



Impact of the Slave Trade Through a Ghanaian Lens

The Atlantic slave trade removed 12.5 million people from Africa and probably resulted in the death of millions more. This violence and forced migration caused long-term suffering at the individual and societal levels. Three Ghanaian scholars give us a sense of its impact on the coast, the interior, and the far north of this region.



00:01

Trevor Getz, PhD, stands next to a canon at Cape Coast Castle

My name is Trevor Getz and I'm a professor of African history at San Francisco State University. I'm here at Cape Coast Castle in Ghana in West Africa. You know, 25 years ago, when I first became interested in African history, my high school world history text book had very little to say about Ghana. It was as if there was no information about the place. But in fact we know an awful lot about this country, and it's Ghanaian historians who help us to understand it and its place in world history.

01:00

Getz and Ashun sit across from one another in conversation; Video footage shows a long line of canons, and the surrounding sea

I'm here to talk to some of those historians about the Atlantic slaving system. I want to understand what Ghana was like before the Atlantic slave trade and how the Atlantic slave trade, which ripped millions of people from their homes and left devastation in its wake, changed this country and the lasting legacy that it has.

So, I'm here with Ato Ashun, the regional director for the Ghana Museums and Monuments Board. - Yeah. - And, where are we?

ASHUN: Currently, you are at Cape Coast Castle.

GETZ: Before Europeans arrived in this region, in general, what kind of political structures were there?

01:35

*Abusua: extended family units within a state
Image: a painting of a Ghanaian meeting*

ASHUN: Well, you know, before they came, we have the chiefs, working together with the elders of states. They would be today like the president and the cabinet ministers, running the system. Then we had the heads of the various family units. We call them "abusua." They are those together with the chiefs running the political system of the various places.

GETZ: So you have an executive, the chiefs, and then you have a legislative if you will, which is the elders.

- Of course.

GETZ: What was the economic system like here? Were people trading, was there commerce, were people growing things, was there industry?

ASHUN: In fact, we we would have the, the farming, growing things. We would have the commerce. And we had fishing, also.

02:12

*Text: Portuguese ship captains introduced the Atlantic slave trade to Ghana in the 15th century.
Image: drawing of several ships approaching a town*

GETZ: So, a pretty sophisticated commercial system, stable states with an executive, and a legislative branch. And then we have the arrival of Europeans and we have the Atlantic slave trade.

When did the Atlantic slave trade begin here?

ASHUN: You will talk about the fact that when the Portuguese came over here, they came along with it. But then, when you talk of the Cape Coast Castle, you talk about when the English took over, actually. So that was round about 1660, '65, thereabout.

02:38

Text: in the 16th century, high demand for enslaved workers on Caribbean sugar plantations brought British slavers to the region in large numbers. They made their headquarters at cape coast castle.

Image: A map of the region shows all of the towns along Cape Coast

Drawing of a slaver "inspecting" a slave

GETZ: At that point, is it involved in the slave trade?

ASHUN: Oh, yes, at that time, they had already started.

GETZ: And so what would happen when British and other European ships come up here to purchase people?

ASHUN: Two different occasions would happen. When the merchants would come to buy, and when the castle would supply their colonies.

GETZ: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. Okay, so there were actually dungeons built into this place right from the beginning?

ASHUN: Absolutely, we have two separate dungeons. We have the male's dungeon and the female's dungeons. We... total we could talk about 1,300 the minimum.

- People? - People. - At one time?

- At one time. Yes, and in the male's dungeons, we have five compartments making up the whole dungeon. And every compartment had 200 people at a time.

It is sad to see the dungeon because, you know, unlike other places where they were given containers where they could defecate into them, here in Cape Coast Castle, they create a sort of canals in the dungeon that they could do it into them. And whenever it rained, the rain would wash these away.

GETZ: Yeah, I mean, these must be terrible, terrible conditions, unimaginable.

ASHUN: Unimaginable.

