**Capture and Captives**

Left: “Gang of Captives Met at Mbame’s on Their Way to Tette”, 1861. [*Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* (Dec. 1865–May 1866), vol. 32, p. 719] Center: *Slaves: Shewing the Method of Chaining Them*portrays two men chained to one another aboard the slave ship *Favourite* in 1805. Right: Coffle of slaves coming from the interior, Senegambia, 1814.

For three and a half centuries, European slavers carried African captives across the Atlantic in [slave ships](http://slaveryandremembrance.org/articles/article/index.cfm?id=A0035) originating from ports belonging to all major European maritime powers—Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, [Britain](http://slaveryandremembrance.org/articles/article/index.cfm?id=A0116), [France](http://slaveryandremembrance.org/articles/article/index.cfm?id=A0097), and Brandenburg-Prussia. Traders from the emerging powers in the Americas also joined in the trade when possible and profitable.

European and American slavers exchanged goods for people with African traders along enormous stretches of [West](http://slaveryandremembrance.org/articles/article/index.cfm?id=A0127) and [Central Africa](http://slaveryandremembrance.org/articles/article/index.cfm?id=A0104), even to Madagascar and southeastern Africa. But most Africans boarded slave ships in six distinct regions of the African coast: Upper Guinea, the Gold Coast, Bight of Benin, [Bight of Biafra](http://slaveryandremembrance.org/articles/article/index.cfm?id=A0098), West-Central Africa, and southeastern Africa. During the course of the **transatlantic slave trade**, nearly half of all African captives were taken from West-Central Africa (Congo and Angola today).

As a result, those loaded onto European and American slave ships had already endured a number of passages of prolonged hardship long before their sale on the coast. After initial capture, African slavers might pass them through different African societies, through alien lands and cultures, for weeks, months, or years before confronting the most confusing of sights: European men, the Atlantic Ocean, and the slave ships. Though some were marched just a few miles to the coast, others had been forcibly marched hundreds of miles. It was a journey that took its toll on the African men, women, and children bound together by ropes, chains, or wooden yokes.

Different forms of servitude had long been a feature of many [African societies](http://slaveryandremembrance.org/articles/article/index.cfm?id=A0001), and Africa had long-established slaving systems and slave routes, such as those across the [Sahara Desert](http://slaveryandremembrance.org/articles/article/index.cfm?id=A0092) and along the Nile. These systems differed markedly from the transatlantic slave trade and racialized slavery that Europeans later developed to maximize [plantation production](http://slaveryandremembrance.org/articles/article/index.cfm?id=A0095) in their colonies.

There were various forms of indigenous African slavery, ranging from kinship arrangements to chattel slavery. Africans fell into slavery because of extreme poverty (as with children given away or sold by hungry families, for example), pawn slavery (which might be temporary), or violence, including warfare, slave raids, and kidnapping. Enslaved individuals could then be sold on to other communities in need of labor. There were child slaves and large holdings of enslaved people—upward of one thousand in number—by slave traders on the [edge of the Sahara](http://slaveryandremembrance.org/articles/article/index.cfm?id=A0092).

The coming of European sailors and traders, however, transformed the nature and direction of indigenous African slavery. At first, the growing European demand for Africans on the coast prompted a relatively small trade in humanity. Early European maritime traders acquired African slaves alongside other trade goods. They were purchased at various points on the coast from Arab and African traders, who, in turn, had acquired captives through interior African upheavals, including warfare and the dissolution of major African empires and kingdoms (notably Ghana, Mali, and Songhai). The earliest Africans acquired by Europeans were used for labor and domestic service in Spain and Portugal and later in the Atlantic islands of Madeira, the Canary Islands, and São Tomé. The European settlement of the Americas, and especially the invention of New World [sugar plantations](http://slaveryandremembrance.org/articles/article/index.cfm?id=A0095), transformed that trickle into a transatlantic flood.

