, the nature of African slavery changed. Some African rulers and merchants began selling slaves to Europeans in exchange for goods, weapons, and wealth.

## African Kingdoms and the Slave Trade

### The Dahomey Kingdom (Present-day Benin)

By the 18th century, the Kingdom of Dahomey became a major player in the transatlantic slave trade. The Dahomey rulers waged wars against neighbouring kingdoms, capturing thousands of people and selling them into slavery.

King Tegbesu, who ruled in the mid-1700s, made around £250,000 per year from the slave trade. In the 1840s, King Gezo refused to stop the trade despite British pressure, stating:

“The slave trade is the ruling principle of my people. It is the source and the glory of their wealth... the mother lulls the child to sleep with notes of triumph over an enemy reduced to slavery.”



## Northern Ghana: Babatu the Slave Trader

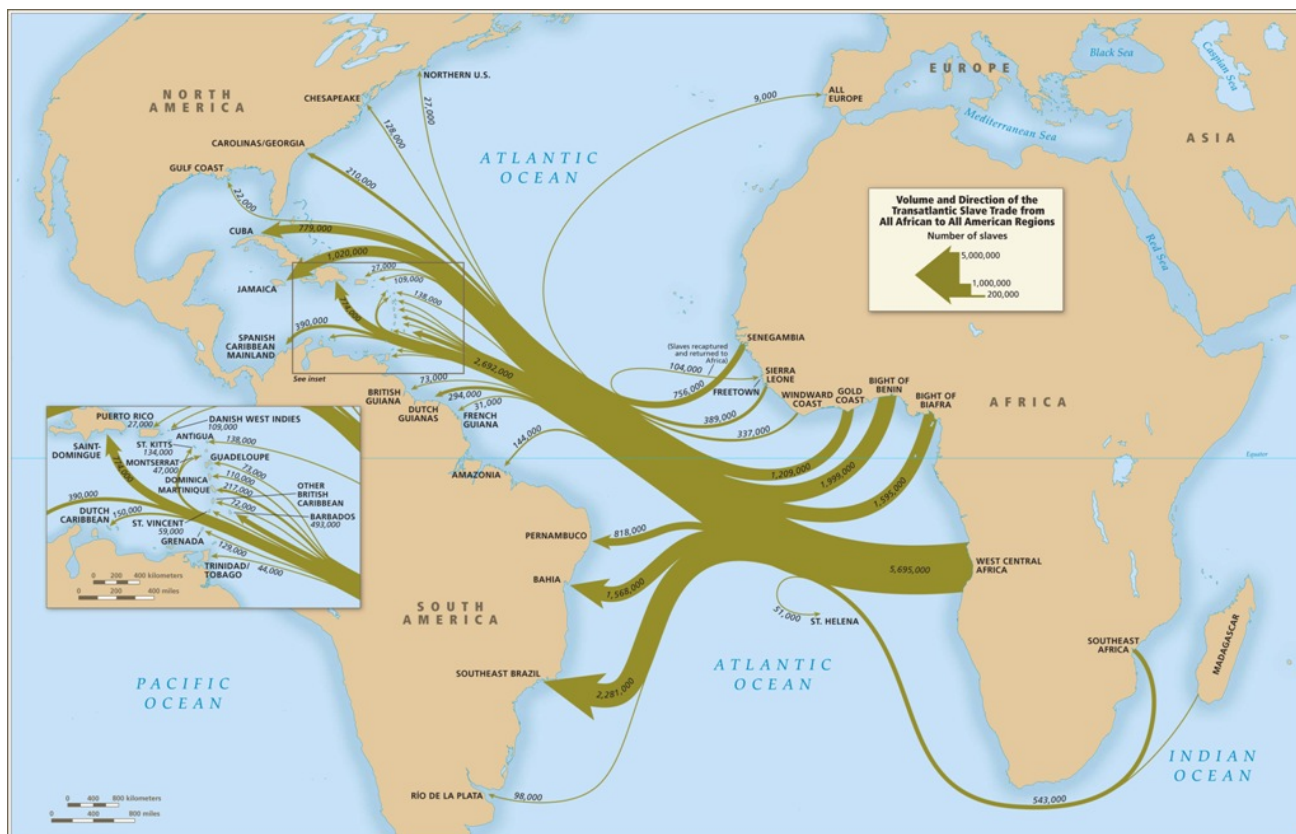
Mohammed Ibrahim Babatu, a schoolteacher in Yendi, Ghana, is a descendant of the famous slave trader Babatu. His ancestor, also known as Baba-ato, was a Muslim slave raider from Niger who carried out raids in Northern Ghana in the 1880s.

