The Arab Slave Trade

AiCE Africanism & Pan-African Studies — Thirteen centuries of raiding

Origins: Before Europe, There Was Arabia

The history of African enslavement by Arab traders predates the European slave trade by nearly a thousand years. Beginning in the seventh century CE, as the Islamic caliphates expanded across North Africa and into the Sahara and the Horn of Africa, Arab and Berber merchants developed systematic networks for the capture and transportation of enslaved Africans northward and eastward. This trade would continue, in various forms, for thirteen centuries.

It is important to state clearly what this lesson does not argue: it does not argue that Arab or Islamic civilisation is uniquely or essentially enslaving. Slavery existed across the ancient world — in Greece, Rome, China, India, and in African societies long before Arab contact. What is being examined here is a specific system: the large-scale, commercially organised transportation of enslaved Africans to serve Arab, Persian, and later Ottoman markets, over a vast time span and across multiple continents.

The Arab slave trade drew on three main route systems. The trans-Saharan routes carried enslaved Africans from sub-Saharan West Africa northward across the Sahara desert to the markets of North Africa and the Mediterranean. The Red Sea routes carried enslaved Africans from the Horn of Africa and East Africa across the Red Sea to the Arabian Peninsula. The Indian Ocean routes, centred on the Swahili Coast, carried enslaved Africans from East Africa to the Persian Gulf, Persia, India, and even as far as China.

The Zanzibar Slave Market: The Heart of Darkness in the East

If one place symbolises the Arab slave trade at its height, it is Zanzibar — the island off the coast of present-day Tanzania that served, under the Sultanate of Oman, as the epicentre of the East African slave trade. By the nineteenth century, Zanzibar's slave market was the largest in the world. At its peak, an estimated fifty thousand enslaved Africans passed through Zanzibar's market every year.

The process was brutal and systematic. Arab and Swahili slave raiders, sometimes working with African collaborators, penetrated deep into the interior of East and Central Africa — into the Great Lakes region, into present-day Congo, into Mozambique — capturing people through raids on villages or purchasing them from local chiefs who had themselves captured them in war. The captives were then marched, often for hundreds of kilometres, to the coast. Those who survived the march — many did not, dying of exhaustion, disease, or violence — were held in barracoons (slave pens) on Zanzibar before being sold.

The missionary and explorer David Livingstone, who witnessed the Arab slave trade in East Africa in the 1860s and 1870s, was so horrified by what he saw that his accounts played a significant role in building European public pressure to end the trade. He described villages depopulated, the ground littered with the bodies of those who had died on the march, and the systematic terror inflicted on entire communities by the slave raiders. His accounts are important historical evidence — though it must be noted that Livingstone's campaign against the Arab slave trade also served as justification for the European colonialism that followed, replacing one form of exploitation with another.

The Arab Slave Trade: Key Facts
Timeline: approximately 650 CE to the early 20th century — over 1,300 years.
Estimated total enslaved: between 10 and 17 million Africans.
Three main route systems: trans-Saharan, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean.
Zanzibar slave market: the world's largest by the 19th century — up to 50,000 people sold annually.
Destinations: North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, Persia, Ottoman Turkey, India, and China.
Distinctive features: high mortality of female captives; enslavement often included domestic and sexual service.
Abolition: the British forced the Sultan of Zanzibar to close the slave market in 1873; the trade continued illegally for decades after.

Scale and Consequences: What Thirteen Centuries of Raiding Did to Africa

The scale of the Arab slave trade is difficult to comprehend in human terms. Scholars estimate that between ten and seventeen million Africans were enslaved and transported across the Sahara, the Red Sea, and the Indian Ocean over the course of thirteen centuries. These numbers, large as they are, almost certainly undercount the true toll: the deaths of those who did not survive the journey, the destruction of communities left behind by slave raids, and the disruption of agricultural and economic life across vast regions of the continent.

Unlike the transatlantic slave trade, in which the overwhelming majority of captives were men destined for plantation labour, the Arab slave trade skewed significantly toward women and children. Women were taken primarily for domestic service, concubinage, and sexual service in Arab and Persian households. Children were particularly valued because they could be more easily acculturated. This demographic pattern had devastating consequences for African communities: a consistent drain of women and children over centuries disrupted family structures, reduced population reproduction rates, and destabilised the social fabric of affected communities.

In the Swahili Coast city-states — celebrated in the previous unit as centres of commerce and cosmopolitan culture — the Arab slave trade fundamentally transformed the nature of the economy and society. Cities like Kilwa and Mombasa, which had begun as sophisticated trading entrepots, became deeply entangled in the slave trade economy. The wealth that flowed through these cities was increasingly built on human misery. The cosmopolitan culture of the Swahili Coast cannot be understood without acknowledging this shadow.

Key Takeaways

The Arab slave trade operated for roughly thirteen centuries across three route systems, enslaving an estimated 10 to 17 million Africans and skewing heavily toward women and children taken for domestic and sexual service. Its effects reached even the celebrated Swahili city-states, whose cosmopolitan wealth was increasingly entangled with human trafficking. The next lesson turns to the second great system of African enslavement —

the European transatlantic slave trade — and the very different economic logic that drove it.