Though some African societies resisted the European demand for slave labor, many coastal societies benefitted from trading with European ships. Europeans provided a host of tempting goods—textiles, ironware, exotic drinks, and firearms—all in exchange for African captives. Without African middlemen—local traders who had access to internal supplies of captured African peoples—Europeans could never have hoped to acquire more than small batches of Africans. Equally, without the commercial attractions of goods imported by the Europeans, African traders would have had little reason to secure ever more victims from their internal African suppliers.

Underlying the commercial exchange of goods for people on the coast were unequal power relations between European and African traders and resulting warfare and violence among various African leaders who provided most of the captives sold to Europeans. Europeans formed alliances with such leaders, providing them with the weapons and means to attack rival African communities, in return for captives. African slavers such as the Asante and Dahomey emerged as powerful states and kingdoms in the eighteenth century, controlling and dominating interior slave trade routes in their respective territories. Widespread turbulence and upheaval resulted from the European demand for slaves, and the transatlantic slave trade stimulated an increase in slavery within Africa itself.

Constant and unpredictable violent attacks and kidnapping clearly had a profound and damaging impact on those African populations that were victimized by the slave trade. Many African communities tried to defend themselves from slave traders and raiders by arming or even trading slaves themselves. Others retreated to more defensible geographical regions, such as lakes or escarpments, to escape attacks and capture. As a result, some African communities experienced stagnation because of dislocation. Elsewhere, states collapsed under the pressure of violent slave trading and extreme population loss.

# Africans thrown overboard from a slave ship, BrazilSlave Ship Mutinies

*Leona and Bulama* (London, 1794)] Africans thrown overboard from a slave ship, Brazil, ca. 1830s. This woodcut was originally published in *The Liberator*, the American abolitionist newspaper, 7 Jan. 1832 (vol. 11, p. 2) [Library of Congress photo, LC-USZ62-30833]

Slave ships were designed and equipped to deal with African resistance. From the earliest days of the trade, it was obvious that African captives, terrified though they were, would seize any opportunity to free themselves. Africans sought to escape even before they reached the coast, running away from their captors when possible. On board a ship, however, escape became more difficult. While the slave ship was anchored on the coast, European sailors loaded captives sporadically until the ship was filled, or it was time to sail.

The slave ship crew separated the men from the women and children when they were detained in the forts and castles. This process of separating African captives by gender continued on the slave ships. The first Africans brought on board may have been allowed a degree of freedom of movement. As the number of captives increased, however, and the crew was greatly outnumbered, the ship became a floating prison. It was then that the crew used chains, manacles, and padlocks produced by tradesmen in Europe to shackle mainly the adult males, who were kept in batches and locked below decks as the number of captives increased. Generally, the women and children had more freedom of movement and were not shackled together unless they formed a threat to the crew.

## **Attempts to Resist**

Despite the chains, shackles, and other repressive equipment of imprisonment carried by the captain and crew on all slave ships, Africans found ways of resisting. The weeks or months spent on the African coast, waiting as the ship filled with slaves, was a dangerous period for the crew. When the Africans were in sight of their land, and with boats passing to and fro between the ship and land carrying captives, open resistance was common. Approximately one slave ship in ten experienced some form of African resistance, and the rate was much higher for vessels embarking captives in Senegambia, which had the highest incidence of shipboard rebellion of any African region.

Shipboard resistance ranged from an individual act of defiance—an isolated act of violence, or a (normally fatal) attempt to leap overboard—to major revolts which descended into a life-and-death struggle between Africans and sailors. For example, the enslaved people aboard the Clare mutinied and successfully drove the crew from the vessel, landing and liberating themselves near Cape Coast Castle on the Gold Coast in 1729.

