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ON THE SLAVERY ISSUE IN WONDERS OF THE  
AFRICAN WORLD

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"But in fact, getting at the root of this problem, why did Africans (or rather African rulers, merchants and other decision makers) sell slaves to Europeans when it was so obviously immoral and harmful, is in fact a central problem and one that ought to be addressed seriously. It needs to be taken at least as seriously as why Europeans did the buying and transporting of slaves." (Thornton; H-Africa, 9 Nov 99).

I guess we may have to go back to some of the following authors, to get the big picture about enslavement and slavery, before we focus on Africa, and we have quite a range of scholars to consult such as: David Brion Davis, Moses Finley and Westermann for slavery in Greece and Rome; R. Hellie, *Slavery in Russia 1450-1725*; Carl Williams, *Thralldom in Ancient Iceland*; and A. M. Wergeland, *Slavery in German Society*. The most relevant for our discussion is probably my favorite author of course, Charles Verlinden in his *Slavery in Medieval Europe (L'ESCLAVAGE DANS L'EUROPE MEDIEVALE)*.

We have to find out why Europeans sold slaves in the Southern European/Mediterranean slave trade. There is a great deal of relevance here to Africa because some of the technologies of oppression and enslavement show up in the European derived Slave trade in the Atlantic by the 16th century, just a few decades later.

I have in front of me about seven articles written by Verlinden on the European slave trade in Southern Europe, including a pretty illuminating one entitled "Le recrutement des esclaves a Venise aux XIV et XV siecles"- which lists buyers and bought, and even the price of the victims, most of whom, in this case were Europeans. (A few were "Tartares").

We have a great analysis of slavery and the slave trade in Crete as well in his "La Crete, Debouche et plaque tournant de la traite des esclaves aux XIV et XV siecles," published

in the Bulletin de L'Institut Historique Belge de Rome, 1968. His "Traite des esclaves et traitants italiens A Constantinople," referring to slave trading and Italian Slavers in Turkey in the 13th and 14th centuries, is equally revealing. This trade concentrates around Southern Russia and a great deal of the victims were Circassians. Female children aged 4 to 9 predominated. We should note as well that in the Iberian Peninsula, both Portugal and Spain practised domestic slavery and ran local slave trading activities. Sicily, Palermo, Naples, Venice, Crete, Valencia were major centers of slave trading activities with trading ports at Muscovy, the Russian Black Sea, the banks of the Elbe, Crete and so on. Russians, Serbs, Albanians, Greeks, Circassians, Georgians and folks of the Iberian Peninsula were the hapless captives.

The obvious conclusion here is that slavery and slave trading was alive and well in Europe as late as the 15th century and what seemed to have happened was that this massive slave trade and sale of Europeans by Europeans diverted into the Atlantic and Africa, taking along with it some of the physical trappings

of enslavement, including shackles, branding, EuroChristianity etc., as well as increasingly racist notions of "the Other". In the long run what followed was a holocaust of bizarre dimensions.

The European slave trade carried out around Southern Russia, Greece, Italy and adjacent regions was a regional one whilst the European Slave trade carried out around the Atlantic was internationalized to encompass a large part of the world-and in the long run would basically "criminalize" an entire race and continent, to paraphrase Mazrui.

So African kingdoms, city states and empires, often hierarchical, came in confrontation with "vampire" European states and elites, with well established traditions of slavery and slave trading. Many of these "vampire states" were on recovery from a wide range of historical phenomena including the Pandemic called the "Black Death" and Mongol and Ottoman Turkish colonization etc. I make no claims to giving all the answers but I believe this tendency to suggest and insinuate that Africa and Africans invented slavery should stop.

## **AN AFRICAN SOVEREIGN'S OPPOSITION TO THE SLAVE TRADE: NZINGA MBEMBA OF KONGO, 1526**

King Nzinga Mbemba of Kongo (Afonso) on The Evils of the Slave Trade in a Letter to King of Portugal, Dated October 18,1526

.....And we cannot reckon how great the damage is since the mentioned merchants are taking every day our natives, sons of the land and the sons of our noblemen and vassals and relatives because the thieves and men of bad conscience grab them wishing to have the things and wares of this Kingdom which they are ambitious of; they grab them and get them to be sold and so great, Sir, is the corruption and licentiousness that our country is being completely depopulated and Your highness should not agree with this nor accept it as in your service. And to avoid it we need from those your Kingdoms no more than some priests and a few people to teach in schools and no other goods except wine and flour for the holy sacrament. That is why we beg of Your Highness to help and assist us in this matter commanding your factors that they should not send here either merchants or wares because it is our will that in these Kingdoms there should not be any trade of slaves nor outlet for them. Concerning what is referred above, again we beg of Your Highness to agree with it since otherwise we cannot remedy such an obvious damage.....

At our town of Congo, written on the sixth day of July.

The King Dom Afonso

This is an extract from Text 67 in C. Hilliard, *Intellectual Traditions of Pre-Colonial Africa*, McGraw Hill, 1998

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