The Selling of Africans

As slave ships neared their West Indian destinations, the crew prepared the human cargo for landing and sale. They allowed the slaves to shave, wash with fresh water, and take more vigorous exercise. Those bound for the larger Caribbean islands or for the British colonies of southern North America were often given some weeks to rest in the easternmost islands of the West Indies. French slave traders typically rested their slave passengers on Martinique. The English preferred Barbados. Sale to white plantation owners followed, and then began a period of what the planters called seasoning, a period of up to two years of acculturating slaves and breaking them into plantation routines.

The process of landing and sale that ended the middle passage was often as protracted as the events that began it in Africa. After anchoring at one of the Lesser Antilles Islands—Barbados, St. Kitts, or Antigua—English slaver captains haggled with the agents of local planters over numbers and prices. They then determined whether to sell all their slaves at their first port of call, sell some of them, sail to another island, or sail to such North American ports as Charleston, Williamsport, or Baltimore. If the market looked good in the first port, the captain might still take a week or more to sell his cargo. The captain of the James, who landed at Barbados in 1676, just as the cultivation of cane sugar there was becoming extremely profitable, sold most of his slaves in three days. “May Thursday 25th . . . sold 163 slaves. May Friday 26th. We sold 70 slaves. May Saturday 27th. Sold 110 slaves,” he recorded in his journal.

Often, captains and crew had to do more to prepare slaves for sale than allow them to clean themselves and exercise. The ravages of cruelty, confinement, and disease could not be easily remedied. According to legend, young African men and women arrived in the Americas with gray hair, and captains used dye to hide such indications of age before the slaves went to market. Slaves were also required to oil their bodies to conceal blemishes, rashes, and bruises. Ships’ surgeons used hemp with those suffering from dysentery in order to block the bloody discharge the disease caused.
The humiliation continued as the slaves went to market. Once again they suffered close physical inspection from potential buyers, which—according to Equiano—caused “much dread and trembling among us” and “bitter cries.” Unless a single purchaser agreed to buy an entire cargo of slaves, auctions took place either on deck or in sale yards on shore. However, some captains employed “the scramble.” In these barbaric spectacles, the captain established standard prices for men, women, and children, herded the Africans together in a corral, and then allowed buyers to rush pell-mell among them to grab and rope together the slaves they desired.

Reading Check  What happened to Africans after they crossed the Atlantic?

Seasoning

Seasoning followed sale. On Barbados, Jamaica, and other Caribbean islands, planters divided slaves into three categories: Creoles (slaves born in the Americas), old Africans (those who had lived in the Americas for some time), and new Africans (those who had just survived the middle passage). For resale, Creole slaves were worth three times the value of unseasoned new Africans, whom planters and Creole slaves called “salt-water Negroes” or “Guinea-birds.” Seasoning was the beginning of the process of making new Africans more like Creoles.

Reading Check

As ships neared their destinations, the crews prepared the human cargo for sale. The crew then attempted to find the best price for their slaves. Once in the marketplace, slaves were subjected to the humiliation of examination and sale.

Teaching Notes

Historian James Walvin estimates that one-third of the new Africans died during their first three years in the West Indies. African men died at a greater rate than African women, perhaps because they did the more arduous fieldwork.

Recommended Reading


In the West Indies, this process involved not only an apprenticeship in the work routines of the sugar plantations on the islands. It was also a means of preparing many slaves for resale to North American planters, who preferred “seasoned” slaves to “unbroken” ones who came directly from Africa. In fact, most of the Africans who ended up in the British colonies of North America before 1720 had gone first to the West Indies. By that date, the demand for slave labor in the islands had become so great that they could spare fewer slaves for resale to the North American market. Thereafter, as a result, slave imports into the tobacco-, rice-, and later cotton-growing regions of the American South came directly from Africa and had to be seasoned by their American masters.

In either case, seasoning was a disciplinary process intended to modify the behavior and attitude of slaves and make them effective laborers. As part of this process, the slaves’ new masters gave them new names: Christian names, generic African names, or names from classical Greece and Rome (such as Jupiter, Achilles, or Plato).

The seasoning process also involved slaves learning European languages. Masters on the Spanish islands of the Caribbean were especially thorough in this regard. Consequently, the Spanish of African slaves and their descendants, although retaining some African words, was easily understood by any Spanish-speaking person. In the French and English Caribbean islands and in parts of North America, however, slave society produced Creole dialects that in grammar, vocabulary, and intonation had distinctive African linguistic features. These Africanized versions of French and English—including the Gullah dialect still prevalent on South Carolina’s sea islands and the Creole spoken today by most Haitians—were difficult for those who spoke more standardized dialects to understand.

Seasoning varied in length from place to place. Masters or overseers broke slaves into plantation work by assigning them to one of several work gangs. The strongest men joined the first gang, or great gang, which did the heavy fieldwork of planting and harvesting. The second gang, including women and older men, did lighter fieldwork, such as weeding. The third gang, composed of children, worked shorter hours and did such tasks as bringing food and water to the field gangs. Other slaves became domestic servants. New Africans served apprenticeships with old Africans from their same ethnic group or with Creoles.

