

The Enslaving of the Nation of Benin

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“Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery, none but ourselves can free our minds.” These are the words taken from a line of the famous Jamaican reggae artist Bob Marley’s “Redemption Song.” The writer of an online article on mental slavery stated, “Mental slavery cripples its victims, making them ineffective, self-destructive, self-hating and dangerous. A mental slave will not investigate nor research history or current events but accepts and believes what is told to him, whether true or not.” A people, a nation that was a victim of the horrendous crime of slavery, were the people of the West African nation of Benin.

The consequences of this crime, as I will show, were both physical and psychological. Enslavers hoped their victims would be completely altered and that they would be a people cut off from their roots with no identity, no culture, no past, and only a brainwashed future. The sole purpose of a slave was to submit to their masters and do what was instructed. The process of physically enslaving a person was accomplished through the process of mental slavery as well. The tactic used by the European colonizers resulted in one of history’s major, successful slave trades. The Transatlantic slave trade connected the continent of Africa with North and South America.

The country of Benin was one site that provided the bulk of slave labor to the New World. Its city of Ouidah housed many forts belonging to the Portuguese, French, Dutch, Spanish and English, each engaged in massive slave trading, with the Portuguese being the principal traders. Today, the city of Ouidah has a rich history, honoring its ancestors as well as educating its present and future inhabitants and those who tread upon its soil, about the grave sufferings of its forefathers at the hands of their fellow men.

The city of Ouidah was connected to the New World of the America because of the great demand for labor on huge American plantations. The New World’s first attempt at slavery was with the Native Americans, but this did not work, as many died from overwork and from Old World diseases. The second attempt to fill the demand for labor was through the introduction of indentured

servants, which also failed as quickly as it began. The Europeans then turned to African slave labor, which met the demand for cheap labor for their plantations. African slaves were immune to Malaria, which plagued the inhabitants of the New World during that time. The Transatlantic slave trade proved to be the best and the most successful solution.

I often wonder what led to the success of this era of the slave trade compared to the others in history. Upon visiting the country of Benin, I was privileged to go on a tour of the city of Ouidah.

I was enlightened to the journey my ancestors travelled in the process of becoming a New World slave. I discovered that each step of the journey was designed not only to enslave these people physically, but also to mentally bind them to conditions that they were going to endure for the remainder of their lives.

People that were sold in to slavery were taken by their fellow Africans and sold to the Europeans as captives or prisoners of war. This was a common practice among Africans and Arabs during that time. Olaudah Equiano, an African slave who wrote his memoir entitled *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, wrote that the practice of kidnapping people as slaves was popular in Africa; he and his sister were victims of this practice, which changed the entire course of his life. The journey into slavery began with the capture of the soon-to-be slaves taken from their families, clans, and villages, whether as prisoners of war, or just simply kidnapped as victims of raids to meet the demand for slaves.

Those that had committed crimes were also sold into slavery; however, the desire for acquiring slaves was so great that even people who committed petty crimes that would have otherwise been given a lenient punishment fitting the crime sentence, were sold as well. They were taken in chains from their point of capture to Place Chacha, which was the site of the old slave market, where the slaves were auctioned under a big tree, planted in 1747 by one of the Dahomey kings.

Chacha Place was named after Francisco Felix De Souza, a. k. a. "Chacha," a Brazilian slave trader who was given the job to manage the slave trade on behalf of the Dahomean king. He was given the alias "Chacha," because he was considered fast and efficient in the buying and selling of slaves. Here at the big tree, the slaves were stripped naked and examined like goods, from head to toe. They were examined to see if they had good teeth and sturdy body structure, if there were any deformities, and if the women were good for child bearing. The same way in which we examine and squeeze and poke and prod a piece of fruit or vegetable or meat before placing it in our shopping cart for purchase is the way the slaves were treated before being purchased at the hands of various traders, whether French or Portuguese or British, in exchange for guns, mirrors, alcohol and other items. They were then branded in their flesh with a hot iron bearing the initials of his buyer, to the pain, shame, and embarrassment of all those around.

They were chained at the neck and hands and then taken to the Tree of Forgetfulness, a tree along the slave route around which they were forced to

walk, in an effort to forget where they were coming from. The nation of Benin is actually the birthplace of the Voodoo religion, so this tree was selected and converted by the voodoo priest as the place where the people would forget their past when the ritual was carried out. Men were instructed to walk around this tree nine times. From this point, still chained at the neck and hands, they were taken to an area known as the Box Zomayi.