GETZ: But here's what really shocks me. - Yeah. - We are sitting above the dungeons, essentially. The British officers were living above this all the time. Can you... I mean, it's unimaginable. So for it to be worth it, it must have made a lot of money for them? - Of course. - Yeah - Of course. This was very profitable for the European companies involved and such. - Mm-hmm.

GETZ: How did the Atlantic slave trade transform the economic system here?

ASHUN: Well, so, now human beings have become commodities. - Mm-hmm.

ASHUN: So, those who would dig for gold will now go into capturing people.

Those who would spend time farming are being captured. So, it changed the whole dynamics. We would start experiencing farming from this end because people will

03:08

Video footage shows the two separate dungeons. Each room in the dungeon is small, dark, and made of brick.

Text: Conditions were so bad that many captives died before even embarking on a ship

03:50

Footage of the castle, showing the living quarters of the British officers, which were directly above the dungeons.

start moving deep into the forest, running away from the radar of these wicked people. Yes, economics changed.

04:44

Text: Economic impact:
- Kidnapping and removal of laborers
- Decrease of productive activities
- People cannot live near their fields or mines

GETZ: Wow, so, okay, so it sounds like three things you're saying... is first of all, people are being taken away, so they don't work. Second, people who would normally be working on productive things like digging for gold or growing things are turning to slave trading because they have to in order to survive. - Right. - And, thirdly, people can't live where they would normally live, they have to go into the forest.

ASHUN: Of course. They have to keep moving.

GETZ: This is a huge transformation.

ASHUN: Yes. So, leave everything you've done behind Because you don't want to be captured.

05:13

Dr. Akosua Perbi, PhD, University of Ghana, is one of the world's leading authorities on the Atlantic slave trade

Drawing of a woman with her baby on her back being kidnapped; she is lead on a rope

AKOSUA PERBI: It was really a time of insecurity. People have to move with security guards and so because you dare not move alone. You'd always go in bands. Because you were not sure what would happen on the way. It also was affected the legal system in terms of the court system. Because where there were fines for various offenses, some case would decide that no, we are not going to ask you to pay any fine. Rather go and become a slave somewhere.

I heard the case of the king of Komenda in the 1700s, who... the brother did something he didn't like. And instead of asking the brother pay a fine, he asked the brother to be enslaved across the Atlantic. Not only the brother, but the wife and the children as well, you know. And then also, in some areas, like the Akwamu area, people resorted to kidnapping a lot. (speaking local language) And that also affected the traditional system. Because kidnapping was not a way of life in Ghana.

06:16

Text: By the early 18th century, the Atlantic Slave Trade had begun to impact the "Middle Belt" of Ghana, including the Kingdom of Asante

Image: the Map expands from the coast, showing the middle belt and Asante

GETZ: So I've been talking to people mostly along the coast about slavery and the Atlantic slaving system, and I'm very interested to get a view from further in the interior, from this region, which you are an expert in and further to the north.

06:44

Dr. Wilhelmina Donkoh, PhD, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, is

WILHELMINA DONKOH: Well, it affected the Middle Belt directly and indirectly. Directly in the sense that they wanted European goods such as guns, gunpowder, fabrics, and so on. And they had to deliver and retain whatever the Europeans wanted at a particular time. So, initially, it was mainly gold and elephant tusk or ivory. And they were so positioned that they could deliver these commodities.

an expert on the impact of the slave trade in this region.

08:13

Text: By the early 19th century, most enslaved people purchased at Cape Coast Castle were from Northern Ghana, captured in wars, and taken to the coast to meet growing European demands for enslaved laborers

And then, over time, as the transatlantic slave trade intensified and the commodities that were required in exchange for European goods, desired by the Asante and people in the Middle Belt, generally was human beings. Because of the plantation agriculture that was going on in the New World, most of the slaves that were taken out of Asante, for example, did not necessarily originate from this region. They had to look up north for them.

GETZ: What was the impact of the Atlantic slave trade in the north?

