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Chapter One

Africa: Ripe for the Plunder

By Tanya Jules, MPH
Consultant
African American Behavioral Health Center of Excellence

“Life in Africa before our enslavement was hardly idyllic, just as life in Africa is not idyllic today (for reasons involving corruption, dictatorial leaders, geopolitics, globalization, and so on). Our task is not to create some illusory ideal past, but to pass on genuine knowledge and wisdom about our actual shared history. Modern human beings have been on this planet for about 200,000 years; civilization as we know it is roughly 6,000 years old. The first modern human beings were Black; so were the first civilizations. We need to teach our children this as well.”

—Resmaa Menakem, My Grandmother’s Hands, p. 256.

Part I: Africa

The story of Africa and its people is often told starting with slavery and jumping straight to the intergenerational trauma that followed. The beauty of Africa and all that originated from it often seems to have been forgotten. So, before we dive into the impact of slavery on Black people, we need to remember to celebrate a continent full of history, culture, families, and human beginnings.

This first chapter of the Healing History Web Page will focus on Africa and all its riches before colonization, westernization, and the abduction of some 12.5 million people. Understanding history is an important key to understanding the present and respecting the fact that the history of Black people is in no way the same for each individual of African descent.

As we embark on this exploration of ancient African history, it is essential to note the importance of oral storytelling in Africa. The culture of oral storytelling is an important way to preserve history through generations. Traditional ancient histories on the African continent have been written, but oral storytelling is one of the oldest ways to reflect the African concept of Ubuntu (Tuwe, 2016).
concept embodies the moral obligation of the people of Africa to celebrate and honor the belief that “I am what I am because of you” and to uphold a people-centered, family-centered, and community-centered view of humanity (Tuwe, 2016). African storytelling has not only preserved history, but it has also brought people together to listen and participate in stories related to past deeds, beliefs, wisdoms, counsel, morals, taboos, and myths (wa Thiong’o, 1992; Utley, 2008).

So, as we look at the history of Africa, we might also listen for the voices of the storytellers. If we are thinking about healing history, we must learn all we can about the value of what those 12.5 million people lost when they were chained and carried from its shores.

The Cradle of Humankind

Africa is known to be the birthplace of human life. With 54 countries, more than 2,000 languages, dynamic spirituality, and rich cultures, Africa is the most genetically diverse continent on the planet (Tishkoff et al., 2009).

Some regions have been home to major fossil sites that hold evidence of human beings dating back three million years or more. In South Africa, for example, the “Cradle of Humankind”—aptly named because of the number of fossils and artifacts that have been discovered there—is one of the world’s most important archaeological excavation sites (Caruana and Stratford, 2019).

Africa is a vast continent with much variety from region to region. We will touch on the history of three distinct regions:

- Northeast Africa
  - Modern day Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, and Uganda
- Southern Africa
  - Modern day Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Zambia, and Zimbabwe
- Western Africa

Over time, Africa has gone through many spiritual, cultural, linguistic, and societal changes. Although discussion of these changes rarely exists outside the sphere of the African community, it goes without...
saying that these events were influential in the development and fortunes of other regions around the globe. (For more about the “Global African History Timeline,” click here.)

**Northeast Africa**

As the African Migration took place, the evolution from our early ancestors to Africa’s ancient civilizations gave rise to great diversity within humankind. Our African ancestors settled in different parts of the continent and allowed their creativity to become an essential and abundant ingredient of survival and development.

The two most significant empires in ancient Northeast Africa were the Egyptian and Nubian empires. In ancient Egypt, the invention of basin irrigation allowed even arid land to sustain life for large populations (Mays, 2013). Ancient Nubia (in what is now Northeastern Egypt) experienced times of peace and times of war with the ancient Egyptian civilization. Nubia was also a key region for trade between Egypt and tropical Africa (Encyclopedia Britannica [EB], n.d.).

**The Struggle for Power**

Around 2000 BCE, the Nubian empire gained power over Egypt (EB, n.d.). At the height of its success (between 2050 BCE and 1500 CE), leaders of the Nubian Empire ruled for about 93 years as pharaohs of the 25th dynasty (Kemezis, 2010; EB, n.d.; Jarus, 2017). The empire’s rule over Egypt ended after a battle won by the Assyrians, a Middle Eastern civilization living on the land now occupied by most of Iraq and parts of Iran, Kuwait, Syria, and Turkey (Kemezis, 2010; EB, n.d.; Jarus, 2017).