Some planters looked for cargoes of young people, anticipating that they might be more easily acculturated than older Africans. One West Indian master in 1792 recorded his hopes for a group of children: “From the late Guinea sales, I have purchased altogether twenty boys and girls, from ten to thirteen years old.” He emphasized that “it is the practice, on bringing them to the estate, to distribute them in the huts of Creole blacks, under their direction and care, who are to feed them, train them to work, and teach them their new language.”

Planters had to rely on old Africans and Creoles to train new recruits because white people were a minority in the Caribbean. Later, a similar demographic pattern developed in parts of the cotton-producing
Middle Passage 61

American South. As a result, in both regions African custom shaped the cooperative labor of slaves in gangs. But the use of old Africans and Creoles as instructors and the appropriation of African styles of labor should not suggest leniency. Although the plantation overseers, who ran day-to-day operations, could be white, of mixed race, or black, they invariably imposed strict discipline. **Drivers**, who directed the work gangs, were almost always black, but they carried whips and frequently punished those who worked too slowly or showed disrespect. Planters assigned the more difficult new Africans to the strictest overseers and drivers.

Planters housed slaves undergoing seasoning with the old Africans and Creoles who were instructing them. The instructors regarded such additions to their households as economic opportunities. The new Africans provided extra labor on the small plots of land that West Indian planters often allocated to slaves. Slaves could sell surplus root vegetables, peas, and fruit from their gardens and save to purchase freedom for themselves or others. Additional workers helped produce larger surpluses to sell at local markets, thereby cutting the amount of time required to accumulate a purchase price.

New Africans also benefited from this arrangement. They learned how to build houses in their new land and to cultivate vegetables to supplement the food the planter provided. Even though many Africans brought building skills and agricultural knowledge with them to the Americas, old Africans and Creoles helped teach them how to adapt what they knew to a new climate, topography, building materials, and social organization.

**Reading Check** What was seasoning and why was it used?

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**Masters and Slaves in the Americas**

By what criteria did planters assess the successful seasoning of new Africans? The first criterion was survival. Already weakened and traumatized by the middle passage, many Africans did not survive seasoning.

A second criterion was that the Africans had to adapt to new foods and a new climate. The foods included salted codfish traded to the West Indies by New England merchants, Indian corn (maize), and varieties of squash not available in West Africa. The Caribbean islands like West Africa were tropical, but North America was much cooler.

A third criterion was learning a new language. Planters did not require slaves to speak the local language, which could be English, French, Spanish, Danish, or Dutch, perfectly. But slaves had to speak a Creole dialect well enough to obey commands. A final criterion was psychological. When new Africans ceased to be suicidal, planters assumed they had accepted their status and their separation from their homeland.

**Reading Check**
Seasoning was a disciplinary process designed to modify the behavior and attitude of slaves. Seasoning was meant to break connections with Africa. It was also designed, in the minds of slaveholders, to produce efficient and effective laborers.

**Recommended Reading**
It would have suited the planters if their slaves had met all these criteria. Yet that would have required the Africans to have been thoroughly desocialized by the middle passage, and they were not. As traumatic as that voyage was, most of the Africans in the Americas had not been stripped of their memories or their culture. When their ties to their villages and families were broken, they created bonds with shipmates. Such bonds became the basis of new extended families.

As this suggests, African slaves did not lose all their culture during the middle passage and seasoning in the Americas. Their value system never totally replicated that of the plantation. Despite their ordeal, the Africans who survived the Atlantic slave trade and slavery in the Americas were resilient. Seasoning did modify behavior, but it did not obliterate African Americans’ cultural roots.

The Ending of the Atlantic Slave Trade

The cruelties associated with the Atlantic slave trade contributed to its abolition in the early nineteenth century. During the late 1700s, English abolitionists led by Thomas Clarkson, William Wilberforce, and Granville Sharp began a religiously oriented moral crusade against both slavery and the slave trade. Because the English had dominated the Atlantic trade since 1713, Britain’s growing antipathy became crucial to the trade’s destruction. But it is debatable whether moral outrage alone prompted this humanitarian effort. By the late 1700s, England’s economy was less dependent on the slave trade and the entire plantation system than it had been previously. To maintain its prosperity, England needed raw materials and markets for its manufactured goods. Slowly but surely its industrialists realized it was more profitable to invest in industry and other forms of trade and to leave Africans in Africa.

So morals and economic self-interest were combined when Great Britain abolished the Atlantic slave trade in 1807 and tried to enforce that abolition on other nations through a naval patrol off the coast of Africa. The U.S. Congress joined Britain in outlawing the Atlantic trade the following year. Although American, Brazilian, and Spanish slavers continued to defy these prohibitions for many years, the forced migration from Africa to the Americas dropped to a tiny percentage of what it had been at its peak. Ironically, it was the coastal kingdoms of Guinea and western Central Africa that fought most fiercely to keep the trade going because their economies had become dependent on it. This persistence gave the English, French, Belgians, and Portuguese an excuse to establish colonial empires in Africa during the nineteenth century in the name of suppressing the slave trade.