Sometimes an onboard insurrection resulted in the death of the enslaved and their captors, as was the case with one slave ship with a crew based in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1785. Rebellions could sink ships, as the result of a major explosion or fire. More likely however, African rebels were beaten back by the superior firepower and violence of the crew. Slave ships were designed to give the crew vantage points to bring their weaponry to play against the Africans. Other ships, and men of shore, rallied to the fight against rebellious Africans, and gory defeat was commonplace. Once defeated, African rebels were subjected to a ritual of grisly punishments and execution, all designed to illustrate to survivors (and to Africans watching on neighboring ships) the inevitable fate of defeated rebels.

## **Crews Prepared for Resistance**

Faced with the permanent threat of African resistance, the crew had to be permanently alert. A piece of wood, a tool, or any physical object carelessly left within a slave’s reach, could become a weapon. Even African children were distrusted by the crew, as they could pass dangerous objects to the men chained below the deck to facilitate escape and revolt.
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From the early days of the trade, though Europeans considered the Africans a profitable cargo, they were also a threat and a danger. The crew on all slave ships were outnumbered—often by a significant margin. Their control could not be maintained, and the voyage completed, without a reliable and violent means of keeping the ranks of Africans under control. Thus, to ensure the successful landing of their African captives, the crew used a repressive system of imprisonment, of chains, and of guns aimed at the slave decks. Such a system, the sailors realized, was required to combat the threat to their lives from possible African rebellion.

Scholars do not know how many Africans died in slave ship rebellions: they were numbered among the more than one million Africans who did not survive the Atlantic crossing. Most shipboard fatalities were caused by diseases and illness. The eleven million survivors entered the Americas physically and emotionally traumatized by the slave ship experience, by disease and suffering, by the deaths around them, and by the inescapable threat of the captain and crew. Through faith and resilience, Africans began making new worlds for themselves and their new communities, within the bounds of American societies bent on their coercion.

# African Diaspora Culture

Africans brought to the Americas the greatly varied cultures of their homelands, including folklore, language, music, and foodways. In forging new lives with one another, as well as neighboring Europeans and Native Americans, rich varieties of African diaspora culture took root in a New World decidedly shaped by the cultural innovations of Africans and their descendants.

## **Music**

European slavers deprived African captives of material possessions during the Middle Passage, but survivors throughout the Americas re-created variants of familiar instruments, if possible. When resources were not available, they created new instruments. Materials found in diverse environments throughout the Americas varied from gourds, sea shells, wood, bones, and string. On their own time, enslaved people used available materials to construct musical instruments, such as drums, rattles, bells, banjars (an ancestor to the banjo), fiddles, and other instruments. In the process, enslaved musicians created new forms of musical expression that informed social and religious life in the Americas.

Throughout the Atlantic, Africans and their descendants created distinctive forms of musical expression, depending perhaps on the most dominant or influential African ethnic group in their communities. Other factors included European and Native American peoples’ culture and religion. Numerous factors influenced how African, European, Native American musical traditions synchronized into new forms of music throughout the Americas. However, music in maroon communities[[1]](#footnote-1) and other isolated regions created the best possible conditions for the persistence of African cultural forms, whose meanings were adapted to New World conditions.

Fearing the use of loud instruments to communicate rebellions, Europeans created laws in the Americas to prohibit large numbers of enslaved people from gathering on their own time for funerals or other events. They also feared other features of African expression, such as drumming and calls on conch shells. Despite attempts to eliminate communication, enslaved communities throughout the Americas found means to communicate through song and music by using hidden codes in the words or meanings of their songs.

African and European cultures influenced each other in different ways throughout the Americas. From the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, in many places in Brazil and the Caribbean, Whites were but a small minority of the population, and their culture and lifeways were heavily influenced by those of the enslaved black majority. In British North America, enslaved people infused their musical culture with European instruments, songs, and dances, creating new forms of expression that incorporated and adapted elements of multiple cultural traditions.

