

HOMEWORK HELPSHEET / REVISION FILE

EFFECTS OF THE SLAVE TRADE: AFRICA

KP6

BACKGROUND

When the first Europeans came into contact with Africa they found societies on the West Coast that were settled peaceful and well ordered. The Kingdoms of Yoruba and Benin had a highly developed culture and the city of Timbuktu was greatly admired by European visitors. In the interior of the continent most tribes lived by farming and herding animals. The peace was occasionally disrupted by inter-tribal wars but these were short lived and according to European observers they were mostly shows of strength and resulted in few actual deaths. At first Europeans traded with Africa for gold, silver, copper, ivory, palm oil and spices. This changed with the discovery and colonisation of America and the demand for workers this created. By the eighteenth century Europeans came to see Africa simply as a source of slaves and there was no shortage of greedy African rulers willing to capture and sell fellow Africans. The trade in slaves caused terrible suffering and Africa lost millions of its youngest and best people.

Slavery existed in Africa before Europeans arrived. Slaves were taken as prisoners of war, in payment for debt or as a punishment for a crime.

African kings wanted European goods, especially guns, and were willing to trade slaves for them. Those who obtained a lot of guns became more powerful and could capture more slaves. Selling slaves made many African chiefs very rich.

By providing firearms Europeans encouraged and increased warfare and political instability in West Africa. Some states, such as Ashanti and Dahomey lived by organizing slave raids and grew powerful and wealthy as a result. Other less powerful societies were destroyed.

The slave trade led to a big increase in wars, raids and kidnapping. Tens of thousands of people could be slaughtered in a single battle. The wars and kidnappings made Africa a dangerous violent place where people could no longer live in peace and safety. Tribes who had lived in peace became enemies and their whole way of life was destroyed.

The loss of life that this constant warfare caused must have been enormous. The destruction of crops and granaries led to starvation. Some of the best farmland in Africa was abandoned or destroyed and people moved to less fertile areas to escape from slave raids and wars.

The long march to the coast by millions of captives shackled together in coffles, over hundreds of miles, must have been just as deadly. It has been estimated that something like 30 per cent of the captives died before reaching the coast.

Africa lost a large number of people who were taken as slaves – possibly 20-30 million. Most of the slaves taken were males aged 15-25 – the most important working age group.

The slave trade stopped economic development in Africa. The loss of so many people damaged farm production. Manufacturing and crafts were destroyed by cheap European imports. African cloth makers could not compete with cheap cloth from Britain.

It was during the slave trade and slavery that white people began to think they were better than black Africans. White traders who bought black people and packed them onto slave ships like cattle believed themselves to be superior.

Slave trading became the main source of wealth in Africa and was seen as a normal way of life. This was very damaging to African societies and is the root cause of many of the problems of modern Africa.