We in the Western world have been exposed to far more information about ancient Egypt than about ancient Nubia, because Egypt is often included in the sphere of Biblical studies rather than thought of as part of Africa. This may have been influenced by the work of a branch of archeologists (called “Egyptologists”) who used race to reframe Egypt’s history, separating the “White” Egyptians from the “Black” Nubians (Ancient Nubia Now, 2019). (For more about “How Egyptologists Removed Ancient Egypt from Africa,” click here.)

**The Religions of Northeast Africa**

The African Migration across the continent provided space for diverse cultures to develop through music, the arts, language, and religion. Over time, treaties with and invasions from several countries on other continents also influenced the cultures in both Egypt and Nubia.

For a period of time, both the ancient Egyptians and the ancient Nubians practiced polytheism (Dorman and Barnes, 2020). They viewed their king as the center of human society, the intermediary.
between the gods and humanity, and someone who after death would be deified and live on as a god (Dorman and Barnes, 2020). People in these civilizations also believed that the gods, humanity, kings, and the dead existed together in the cosmos (Dorman and Barnes, 2020). This sense of the transcendent may have contributed to the importance of holistic community that characterizes many African cultural belief systems.

The people believed in celebrating the gods on earth through festivals that took place in and around places of worship. This provided space for people to interact directly with the gods. Their provision of offerings to the gods was an important way of giving thanks, another tradition that many African and African-influenced countries still practice today in different variations of carnival (Dorman and Banes, 2020). Ancient Egyptians and Nubians prepared their dead for a safe passage to the afterlife through mumification, bringing humanity full circle from their time on earth to their life in the larger cosmos (Dorman and Banes, 2020). (For a video on “Ancient Egyptian Religion,” click here.)

Nubia adopted Christianity through Roman influence and practiced it widely over time. Then, after Arab rule, Islam became the region’s primary religion. Northeast Africa experienced many cycles of cultural exchange, influenced by its many interactions with other ancient civilizations.

Southern Africa

Southern Africa’s first state may have been the kingdom of Mapungubwe, which flourished in present-day Zimbabwe, Botswana, and South Africa between the 10th and 13th centuries CE (Cartwright, 2019c). It was the Iron Age, when metals became the preferred material for tool making, so Mapungubwe grew prosperous because of its rich resources of copper, ivory, gold, and cattle (World Heritage Centre, n.d.).

The heart of the kingdom was centered on a large plateau (the Mapungubwe plateau) enclosed by stone walls. Inside lived the king, his court, and the royal wives. At the highest elevation, they performed rainmaking rituals (Cartwright, 2019c).

The king owned more cattle and material than the rest of the people, and his country conducted significant production and trade in copper, ivory, gold, and pottery. Their wares were traded as far away as India, China, and Mapungubwe, South Africa (Cartwright, 2019c).

The Brilliance of Queen Nzinga

Nzinga Mbande, who rose to the stature of queen of the Ambundu Kingdoms of N’dongo and Matamba (present-day northern Angola), was one of the most exceptional rulers in the history of any nation. “Remembered for her intelligence, her political and diplomatic wisdom, and her brilliant military tactics” (HistoryVille, n.d.), Queen Nzinga was a powerful force for restricting the spread of colonization in Southwest Africa. To watch the HistoryVille video, “The African Queen who Fought Portuguese Colonialism for 37 Years,” click here.
Arabia (Cartwright, 2019c). The kingdom of Mapungubwe was the first southern region of Africa to place intrinsic value on gold, beyond its value as currency (Cartwright, 2019c). As resources began to dwindle from drought and overuse, other kingdoms, such as the kingdom of Great Zimbabwe, began to flourish in the regions to the north of Mapungubwe (Cartwright, 2019c). For a video on “Mapungubwe—Lost Kingdoms of Africa,” click here.

Western Africa

We arrive last in Western Africa, the region that would eventually be the central target of the European slave trade. Reaching much farther back into history, we will look briefly at four civilizations: the Ghana Empire, the Kingdom of Sosso, the Mali Empire, and the Kingdom of Benin.