WILHELMINA DONKOH: Uh, to the north I would say it was more devastating in the sense that, if you remember, I said most of the slaves that were sent from the Middle Belt did not originate from here. They came from the north either as captives or they were brought in as tribute because parts of the north had been conquered by Asante, and as subjects of Asante, they had to pay homage and tribute to Asante. And this caused people in the north to war amongst themselves. And also some of them found the opportunity to trade. So if they were able to attack weaker neighbors, they would be able to acquire slaves, sell off, and get some money out of that.

09:26

Drawing of a village being attacked

GETZ: What do you think was the impact on that region of the removal of so many hundreds of thousands or even millions of people?

WILHELMINA DONKOH: First of all, I will say insecurity, because one was not too certain when there would be a raid. And there are so many stories about villages that were attacked, raided, and people taken away. And though some of them who found their way to the south and became integrated in southern societies, you know, tell of how they came to be in the south. So you can tell from them that there was a lot of insecurity. And definitely, if people are worried, trying to protect themselves, it's going to also hinder their major source of economic activity, which was agriculture. So, I'll say that in the north it must have had more devastating effect.

10:33

GETZ: What do you think have been the long-term impacts of the Atlantic slave trade on Ghanaian society?

WILHELMINA DONKOH: Now people hedge about talking about their roles in the transatlantic slave trade. It takes a lot of effort before people will actually open up to talk about it, talking to people who have lost family. You know, very often we just think about those who were sent away. But we do not think about those who were left behind. Because those who were sent out belonged to families. They had parents, they had siblings, some of them had children, and so on. And there are memories of those who lost loved ones to the trade. So that is very often hidden, it doesn't come out in the open.

GETZ: So we're actually talking about multi-generational trauma.

Yes. Yes. - Yeah, incredible. - Yes.

11:49

Getz and Ashun in conversation at the Castle again

ASHUN: Let me make it very simple. One simple thing it did was to take away our independence and bring in dependence. So that, you know, we are digging for gold ourselves, now when we get the gold, we have to bring you the gold dust, you bring us the trinkets. Now we're not able to have the opportunity to develop the system we're already having.

GETZ: Let me ask you, how did you first learn about the impact of the Atlantic slave trade here?

Video footage of a compartment in a dungeon

ASHUN: In my growing stages, I never had the opportunity to visit the dungeons... - Mm-hmm. - ...that much. I could see the castle pass by. But when I grew up a little bit, that was when I entered for the first time. And I had then grown, so I was like... that was why I said to you that I was sitting in the dungeons crying every morning for about a week or two, because, one, I was surprised that it did happen. Two, I was again surprised that even though I was born around the castle, never had the opportunity to, to visit it. So, then it was very difficult to take.

12:51

We follow a tunnel in the castle to a door at the very end

GETZ: So, can you tell me what the Door of No Return is?

ASHUN: You know, the very last point the African exited from the castles to the ships to be taken away, that very last point of the exit, is what is termed "Door of No Return." Because knowing that you will never come back in to Africa again.

What do you think about the fact that tourists come here to see this place that is really a place of enormous suffering?

ASHUN: Yeah. I think that those who are coming are here to learn so that we don't repeat the same mistakes. So it doesn't serve just as a tourist center, but a kind of educational center, sort of. So that everybody will learn from it and will make the world a better place than it is today.

13:35

GETZ: Between about the 1440s and the 1880s, over a million Ghanaians were ripped from their homes and kidnapped into the Atlantic slave trade. Multiply that by more than ten to understand the scale over the entire continent of Africa.

We know that this must have had a deep and dramatic impact on Ghanaian society. We can think about the psychological trauma it must have caused, the social breakdowns, the economic dislocation, and the political decline. But we don't really know about the impact of the Atlantic slave trade. Enslaved people don't leave behind a lot of records and a lot of people today in different parts of the world don't want to talk about that era. As a result, when we get Ghanaian historians together, we see some disagreement over the precise details of the Atlantic slave trade and its impact. But we also see a broad recognition that results were deep and they were lasting, that they were widespread and that they still haven't gone away today, and that we need to understand the scale of the impact of the slave trade in Africa if we are to understand the patterns of world history themselves.