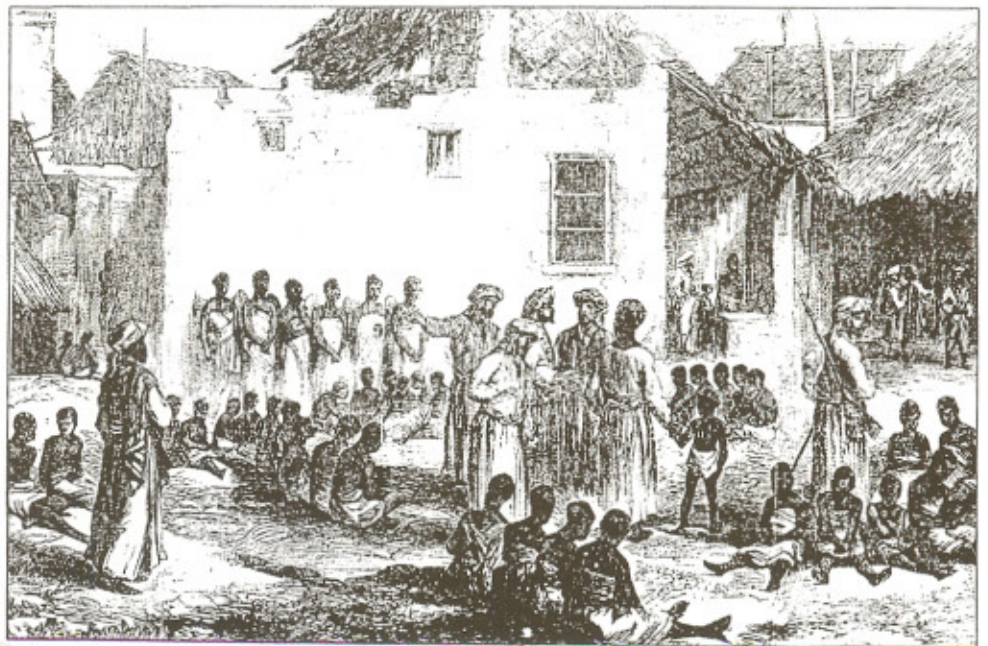


# The Price of Man





the Trade Contracts or agreements (al assientos) were granted for a fee to slave traders. Decrees such as the one granted the wholesale enslavement and export of African people to South Americanish colonies. Printed in Portuguese, it enlarging upon the stipulations of the dated nineteenth of October of seven-hundred and ninety eight: It is our wish exemption of Duties granted thereby to introduction of slaves dispatched from Para be extended to all slaves which, from Ports of Cacheu and Bissau or alike, are transported to the aforesaid of Para, subject to the same conditions in the above mentioned decree; with understanding that this Grant, as well as previous Grant to which this present one shall be limited to the exact span of ten years. The Revenue Council shall abide by this and see that it is done. At the Palace

of Queluz on the sixteenth of January of seventeen hundred and ninety nine.  
 "Bears the Hand of Our Lord the Prince"

IT MUST HAVE BEEN a strange sight: unfamiliar men arriving in tall ships from foreign lands. They came, they said, as friends—to trade for ivory, spices, and gold. They returned a few years later, this time wanting something more: "black gold"—men, women, and children to work as slaves on the lands they had just colonized. ¶ The fifteenth century found Europe wielding the sword for expansion, capitalism, and the spread of Christianity. Eager to claim souls for the Church, markets for the Crown, and materials for its emerging commercial economy, Europe, led by the Portuguese, sailed for Africa and lands beyond. In 1435, the Portuguese established trading posts along the coast of Senegal. In 1441, the Portuguese sailor Antam Goncalvez returned from Africa with ten Africans. So delighted were the Portuguese with the "black ones" that subsequent venturers returned with 235 more. In 1455, the Pope authorized Portugal to reduce to servitude all infidel people. ¶ But it was Columbus's "discovery" of the New World in 1492 and the introduction of sugar cane to the Spanish West Indies that turned slave trading into big business. The great sugar plantations needed cheap labor. At first the Spanish enslaved the native Arawak Indians. When slavery nearly decimated the native population, Spain turned to what it deemed the next best alternative—Africa—where



