

African Migrations Up to the 19th Century

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Migrations have taken place by slaves and by free people of sub-Saharan Africa for over seventy thousand years, beginning with the tropical areas of the Old World and followed by Eurasia and the Americas. These migrations, or Diasporas, began with religious voyages and cultural exchanges and evolved to the slave trade and the deportation of black men, women and children to new colonies as workers and servants. Long before the Atlantic slave trade grew, merchants from Greece and the Roman Empire traveled to the East African coast. Patrick Manning points out in, *African Diaspora: A History Through Culture*, that migrants came from southern Arabia to Eretria and Ethiopia in the first millennium BCE. As time went on, contacts grew with other regions of Africa and trade developed with Asia and Europe. This resulted in further migrations of black Africans as both slaves and free men. The Africans brought with them customs, music food preparation techniques and minerals. For example, the discovery of copper in Central Africa brought about a substantial trans-Saharan trade and more exchange of culture and migrations. As more Africans migrated to various parts of the world, they carried with them their culture and learned new techniques and ways of life. Whether they migrated as slaves or as free men, the Africans influenced their new lands and African identity was influenced forever. This paper will look at the effects of these migrations on African identity throughout the Diaspora. It will examine migration patterns, issues of race, racial hierarchy and culture.

MIGRATION PATTERNS

Before the slave trade began, sub-Saharan Africans traveled. Mansa Musa, [the Emperor of Mali], in the 1320s and, seven centuries earlier, the mother of Bilal ibn Rabah, followed paths across Africa and out of the continent that many had trod before them. Sub-Saharan Africans traveled beyond the continent as individuals and government representatives. For example, the Kingdom of Kush, which existed for many centuries in the Nile Valley, had conquered and ruled Egypt for half a century (712– 664 BCE).

Indian, Turkish, Iranian and Arab powers brought African slaves back to their countries and, while dominating them, interacted with them socially and sexually. As Christianity and Islam grew in influence, more people traveled to holy sites. Travelers from Indonesia visited the coast of East Africa taking Africans back with them. As contacts increased, Africans migrated to the Persian Gulf and South Asia. Africans were in leadership positions in India. While Africans traveled to other parts of the world, many migrated within the continent. They too brought with them their material goods and methods which mixed with the local cultures. As the Atlantic economy grew, the demand for labor would change Africa and create the largest migration in human history effecting over 10 percent of the African population.

The concept of slavery existed long before it affected sub-Saharan Africans. It existed with the Assyrians and in Egypt and spread throughout the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Wars created cheap captives that could be utilized in agriculture, mining and transportation. By the late 1500s, the demand for labor in the Brazilian sugar plantations had grown. The Portuguese brought slaves from Angola but they rebelled and set up their own community. They were

eventually defeated and the slave trade began in earnest. As sugar plantations developed on Caribbean islands, and American plantations grew, the demand for slaves grew. At about the middle of the seventeenth century, the number of Africans sent each year across the Atlantic in bondage came to equal and then exceed the number sent as slaves across the Sahara to North Africa. Thereafter, the trans-Saharan slave trade continued to account for about ten thousand enslaved Africans each year, while the number crossing the Atlantic kept growing, exceeding twenty-five thousand per year by 1700.

By 1850, this demand grew to approximately 120,000 slave exports per year. The captured slaves had many stops along their way to their new owners. In his video *African Slave Trail, Ghana (pt 1)*, Paul Williams records many of these places and describes what happened to the captured Africans at each location.

RACE

This story of black people in the modern world acknowledges but does not advocate the concept of "race". The history of black people is the history of black community. He proposes that one way to look at racial difference is color. Another way is biological difference. A third is religious belief and a fourth is purity of blood. All four of these contribute to our sense of "us" or "them." This sense of us or them feeds the concept of racism and is not contained to only one element. While one may at color, someone else may consider religion. Examples of all four elements exist in history. For example, people, who consider Jews to be different, typically focus of religious beliefs while people consider blacks to be different due to their skin color or hair. Race was certainly a consideration when it came to enslaving Africans.

RACIAL HIERARCHY

In addition to categorizing people by the four elements described, groups are often ranked using one or all of these elements. Historian Frank Snowden, after studying blacks in Greek and Roman society, determined that they were not clearly identified. As a result, there is no evidence that blacks were discriminated against in their societies. White plantation owners and anthropologists of the nineteenth century clearly ranked people by race, placing themselves on top. Manning contends that the fifteenth Portuguese had no problem enslaving African blacks because it was a natural extension of the medieval belief of purity of blood. A more recent example is the Nazi's belief in purity of blood, excluding Jews and anyone else who was not considered Aryan.

CULTURE

The idea of "black culture" or "African culture" may be misleading. These terms are widely used but can be vague. Africans have influenced the cultures they migrated to just as the people and communities of Africa have been influenced by many visitors and influences. For example, Trinidad and South Africa can each be labeled African, Western, Islamic, Indian, and Chinese in their culture all at once, even though the two countries are quite distinct from each other. Even while Africans were involved in Diaspora, they were creating new dance, music and art. They had to change the family dynamic as many were separated. They had to adapt but tried to hold on to traditions as they migrated. They carried their food preparation methods, religious beliefs

and rituals with them, blending into the new cultures and forming a new identity. Many of these have found expression in art and music and have contributed to contemporary society.

SUMMARY

This paper attempted to describe the African migrations up to the 19th Century and the effect of these migrations on African identity throughout the Diaspora. In the process, the migration patterns sub-Saharaners were identified along with issues of race, racial hierarchy and culture. It is clear that several factors affected the identity of those involved. Race and racial hierarchy contributed to the enslavement of the sub-Saharaners Africans. While the Arab, Iranian and Turkish masters interacted with the Africans, they considered them subordinate to them. The Portuguese and others had no problem enslaving thousands of Africans that they considered them inferior because of their "blood."

Even with the racism and indifference, everywhere the Africans migrated to, whether as slaves or freely, they contributed to the new society. They brought new foods, music, and traditions, blending them with the new lands and cultures. Those who traveled back to Africa brought with them new ideas and experiences that they blended with their existing ways of life. They adapted and innovated to their circumstances, creating new identities while holding on to as much of their old culture as possible. Africans changed or rebuilt their societies as a result of their travels and interactions with other cultures. The enslaved black people built a tradition of opposition to slavery that manifested itself in significantly weakening the systems of slavery. They developed new traditions and a new sense of identity that incorporated appreciation for their ancestral life as well as the new realities of slavery. Migration, whether forced or done freely contributed to a new identity.

References

Manning, Patrick. *African Diaspora: A History Through Culture*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2010. Print.

Williams, Paul. *The African Slave Trail, Ghana (pt 1)*. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yMt1g4pC908>. Web. 07 February 2014.

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