Mohammed Ibrahim Babatu acknowledges the harm his ancestor caused:

“He has done a great deal of harm to the people of Africa. I have studied history, and I know the effects of slavery. Some in my family believe he was ignorant, but what he did brought our family great fame in Dagomba society.”

Babatu sold enslaved people at the Salaga market. He and others involved in the trade did not fully understand what happened to the people they sold.

## Slavery in Other African Societies



Volume and direction of the trans-Atlantic slave trade from all African to all American regions. Photo by: Slave Voyages

## The Songhay Empire

Leo Africanus, a Moroccan traveller in the early 1500s, described the wealth and slave markets of Gao, the capital of the Songhay Empire:

“Here, there is a certain place where slaves are sold, especially on market days. A young slave of fifteen years is sold for six ducats, and children are also sold. The king keeps a large number of concubines and slaves in his private palace.”

## The Swahili Coast

The ruling class of Swahili society, including sultans, government officials, and wealthy merchants, kept enslaved people for domestic labour and agricultural work. The famous trader Tippu Tip, who became powerful in East Africa, was the grandson of a slave.

The Omani Sultan, Seyyid Said, became extremely rich by using

enslaved labour on clove plantations. He was so successful that in 1840, he moved the Omani capital to Zanzibar.

## **The British and the End of Slavery**

### **The Asante Kingdom (Modern-day Ghana)**

The Asante people had a long tradition of keeping Slaves for domestic work, but their main economic focus was gold. When Europeans arrived, the demand for slaves grew, and slavery became more profitable than gold trading.

By 1895, the British did not interfere much with domestic slavery in Asante society. A British Colonial Office statement said:

“It would be a mistake to frighten the King of Kumasi and the Ashantis generally on the question of slavery. We cannot sweep away their customs all at once.”

However, British attitudes changed when the Asante resisted colonial rule. In 1896, after King Prempeh I was defeated and exiled, the British took control and forced the Asante to follow British law, which included the abolition of the slave trade.

### **The King of Bonny's Reaction**

In 1807, Britain banned the slave trade, but some African leaders resisted the decision. The King of Bonny, in the Niger Delta, was shocked and opposed the ban:

“We think this trade must go on. That is the verdict of our oracle and the priests. They say that your country, however great, can never stop a trade ordained by God himself.”

Slavery played a major role in African societies, both before and after European involvement. While many African kingdoms initially kept enslaved people for domestic purposes, the arrival of European