The Ghana Empire

The Ghana Empire, spanning the 6th through 13th centuries CE, was located in the area currently known as Mauritania and Mali (Cartwright, 2019b). The kings of this empire made their fortune from large supplies of gold nuggets that only they were allowed to possess, allowing them to corner the gold market in Western Africa. The spread of their gold extended to regions in North Africa and Europe, making the Ghana empire a high-traffic location on the trade routes in and out of Africa (Cartwright, 2019). The land was fertile from the flooding of the Niger River in the dry grasslands, producing many crops that could be consumed by the people of the empire and traded elsewhere. A well trained army protected the king and the villages and conquered new territories beyond the region (Cartwright, 2019b). The king also received sacrifices from the people, as he played a dual role, head of both justice and religion.

As trade among regions increased, religious influences increased as well. Muslim merchants also carried both their goods and their religion, Islam, on their trade routes. The Ghana Empire divided in two, one that was influenced by Islam and one that maintained its traditional religious allegiance to the king (Cartwright, 2019b). Years later, Ghana would become infamous as the busiest launching point for the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The West African coast is haunted with old slave dungeons, the most famous being Ghana’s Elmina and Cape Coast Castles, where countless tortured souls were held in chains and then forced to walk through the “Door of No Return” toward the waiting slave ships and away from all hope of home and freedom.

The Kingdom of Sosso and the Mali Empire

The Ghana Empire began to decline after civil wars, rebellion, and poor harvests adversely affected its economy. The Kingdom of Sosso took over and started to conquer nearby regions. It was then that the prince of the Makinke tribe waged war against the Kingdom of Sosso and won, starting the Mali
Empire (Cartwright, 2019a). During the time of the Mali Empire, an intricate and systematic web of trade centers began to develop, Timbuktu being one of the most lucrative of these (Cartwright, 2019a). Goods such as textiles, gold, ivory, horses, spices, and enslaved people were all traded there.

**An Ancient Griot Tradition Expands**

Traditions passed down through griot families have included musical instruments such as the “kora,” a 21-stringed instrument that dates back to the 13th century and combines properties of a harp and a lute. Born into a Gambian griot family, Sona Jobarteh has broken through a centuries-old all-male tradition to become one of the world’s foremost kora players. She has also established her own academy on griot music and culture. To hear Sona Jobarteh’s story and some of her exquisite music, click here.

By the 15th century, the Mali Empire began to decline due to civil war and its inability to compete with more successful kingdoms (Cartwright, 2019a).

**The Kingdom of Benin**

The Kingdom of Benin, located in what is now Nigeria, was most successful between the 13th and 19th centuries CE. The Kingdom had strong trade ties with Portugal, whose government was seeking gold and slaves (Cartwright, 2019d). The region was a mixture of rainforests, mangrove swamps, and dry forests, yielding an abundance of resources for trade, including stone, fish, yams, cattle, copper, brass, bronze and gold (Plankensteiner, 2007; Cartwright, 2019d). Artists and artisans crafted beautiful bronze sculptures, including many images of the human head. (For a video on “Western Reactions to Benin Bronzes,” click here.)

The Mali Empire became even more powerful during the 13th-century reign of Mansa Musa I. Mansa Musa not only increased the size of the territory from what is now Gambia to include lower Senegal, but he also diversified the region with the inclusion of different ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups. After traveling to Mecca, Mansa Musa brought back Muslim architects, scholars, and books, further promoting the spread of Islam in Western Africa (Cartwright, 2019a). (For a video called “Mali Emperors Family Tree: Mansa Musa—the Richest Man in World History,” click here.)

Mali culture was also enhanced by the rich traditions of its griot caste. The griots were storytellers, poets, musicians, and praise-singers who carried oral and spiritual traditions from generation to generation—and were often called upon to serve as advisers to royalty. Griots continue to pass down their traditions, their stories, and their musical instruments in several African countries.

[Brass head of an Oba of the Kingdom of Benin (The British Museum, n.d.)]
As European interest in African resources began to rise, the Western part of Africa became the first stop on the trade route, moving up from its original position as last stop. After 1516 CE, the king of Benin, known as the Oba, took control of the trade within his kingdom by prohibiting the sale of male slaves (Plankensteiner, 2007; Cartwright, 2019d).