Most times they were taken to this area late at night, so they would not see where they were going and could prepare themselves somewhat for what was ahead. This box was a holding point where they waited to be transported to the ships headed for the New World. In the small, tightly closed box, many were packed together, regardless of gender, age or size, and locked up in total darkness and bound, so that there was no opportunity to escape. This inhumane type of lockdown was designed to disorient and confuse these people and acclimate them to conditions aboard the slave ships. Zomayi means “where the fire is not there,” and here the slaves were kept for three to four months, as they awaited the ships that would take them away from their native land.

Many died in these horrendous conditions, especially the very young, the old and the feeble. Those that did not survive this segment of the journey were buried in mass graves; those who appeared sick or like they would not make the three-month journey aboard the ships were buried alive as well in these mass graves. They were left there until death claimed their abused bodies. Today, a memorial known as Memorial Zoungbodji has been erected in their honor.

Those that survived this ordeal were then taken down to the coast to be loaded onto the ship heading to the Americas. Here The Door of No Return marks the end of the slave route, where the slaves would forever leave their homeland.

Aboard the ships, the slaves were packed like sardines in a can, and were to stay in that position for the three-to-four-month journey. In his memoir Equiano described the conditions in the belly of the ship.

[T]he stench of the hold while we were on the coast was so intolerably loathsome, that it was dangerous to remain there for any time, and some of us had to be permitted to stay on the deck for the fresh air; but now that the whole ship’s cargo was confined together, it became absolutely pestilential. The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. This produces copious perspiration, so that the air soon became unfit for respirations, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died—thus falling victims to the improvident avarice, of the purchasers. This wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains, now become insupportable, and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable.” (684)

As many as half of these slaves taken on these ships did not survive the journey. Some committed suicide by jumping overboard when they got the chance, preferring the sea to claim their bodies rather than their evil captors. Others died of starvation, illnesses or just the effects of the deplorable conditions aboard. They were flogged and beaten severely for displeasing their enslavers, for not eating or simply for trying to obtain food to nourish their starving bodies. A typical ship was packed with one thousand slaves, with only 500 arriving alive in the Americas.

The journey to the Americas so traumatized these people that the majority continued to live in slavery, not attempting to escape or to be freed for fear of once again experiencing such torture and abuse. They continued to accept the physical and mental abuses and destruction of their self-esteem by being told they were nothing, not human and only made and built for hard labor, to be used like animals for another man's pleasure and wealth. Their men were humiliated, embarrassed and devalued, as they stood helpless and watched themselves and their families living like animals or torn apart; as they watched and heard the sexual acts committed against their women, not being able to defend them. Women were treated as objects of sexual fantasy for their captors. Aboard ship, men were sometimes chained face down while women were chained face up so that they were easily accessible by their captors for sex. Some committed suicide; some brave ones attempted to escape; while the majority just simply accepted their fate.

Even on the plantation in America, the dehumanizing and brainwashing of these people continued to the point that they believed they were nothing and that their skin color determined their future or their status. House slaves and mulattoes (Mulattoes were the offspring of European men and African slave women) were viewed by their fellow slaves as higher class or more important than field slaves. In modern day Benin, the brainwashing continues. The descendants of Felix De Souza are still regarded as important, upstanding members of society. The Beninese people are brainwashed into viewing Felix as a merchant and inventor of palm oil rather than the man at the center of the destruction of their nation. The long-term effects of slavery on that nation are evident all over the country. There still remains a lot of poverty, corruption within the dysfunctional government, bribery in the business world, distrust among communities, an underdeveloped nation with lack of resources, superstitious beliefs and customs built on fear, and the belief that whites are superior to blacks.

There is still hope, however, for the nation of Benin. The Door of No Return became the Door of Return for some. A handful of the slaves taken to the Americas returned to their homeland of Benin, bringing with them a new culture in food, music, religion and knowledge of their ordeal on the journey to the New World and the life they experienced there. The city of Ouidah was developed as a walking history book and a tourist attraction. The nation does its best to preserve its history and to inform its generations of its past, so that they will have a

direction for the future. Slavery ended over a hundred years ago, but its effects live on in a people that are still struggling to emancipate themselves from mental slavery.

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