The sacred music of Protestant and Catholic Christian religions profoundly influenced the instrumentation and songs of the African diaspora over the decades and throughout the Americas. Some enslaved people converted to Christianity while others rejected it as the religion of their oppressors. Those who attended church learned and reinterpreted western hymnal and choral singing for their communities. In some cases, enslaved people continued to use elements of African music in their religious expressions, including syncopation, polyrhythms, and call-and-response. In the United States, nineteenth-century enslaved people also combined dance, music, and Christian hymns in the “ring shout,” as a distinct form of religious worship. Elsewhere, as with maroons in Brazilian *quilombos*, combined dance, song, instruments, and martial arts in *Capoeira*, a form of self-defense disguised as a dance.

**Religion and Slavery**

Though Africans landed with few possessions, they carried their cultures, skills, and spiritual worldviews into the Americas. Wherever African religions took root in the New World, Africans and their descendants changed and adapted their belief systems to local circumstances and influences. Individual circumstances created variations in the way people practiced their faiths, what they believed, and what significance it held for their lives.

Throughout the Americas, religious beliefs emerged in distinct local forms: for example, *Santería* in Cuba, *obeah* and *myalism* in Jamaica, and *voodoo* in Saint-Domingue (Haiti). All—and there were many others—allowed Africans and their descendants a social space of their own. The continuation of the slave trade to Cuba and Brazil through the mid-nineteenth century consolidated and strengthened African religions in both countries. The best known perhaps is *candomblé* in Brazil. In both places, African deities and African religious customs survived in ways they did not elsewhere in the Americas. They also spawned secret societies which were important social institutions among local enslaved people and, again, often fomented unrest among the enslaved.

Though African religions were largely frowned upon by colonial authorities, they nonetheless survived and adapted, enabling enslaved practitioners to enjoy a degree of freedom in the way they conducted their social and private lives. For people whose lives were controlled by intrusive owners, it is hard to overestimate the importance of these religious practices.

Millions of Africans and their New World descendants became Christians, but there were marked differences between slave societies, notably in those dominated by the Catholic and Protestant churches. Catholics tended to welcome Africans, and to convert them simply and with little fuss. Protestant churches tended to insist on instruction and conversion before baptizing Africans into the church. In British colonies, the Anglican Church was notoriously hesitant and reluctant to convert enslaved people, largely because of the opposition and hostility of powerful planters in the colonies.

However, the emergence of evangelical dissenting sects in the eighteenth century, especially Moravians, Baptists, and Methodists, saw a major transformation, notably in the English-speaking Americas. Throughout the Caribbean and in North America, slaves were drawn in ever greater numbers to dissenting churches and chapels, converted by evangelical preachers, sometimes by their own masters. Among these expanding armies of Christian slaves, the Bible, but especially the message, imagery, and the stories of the Old Testament, spoke to their enslaved condition, and nurtured their growing demands for freedom and equality.

By the early nineteenth century, increasing numbers of slaves demanded their freedom as Christians. This black Christian voice was heeded and supported by fellow Christian sympathizers in the U.S. North and in the centers of political power in Europe. Christianity was, eventually, to prove one of the major challenges to slavery itself.

Outsiders—Europeans and slave owners across the Americas—tended to dismiss African faiths and practices as mere superstitions. They overwhelmingly viewed African beliefs as idolatry and heathen that lacked the essential customary religions, including religious text. The exception was Islam. It was no accident that those Africans who tended to be spotted as exceptional came from the ranks of African laborers who were practicing Muslims: those who could read and/or write, and those with regular habits of worship, which Christians recognized as paralleling their own religious routines. The rest—many millions—arrived as they left Africa, mere heathens in the eyes of the people who bought and sold them. Indeed, Europeans used the concept of "paganism" to justify their enslavement of people in the first place. In European minds, New World slavery brought the Africans within reach of Christian conversion.

*Slavery and Remembrance*. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation,
     slaveryandremembrance.org/articles/

1. Maroon societies were bands of communities or fugitive slaves who had succeeded in establishing a society of their own in some remote areas, where they could not easily be surprised by soldiers or slave catchers [↑](#footnote-ref-1)