The king then attempted to negotiate with the Portuguese, but his efforts were unsuccessful. He found that Portuguese interests were focused on spreading Christianity to Africa (Plankensteiner, 2007; Cartwright, 2019d). He was able to maintain traditional beliefs in Western Africa for some time, until European missionaries came back in the 19th century to convert the people from their traditional beliefs. European interest in the resources of Western Africa increased even more, leading to the ultimate decline and British conquest of the Benin kingdom in 1897 (Cartwright, 2019d).

Part II: Beyond

The Triangular Trade Route

The fall of the African Empires coincided with the success of the triangular trade route. The triangular trade route, a three-legged system that linked Europe, Western Africa, and the Americas, carried firearms, cash crops, textiles, and enslaved Africans among the three continents. The benefits of the triangular trade route were incredible for Europeans and for those who were settling in the New World, because they were receiving free labor, goods, and monetary gains. Meanwhile, people of African descent were exploited, sustaining both the direct and the indirect impact of the high demand for slavery in the Americas and in Europe.

- The first leg of the triangular trade route usually began in Europe, where manufactured goods such as guns and textiles were brought to Western Africa. These goods were to be traded for gold, spices, and human beings who would ultimately be enslaved.
- The second leg of the journey, the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade or the “Middle Passage,” primarily transported Africans across the Atlantic Ocean to be enslaved in the Americas and the islands of the Caribbean, though a variety of goods were also transported on these trips. Molasses, ultimately destined for use in rum production, would be a major product of exchange on the route between the Caribbean and the middle colonies, before the ships started back to Europe and Africa to collect more human lives (Ostrander, 1956).
- The last leg of the journey brought human beings, lumber, furs, whale oil, and other goods that were traded and taken back to Europe along the third leg of the triangular trade route.
The Varieties of Slavery

Slavery had existed in Africa well before the triangular trade system became the main conduit for receiving and transporting goods across the Atlantic Ocean. The many kingdoms in Africa—the Mali Empire, the Ghana Empire, the Kingdom of Benin, and others—had often used the prisoners they had captured at war to expand their nations, to barter in trade, and to fill labor needs (Battle, 2014). Some individuals had been designated slaves and castrated as punishment for serious crimes that they had committed, and some who had met this fate may also have been included among other Africans captured for the slave trade.

In African traditions, people who had been taken as slaves were exploited; however, many also had a reasonable chance of regaining their freedom after they had served their time for their crimes or had fulfilled their roles as spoils of war. There were crucial differences between these experiences of slavery and the enslavement that Africans were subjected to after they had been sold to or captured by traders on the transatlantic Slave Route. The differences lay in the way people who met that fate were treated after they left their homes in Africa, and in the singular form of slavery—called “chattel slavery”—that would develop in the North American Colonies.

As Europeans were settling in the Americas, Indigenous Americans were exploited and enslaved as colonization proceeded at a fast pace. The arrival of European settlers also introduced deadly diseases and tactics of coercion that contributed to the displacement and loss of millions of Indigenous people’s lives (Benjamin, 2009). The difficulty that the colonizers encountered in trying to turn the native population of the continent into an enslaved workforce, coupled with the increased presence of Europeans and their persistent desire to conquer and cultivate land in the Americas and the Caribbean, made the transatlantic slave trade one of the most important and impactful components of the triangular trade route.

The transatlantic slave trade, which occupied a period of time between the 16th and 19th centuries, transported an estimated 10 to 12 million enslaved Black Africans across the Atlantic Ocean to the New World (Lewis and Luebering, 2021). During that time, Black people from Western and Central Africa were traded and forced into slavery and the production of crops in the American colonies—and were exploited at astronomical rates. This forced migration led to tens of millions of people of African descent living in the modern world of North America, Central America, South America, and across the Caribbean.

Through this displacement, lives were lost and families were ripped apart after going through the Door of No Return, all for the benefit of the expansion of the New World. However, even in the face of overpowering adversity and defeat, resilience, strength, and courage rose defiant. History has left us reports of golden moments in Black history from that time, and powerful examples of the resilience of Black people. To listen to a description of the top 10 African Tribes taken in the Atlantic slave trade, click here. And to explore the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, click here.
Once they reached the slavers’ ships, their fate grew far worse. According to the Liverpool Museum, “The men were packed together below deck and were secured by leg irons. The space was so cramped they were forced to crouch or lie down. Women and children were kept in separate quarters...this also exposed them to violence and sexual abuse from the crew. The air in the hold was foul and putrid. Seasickness was common and the heat was oppressive. The lack of sanitation and suffocating conditions meant there was a constant threat of disease. Epidemics of fever, dysentery (the 'flux') and smallpox were frequent. Captives endured these conditions for about two months, sometimes longer” (Liverpool Museum, n.d.). An estimated 10 to 20 percent lost their lives during the journey (PBS, n.d.).

