

## The Difference Between African Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade

One of the justifications slaveowners gave for the perpetuation of the slave trade during the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the fact that many African cultures practiced slavery themselves. This was at a time when most “civilized” nations were abolishing slavery and the ones that weren’t needed to explain why they weren’t. And yes, this argument looks good if you look at it uncritically. But African slavery was in many ways very different from what was practiced in what would come to be called the transatlantic slave trade. In fact, they both probably shouldn’t be called “slavery.” First off, most people became slaves in Africa in one of four ways 1) prisoners of war, 2) they were sold to cover a debt 3) they were criminals or 4) they were outcasts from another community. Second, slavery was often not a lifetime deal. Once slaves had reworked themselves into good standing with the community, they would become members of whatever clan they had been enslaved to. And the children of slaves were never slaves themselves. That was unheard of in Africa. Third, the labor that was done was often done right alongside their owners. When their owners took a break, they took a break. When their owner stopped work, they stopped work. In effect, slavery in precolonial Africa served the same purpose that it had in virtually every other preindustrial society for 4,000 years: population control and casting out of bad elements. People were sold into slavery when their society had no use for them: When access to food or water was scarce, slaves were sold to reduce the number of mouths to feed. When a neighboring community was conquered, keeping POWs as slaves guaranteed continued good behavior. When someone stole, selling them to a neighboring community was their opportunity to start over with a clean slate. The economy could maintain stability when debtors did not get away with welching. Slavery as a disincentive served that purpose. African slavery was prison, welfare, political collateral, and social reform all rolled into one institution.

The reasons Europeans changed the nature of slavery so much was because of what slaves were needed for in their colonial enterprises. The new economic system sweeping Western Europe in the early 1500s involved companies taking joint-risk ventures and then reinvesting profits back into the production of capital. In this model, having a surplus of product was key because you could always undercut your competition if you could sell at a lower cost but at a higher volume. This means if you have a dirt-cheap labor force that can work extra-long hours, you will be more competitive than your neighbor. This extra pull incentivized slaveowners to 1) make slavery a lifetime sentence 2) enslave the children of all their slaves 3) work slaves from sunup until sundown and 4) start and participate in wars between African communities in order to move up the POW count from which they could buy slaves, and 5) institute a system of racial segregation so these people could never be fully reintegrated back into society. So, this was a new thing. And capitalism was its mama. Bust out these easily Google-able facts when anyone ever says to you "Well Africans owned slaves, too," which people still do sometimes, because they don't know the facts.