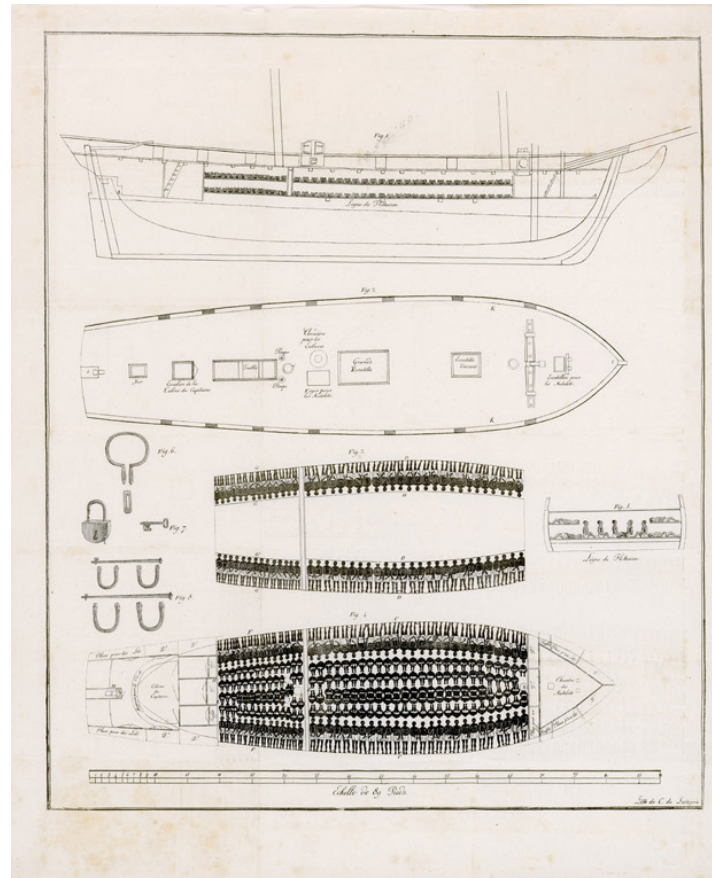
traders turned slavery into a large-scale commercial business. Some African rulers and merchants gained great wealth from the trade, while others resisted it.

The British, after banning the slave trade, used its suppression as a reason to expand their colonial influence. Today, slavery is recognized as one of the greatest injustices in human history, leaving a lasting impact on African societies.

## **West African Resistance to the Slave Trade**

The fight against the slave trade in West Africa played a big role in its abolition. West Africans resisted in four main ways:

- Resistance by ordinary people in West Africa
- Resistance by West African leaders
- Resistance by West Africans living abroad
- Revolts by enslaved people on the way to and in the Americas



Plan of the Slaver Vigilante. The Brig Vigilante was a French slave ship captured in the River Bonny, at the Bight of Biafra, on April 15, 1822. The vessel had departed from Nantes, France, carrying 345 Slaves from the African coast. However, before it could sail to the Americas, it was intercepted by anti-slavery patrols and taken to Freetown, Sierra Leone.

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## Resistance by Ordinary People in West Africa

Many West African communities refused to take part in the slave trade. For example, the Jola of Casamance (Senegal) and the Baga (Guinea) refused to trade people and fought off slave traders.

Others used different strategies to protect themselves:

- Moving to Hidden Places

People in the Sokoto Caliphate (Nigeria) hid in mountains, caves, and

underground tunnels. They also built walls and forts and planted thorny bushes to keep slave raiders away. People in Togo and Cameroon also hid in mountain areas.

- Building Fortresses and Protective Walls

The people of Gwolu (Ghana) built a wall to protect themselves. The wall had two layers, with farms and ponds in between, so people could survive inside without being captured.

- Changing Leadership Styles

Some leaders, like those in Kayor and Baol (Senegal), created stricter systems to keep their people safe from slave traders.

- Adapting Their Homes and Living Areas

In Ganvié (Benin), people built houses on stilts in Lake Nokoué, making it hard for slave traders to reach them. The Musugu people of Lake Chad built dome-shaped houses that looked like termite nests to hide from raiders.

- Creating Secret Communities

In the Upper Guinea Coast, maroon societies (groups of escaped slaves) were formed to resist the trade.

- Organizing Defense Groups

Women's groups, youth militias, and secret societies in places like Igboland (Nigeria) helped protect their communities. Olaudah Equiano, an Igbo man, was trained to fight using javelins and weapons.

- Training Children as Lookouts

Children across West Africa were trained to act as sentinels, watching for slave traders.

- Using Poisonous Plants and Insects

People in northern Cameroon and Chad planted thorny, poisonous trees to create natural fences. These made it harder for slave raiders to enter villages.