The African Diaspora: Through the Caribbean, and Beyond

The term “diaspora” refers to the spread of a people from their original homeland. In the diaspora that began with the Atlantic slave trade, an estimated 12 to 13 million African men, women, and children were dispersed to the Americas, the Caribbean, and Europe. Through the centuries that have followed, the currents of trade, migration, and ancestry have formed the huge and sprawling pattern known as the African diaspora, extending to the Caribbean region, to North and South America, and (to a lesser extent) to Europe.

Any brief attempt to tell the story of a people can do little more than give an impression of that story. It is even more so with the story of the African diaspora. This brief mention of the subject focuses on the flow of captured human cargo from West Africa to the Caribbean, and from there to the 13 colonies that would become the United States. Since the fate of the enslaved Africans in the colonies and the U.S. is the subject of the remaining chapters of this Web Page, most of the following discussion will focus on the Caribbean, with a spotlight on two islands, Haiti and Barbados.

The Caribbean

The term “Caribbean” is often used to refer to the Caribbean Sea, the islands that arise from it, those that surround it and separate it from the North Atlantic Ocean, and the surrounding coasts. The Caribbean Basin includes the four large islands of Cuba, Jamaica, Hispaniola (Haiti and the Dominican Republic), and Puerto Rico, and the smaller islands in the Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Montserrat, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago.

The Caribbean was once home to the Taino people. Before the 15th century, this indigenous population may have numbered close to three million. They migrated from South America as The
Arawak people, to settle across the Caribbean in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Bahamas, and the Virgin Islands (Poole, 2011; Taino, 2020).

When Spanish colonizers arrived on their land, the Taino people welcomed them and shared their knowledge of agriculture, hunting, irrigation, and navigation. This peaceful arrangement was short-lived. Once the need for labor increased, the Spanish colonizers began to enslave the Native people and over-mine the land for gold (Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 2020). This, coupled with illnesses brought over by the Europeans and the importing of enslaved Africans, drove the Taino people close to extinction (Poole, 2011). A new culture of displaced peoples began to take shape across the Caribbean.

**Haiti: The Price of Freedom**

In 1492, Christopher Columbus laid claim to the Caribbean island that today holds Haiti and the Dominican Republic and christened it “Hispanola.” Ceded by the Spanish to the French in 1697, Saint Domingue (present-day Haiti) was once the wealthiest colony in the Caribbean and the Americas (Haiti, n.d.). Under French rule, exports to Europe and the Americas helped make the region successful for the French colonizers, and almost 800,000 enslaved Africans—not counting those who died in the Middle Passage or immediately after their arrival—were imported to keep up with the demand for sugar, coffee, and molasses (Haiti, n.d.; Poole, 2011). A mix of French, Spanish, African, Affranchis (lighter-skinned freed slaves), and descendants of the Taino people contributed to a colorist and classist society that placed the enslaved Africans at the bottom of a rigid social and economic hierarchy (Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 2020).

The brutal treatment of both enslaved and freed slaves (regardless of skin tone) motivated free Black leaders such as Toussaint Louverture (who died in French custody a year before independence was won), Jean-Jacques Dessalines, and Henry Christophe (who had fought in Savannah, Georgia during the American Revolution) to lead a revolution against the French for independence (Haiti, n.d.; [EB], 2020). The revolt began in 1791 and ended in 1804 with independence for Saint-Domingue (later named Haiti, a word derived from the indigenous Arawak language).

Many countries in Europe and America did not want to acknowledge Haiti as a free Black nation, and many of the American enslavers’ most repressive policies reflected the fear that Haiti’s successful revolution had invoked. None of these countries would trade or develop partnerships with Haiti. As resources in Haiti dwindled, it became clearer and clearer that this nation would never have a successful and independent economy without the recognition and respect of powerful nations. About 20 years after Haiti won its independence, France demanded 150 million francs to allow Haiti to maintain its independence and be recognized as a free nation—a demand backed up by the French
military and its full array of armaments (Rosalsky, 2021). If Haiti declined, they would go to war again.