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 ...Serrás, que a  
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there seemed to be an inexhaustible supply of laborers.  The trade for men was never easy nor simple. In the early days, traders sailed from port to port, kidnaping a few Africans and trading for goods until they had enough to make the voyage profitable. They soon abandoned this for more efficient ways of securing captives—hiring African middle men to raid villages deep in the interior or pitting kings against each other, convincing them to sell their enemies as slaves. To entice Africans, white traders lay before them cloth, beads, rum, iron bars, and guns—lots of guns. Led by greed or the desire to protect themselves, African nations became swept up in the evil trade, eager to sell their foes for goods they wanted and weaponry they believed they needed.  Once captured, the enslaved Africans began the months-long journey from the interior to the coast. Thousands died making the trek, their bleached bones marking the trail for succeeding coffles (caravans of enslaved Africans). Upon arriving at the coastal town, the booty was laid before all to see—men and women stripped, examined, and traded for goods. Those sold were often branded, bound, and herded into slave dungeons where they were held for weeks or even months until there were enough bodies to fill a ship. There, deep inside the fanciful castles built by strangers and fortified by huge cannons, in cave cellars hewn out of massive rock with a sole grate for air and light, the transatlantic trade began.  The trade in flesh was an evil that would haunt Africa and her descendants for 400 years. It disrupted cultures, depopulated the continent, provoked wars, and took from Africa the brightest and the strongest. No doubt those Africans who participated in the trade lived to regret their involvement. In a letter to the King of Portugal in 1526, King Affonso of the Congo, an African baptized and educated by white missionaries, wrote: "We cannot reckon how great the damage [of the trade] is, since the merchants are taking every day our natives, sons of the land and the sons of our noblemen and vassals and our relatives... We beg of Your Highness to help and assist us in this matter, commanding your factors [buying agents] that they should not send 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..."  King Affonso's plea fell on deaf ears. The trade was under way, and once it began, it would be hundreds of years before it was halted.



The Price of a Slave: The goods that Africans wanted—beads, linen, iron bars, guns, and powder—and letters of introduction to slave brokers helped to ensure a profit. A woman could be purchased for a cask of rum and seven pieces of cloth; a man of prime for iron bars, two small guns, and powder. This letter of introduction asked Brew, a private trader on the coast, to use his hospitality and expertise to captain Dordin, who soon will be arriving on the







# Horrors of the Middle Passage

and Slave Vessels Historians state that fifty-five mutinies are recorded with passing references made to more than one hundred other attempts. Africans fought valiantly with little regard for their lives in efforts to take over vessels bound for Africa. Even the failed attempts were costly in terms of lives—both of the African crew. Africans revolted on the ship *Albion-Frigate* by using knives, even to them to cut their meat, to break their shackles and to kill a guard. After the mutiny was over, twenty-eight Africans had been shot or, upon seeing the futility of their efforts, threw themselves overboard.

FEW CAN IMAGINE the horrors that awaited my people aboard the slave vessels. The filth, the stench, the loss of life, the disease, the packing of men in spaces so tight that they could neither turn, nor stand, nor squat, nor sit, is beyond human comprehension. Yet such were the conditions that my people were forced to bear during the hellish journey from Africa to the New World—the journey known as the Middle Passage or Maafa (“the massive disaster”). For fifty days or more, my people were forced to live like animals, caged in spaces as tight as coffins. Captains shared two schools of thought. Tight packers herded as many Africans aboard as possible, arguing that the net receipts from sales of slaves would offset the number who died on board. Loose packers preferred to give their captives



"breathing room," trusting that more would survive the journey under sanitary conditions. So great was the profit from the sale of the enslaved that most European captains filled their vessels to the top, adding a second platform, if necessary, barely twenty inches above the heads of those below, to accommodate more.  Crammed in suffocating heat, held fast by chains bolted to the floor, forced to lie in their own waste, breathing air rancid with vomit, disease, and sickness—my people suffered unimaginable horrors. There, amid huge rats that gnawed through wood and flesh, men went mad. There on floors covered with blood and excrement, pregnant women gave birth. There the living awoke, chained to the dead.  The daily routine brought little relief. Meals—horse beans pounded to a pulp and served with slabber sauce, a mixture of flour, palm oil, and water—came twice a day, once if rations ran short. This they washed down with a half or perhaps a full pint of water, the total allotment for the day. Next came the dancing of the slaves—a cruel form of exercise and amusement conducted by slave captains to keep their human cargo in salable condition. The crew played the bagpipe or forced my ancestors to beat out a rhythm as the enslaved Africans, ankles rubbed raw from the friction of the leg irons, were made to jump about.  But the few hours above deck ended quickly, and each evening my people again were herded below. Nighttime became a horrible nightmare. The cries of the people rose, with utterances of sorrow that filled the air. An enslaved woman interpreted her people's lamentations and anguish, describing the noise and their howling as "owing to their having dreamt they were in their own country and finding themselves, when awake, in the hold of a slave ship."<sup>1</sup>  It was this journey that brought millions of my people from Africa to the West Indies, North America, South America, and the countries of Europe. We do not know how many died during the voyages; conservative historians estimate 50 million. Those who endured suffered a horror unmatched in history—a horror that words can only begin to describe.

**Slaves Aboard a Vessel** Open up the authentic rendering of a slave ship's deck. The famous diagram below shows the hold of the *Brookes* and how one captain packed his ship. More than 450 captives are shown stowed here, the vessel packed to capacity. On one occasion, 600 captives were crammed into the ship's hold; on another voyage, 609.