- Changing Farming Methods

In Chad, people stopped growing crops like millet and sorghum, which could be easily seen and stolen. Instead, they planted cassava, which was hidden underground and needed little care.

- Seeking Spiritual Protection

Priests and spiritual leaders across West Africa created religious protections. For example, in Igboland (Nigeria), the Efuru goddess was believed to protect the people from slave raids.

- Buying Back Captives

Some communities, like those in Futa Jallon (Guinea), collected money to buy back their captured people from slave traders.

- Fighting Back Against Slave Traders

Some West Africans attacked European ships and burned down slave factories. Historical records show at least 61 attacks on ships in the 17th and 18th centuries. In Sierra Leone, people destroyed a slave trader's quarters.

- Revolting in Captivity

When all else failed, captives resisted in holding cells and aboard ships. Many enslaved people in Gambia revolted on ships, while others jumped into the ocean rather than being enslaved.



04

# Resistance by West African Leaders

- The Oba of Benin Banned Slave Trade

In the 1530s, the King of Benin saw that slavery was weakening his kingdom. He banned the sale of slaves and focused on trading goods like pepper and ivory. By 1550, the slave trade had stopped in Benin.

- King Tezifon of Allada Rejected European Traders

In 1670, the French wanted to set up a trading post in Allada (Benin). King Tezifon refused, warning that the French would build a fort and take over his land.

- Religious Leaders Fought Against Slavery

In the 1670s, the Muslim leader Nasr al-Din led a movement in Senegal against selling slaves to Christians. This weakened the French slave trade.

- King Agaja of Dahomey Attacked Slave Traders

In 1724, King Agaja of Dahomey attacked his neighbours in Ouidah and Ardrah to stop the slave trade.

- The Almamy of Futa Toro Blocked Slave Routes

In 1787, the Almamy (Muslim leader) of Futa Toro (Senegal) banned the movement of slaves through his land. When French traders tried to bribe him, he refused and sent the gifts back.

05

# Resistance by West African Abolitionists Abroad

Many former slaves from West Africa worked to end slavery in Europe and the Americas.

- Quobna Ottobah Cugoano

Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, a Fante man from Ghana, was captured at 13 and later freed. In 1787, he wrote a book called *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*. He called for an immediate end to slavery and suggested that the British Navy should stop slave ships.



Richard and Maria Cosway, and Ottobah Cugoano (1784). Photo by Richard Cosway

- Olaudah Equiano

Olaudah Equiano, an Igbo man from Nigeria, wrote *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* in 1789. In it, he described the horrors of slavery and the terrible conditions on slave ships. His book became popular and helped the abolitionist movement in Britain.



Portrait of abolitionist Olaudah Equiano (around 1745–1797), created by artist Daniel Orme (around 1766–1832).



Blue plaque erected in 2020 by English Heritage at Schomberg House, 80-82 Pall Mall, London, SW1Y 5HF, City of Westminster. Photo by Spudgun67



Rev. Lucy Winkett and Rev. Dr. Rosemarie Mallett at the dedication of the plaque commemorating 250th anniversary of Cugoana's baptism, 20 August 2023. Photo by JoThePotter

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## Revolts by West African Slaves in the Americas

Many enslaved West Africans resisted once they arrived in the Americas.

- Ship Revolts

Revolts on slave ships were common, so sailors had to be heavily armed. Many enslaved people in the Gambia River fought back or jumped overboard rather than be enslaved.

- Uprisings in the Americas



Once in the Americas, enslaved people continued to resist. Some escaped and formed maroon societies, while others led rebellions against their enslavers.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### Idenze Ezeme

Nze is an Igbo history and culture enthusiast with an in-depth passion for exploring the rich cultural heritage, traditions, and historical narratives of the Igbo people. His works is mostly focused on pre-colonial Igbo societies, traditional belief systems, leadership systems, and the impact of European colonialism.



# Ozi Ikòrò

*History worth reading.*

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