To put things in perspective, the price of Haiti’s freedom was ten times what the United States paid France for the Louisiana Purchase, which effectively doubled the size of the United States (Rosalsky, 2021). It took 122 years for Haiti to pay off its debt, an encumbrance that has left the country impoverished to this day and set the stage for predatory behavior from other developed countries. In the chaos and abject poverty of today’s Haiti, it is easy to trace the effects of crushing debt, manipulation, and corruption on a tiny nation that had fought so hard to shake off the yoke of slavery. To learn more about how the French Tax affected Haiti, Click Here.

Barbados

In the fifteenth century, the Portuguese and Spanish identified an already inhabited island, now called Barbados. Originally the island was home to the Taino people and later the Kalinago, also known as the Indigenous Carib people. The Kalinago-Carib people who settled there were originally from mainland South America. They eventually intermarried with the indigenous Arawak people after arriving at the island (Minority Rights Groups, 2021).

In 1627, England began to colonize Barbados with the intention of rebuilding their economy after a series of wars had taken a toll on the country’s finances (Luqman, 2021). England focused on cultivating tobacco on the land but faced competition from Virginia’s successful tobacco plantations. By the mid-1630s, colonizers in Barbados had shifted their attention to cotton, indigo, and ultimately sugar (Slavery and Remembrance, 2023).

In an effort to keep up with the international demand for sugar, and as the indigenous population began to dwindle and the price of Irish laborers began to rise, the British began to focus on the use of African people through the transatlantic slave trade. This transition led to the 1661 Slave Code, which stated that African people were viewed as chattel (objects) and real estate (Beckles, 2017). Like the Slave Codes developed in the United States (see Chapter Two), the British Slave Code was concerned, not with protecting the lives or the welfare of the enslaved Africans, but with protecting the liberties and the profits of the slaveholders. To learn more about the Barbados Slave Codes, Click Here.

Life for enslaved Africans in Barbados was brutal, as described in Beckles (2016), The First Black Slave Society: Britain’s Barbarity Time in Barbados, 1636-1676. The slave codes developed and followed by the British set the tone for the first large-scale Black slave society, meaning that the whole British economy that operated in Barbados thrived due to the physical brutality and social inhumanity directed toward the Africans. These enslaved men, women, and children were viewed as easily replaceable, absolving the slaveholders of any responsibility for treating them humanely. This
resulted in the highest numbers of enslaved African deaths recorded anywhere (Beckles, 2016). For example, in one 1982 study, examination of the skulls and teeth of Africans who had been enslaved in Barbados suggested a life expectancy of 20 years and showed signs of periodic near-starvation (Corruccini, Handler, Mutaw, & Lange, 1982).

About half a million Africans were transported to Barbados during this period (Watson, 2011). Although the number of enslaved Africans who perished quickly in the harsh working conditions there increased, so did British wealth, further enforcing the enslavers’ success and providing a “gold standard” that slaveholding colonies in the United States could use as a model. England’s financial gain from its slave codes in Barbados, other colonized islands, and the United States boosted the British economy so much that the country is still experiencing its benefits today (Beckles, 2016).

The treatment of enslaved Africans in Barbados was perhaps the key factor leading to the Bussa Rebellion. On Easter Sunday, 1816, in an effort to overthrow the island’s planter class and gain freedom, organizers such as an African-born enslaved man named Bussa, John Grigg, a man named Davis, and Johnny Cooper led a rebellion that involved enslaved men from various plantations on the island. The organization of the rebellion was strategic, planning took place under the guise of allowed celebrations for enslaved people, and conversations held in native tongue aided in the secrecy of the revolt. After three days, though, soldiers and imperial troops ended the rebellion and Bussa was killed in battle (Beckles, 2017; Luqman, 2021). A quarter of the island’s crops were destroyed, and the island was placed under martial law to prohibit additional uprisings.

In 1834, slavery was abolished in Barbados. After that, the island engaged in an “apprenticeship” period, wherein free men worked for about 50 hours a week without pay, in exchange for the ability to live in their homes on the plantations. It wasn’t until 1961 that Barbados celebrated its freedom as an independent colony without any ties to the British, and the country gained independence in 1966 (Barbados, 2023).

In 2021, after 396 years of freedom, the government of Barbados announced that it would remove the British monarch as head of state and begin a new era as an independent republic, though it would remain a member of the commonwealth (Torrance, 2021). In the transition ceremony, Prince Charles delivered a message to the new republic: “from the darkest days of our past and the appalling atrocity of slavery, which forever stains our history, the people of this island forge their path with extraordinary fortitude.”

**North America**

Many Africans imported across the Middle Passage were auctioned off in Saint-Domingue and brought to the many ports in the South. Charleston, SC was one of the busiest points of entry for
enslaved Africans in North America (Battle, 2014). Between 1628 and 1860, more than 470,000 Africans—men, women, and children who had been torn from their homes and families—were enslaved in North America (Battle, 2014; O’Neil, 2022).

Conditions on plantations in the South were the most brutal in the United States. With some Southern regions experiencing weather similar to that of the Caribbean, enslaved Africans worked year-round, allowing their slave handlers to escape the sweltering heat during the summer months. Cash crops such as sugar, tobacco, and cotton were in high demand across the United States and overseas. Slaveholders’ eagerness to meet those demands led to extreme brutality, overuse of an undernourished and exhausted workforce, and high vulnerability to disease and early death. So punishing were the enslaved Africans’ experiences that—in spite of the steady stream of new enslaved people being imported into the United States—the enslaved population did not actually start to increase until the 1760s—almost 100 years after slavery began to be used for profit there.

Chapter Two of this Web Page offers much information on conditions that the enslaved African population faced in America—and conditions that their descendants faced after emancipation—along with an analysis of how slavery could ever have happened in the first place, and it could have been allowed to continue.

The remainder of this chapter offers two uplifting glances at the isolated experiences of a few African Americans. The first tells the story of an early experiment in freedom for African Americans. The second is a quick portrait of a small North American subculture whose traditional African and American ways have been preserved and have had profound influences over the creativity and culture of the nation.

**St. Augustine: An Experiment in Freedom**

In 1565, America’s first European settlement was established by Spanish Admiral Pedro Menéndez de Avilés. St. Augustine, Florida was built by 50 free and enslaved Africans and 800 Spanish colonists.

The societal structure of St. Augustine differed from those of British and French colonies, which operated using chattel slavery, in which enslaved people were considered objects with no rights or personhood. In St. Augustine they viewed all men, free or enslaved, as brothers in Christ. This meant that enslaved Africans living in St. Augustine were granted certain rights and protections and had the opportunity to purchase their own freedom—if they pledged their loyalty to and belief in Catholicism and the Spanish crown. Free Africans, some of whom had helped build the town, were even able to own land.
By the late 1600s, enslaved Africans from the early plantations in the Carolinas began to escape to St. Augustine, following the path of the original Underground Railroad, in the hope of finding freedom. So many sought freedom there that Spanish King Charles II issued a policy to protect those who had escaped enslavement, giving liberty to all, “so that by their example and by my liberality others will do the same” (Wood and Hipp, 2022, p. 4). In 1733, the Spanish King established an additional policy, 1) prohibiting the English from recapturing those who sought freedom and 2) protecting the freedom of escapees who had completed four years of service to the Crown.

By 1738, there were so many freedom seekers that the governor of St. Augustine, Manual de Montiano, granted them a plot of land, called García Real de Santa Teresa de Mosé (or Fort Mosé). This was the first Black town in North America. James Oglethorpe invaded Fort Mosé in 1740, only for the Mosé community to take back their fort a few days later. The fort was not rebuilt until 1752. After the Treaty of Paris, the territory now known as Florida was given to the British. This shifted the fate of Black free and enslaved people from one where they were seen as human to one where they were considered property. Many of the free people moved to Cuba with other Spaniards emigrating from St. Augustine (National Parks Service, 2020; National Parks Service, 2022).

St. Augustine still honors Black History with many monuments acknowledging the major milestones in its history and the contributions made by community members of African and Caribbean descent. To learn more about the first free Black Settlement in North America, Click Here.

Gullah Geechee People: Strength and Beauty from Diversity

Many elements of African culture and the cultures of the diaspora have refused to dissolve in the American “melting pot.” In some areas, the influences of Africa have mixed with Caribbean and/or multiple European influences to form intact and enduring local cultures. Perhaps the best-known example of this is the Creole influence on New Orleans. A less well-known but highly creative example is that of the Gullah Geechee people.

Many enslaved individuals from the rice-growing regions of West Africa ended up in the low-country coastal region and island plantations of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. These people, the Gullah Geechee, began to develop a unique language (to help bridge the differences among the many local ethnicities) and Gullah arts, foods, and music. (The word “Gullah” is thought to be a derivative of “Angola.”)

Many elements of Gullah music can be found in a variety of musical traditions that were born in southern Black cultures (e.g., spirituals, Gospel, blues, ragtime, jazz, soul, and hip hop). Southern-style cooking also has roots in Gullah traditions.
In the midst of despair, a beautiful culture was born, combining African, European, and West Indian influences and shaping many enduring and distinctly American creative traditions. For example, Ranky Tanky, a band steeped in Gullah musical and cultural traditions, has been gaining national attention (including two Grammy awards) for the beauty, authenticity, power, and broad appeal of their music. To hear Ranky Tanky playing their powerful original song, “Stand by Me,” click here.

To learn more about the Gullah Geechee people, Click Here.

Honoring African History

Today, many museums, galleries, monuments, and written works honor the rich and complex ancestral history of the more than 45 million people in the United States who are of African descent (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2022). For example:

- “Nubia: Jewels of Ancient Sudan” is a traveling loan exhibition that highlights the rich traditions of the Nubian Kingdom,
- the National Museum of African American History and Culture has a permanent home within the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., and
- many colleges and universities house ancient African art and artifacts and within their archives.

However, according to Prof. Tukufu Zuberi, PhD of the University of Pennsylvania, many museum and gallery curators are challenged by the controversial origins of the pieces in these collections. Aware that many precious artifacts were looted from their ancestral cultures and communities for use by rich, developed countries, these curators are faced with difficult decisions about how to return them to their proper places.

“How do we take that activated conversation and transform the narrative in here, seize this moment to transform the museum—the narratives in the museum—and the service we can provide to the community about the national narrative, about the international narrative, about the narrative of humanity?” asked Prof. Zuberi. To learn more about archeological justice in an interview with Prof. Zuberi, Click Here.

Creating space for conversation can be the first step. According to Prof. Zuberi, we must ease into our discomfort, to prevent history from repeating itself and to create a space for inclusivity and success. The story of the African Diaspora is still being written today, and an important duty of the behavioral health professional is to honor the past, to understand the present, and to work toward positive change in the future.
Honoring What Was Lost

The people of Africa once experienced riches—in trade, in culture, in love, and in human potential. They helped build and expand empires across the continent. The mixing of their many cultures facilitated the development of art through storytelling, pottery, architecture, and sculpture. Their natural resources put the continent on the map, making it a “curiosity stop” on the trade routes that stretched to other continents. Languages developed and religions spread, but as European interest grew, the downfall of the African people began. Learning and telling the story of Africa before the slave trade carries an extra level of complexity. Much of the most powerful information about early African civilizations may have been handed down through oral traditions that have never reached the 21st-century West.

Some empires were hidden in history books, and others were spoken of only if they had a strong connection to Europe. This birthplace of humankind and land of resources was overshadowed by power and the European will to conquer. As the slave trade expanded Westward, many Africans stepped through the Door of no Return, leaving behind families, traditions, and a natural way of life.

There is also no reliable way to assess the ongoing impact that colonization and the loss of some 12.5 million young, able-bodied people has had on Africa, its cultures, and its people. These losses were all the more destructive given that they began at a critical time in the development of the continent and the formation of its political and trade relationships with the world. In the words of one African historian, “There was not a single spot of our continent that was out of reach of enslavers. It is more than the physical destruction of people. There was no hope for anyone for centuries” (BBC News Africa, n.d.).

As Resmaa Menakem wrote, Africa neither was nor is an idyllic place, but it was the cradle of civilization and it is still a wellspring of ingenuity, creativity, and initiative. As you read in Chapter Two about the forces that captured, denigrated, and abused the enslaved sons and daughters of Africa, please remember the resilience that is rooted deep within their history.

And history is not yet over.
Chapter One, Africa: Ripe for the Plunder

African American Behavioral Health Center of Excellence

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