

Slavery as a Universal Institution A Complete History

From Antiquity to the 2026 UN Resolution — Including Africa's Own Role

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Preface

The United Nations General Assembly resolution of March 2026, adopted with 123 votes in favour and 52 abstentions (including the Netherlands), declares the transatlantic slave trade "the gravest crime against humanity" and calls for reparatory justice, formal apologies, and financial compensation directed primarily at Western nations. The resolution was spearheaded by Ghana on behalf of the African Union and has reignited a global debate about historical accountability.

What this resolution — and much of the media coverage surrounding it — largely omits is equally important: Africa's own extensive participation in the slave trade over many centuries, the parallel Arab-Muslim slave trade lasting over thirteen hundred years, and the fundamental reality that slavery was not a Western invention but a near-universal feature of human civilisation from antiquity onward. This essay provides the historical context that is missing from the current political debate. It does not diminish the horror of the transatlantic trade; rather, it insists on the completeness of truth that any genuine reckoning requires.

Part I: The Universal Origins of Slavery

Slavery is as old as recorded human civilisation. It appears in the earliest written documents of Mesopotamia, in the law codes of Babylon, in the temple economies of Sumer. The claim that slavery was a peculiarly Western or European institution is not merely misleading — it is historically illiterate.

In **ancient Greece**, scholars estimate that slaves constituted between 10 and 33 percent of the total population, varying by region and period. Athens — the celebrated birthplace of democracy — ran its economy on slave labour. The great philosophers did not merely tolerate this; they defended it intellectually. Aristotle explicitly argued that some human beings are "slaves by nature," fit only for obedience, and that the institution was both just and necessary for civilised life. Spartan society rested on the *helots*, an entire ethnically distinct population kept in permanent servitude and subjected to ritual killing to prevent rebellion.

In the **Roman Empire**, slavery was not a marginal institution but the structural foundation of the economy. Estimates suggest that at its height, 25 percent or more of the population of Rome was enslaved — primarily war captives from conquered peoples across three continents. The Roman *latifundia* (large plantation estates) of southern Italy and Sicily were worked almost exclusively by slaves, creating an economic model that would later be consciously replicated in the Americas. Roman law provided the legal vocabulary for chattel slavery — the complete ownership of a human being as moveable property — that subsequent civilisations would borrow and expand.

In **ancient China, India, Persia, Assyria, Babylon, and Egypt**, forms of forced labour and debt bondage were universal features of social organisation. The great monuments of antiquity — pyramids, temples, palaces, irrigation systems — were built with the labour of enslaved or coerced human beings. The Maya and Aztec civilisations in the Americas practised slavery and human sacrifice. The Iroquois Confederacy enslaved prisoners of war. The institution was not an anomaly: it was the norm.

As historian David Eltis has observed, "almost all peoples have been both slaves and slaveholders at some point in their histories." French historian Fernand Braudel, writing in 1984, noted that slavery had been *endemic in Africa* and "part of the structure of everyday life" throughout the 15th to 18th centuries, taking forms ranging from court slaves and military slaves to domestic servants and agricultural labourers.

This global baseline is not a moral justification for anything. It is the necessary foundation for an honest historical conversation.

Part II: Slavery in Africa Before and Independent of European Contact

One of the most persistent distortions in contemporary discourse is the image of pre-colonial Africa as a continent of free and peaceful societies disrupted from outside by European slave traders. The historical record is far more complex.

Internal African Slavery

Slavery existed across Africa long before the first Portuguese ship sailed down the West African coast in the 1440s. In virtually every major African kingdom or empire, slaves were acquired through warfare, judicial punishment, debt bondage, or tribute. They served as agricultural labourers, domestic workers, soldiers, court officials, and in some cases ritual sacrificial victims.

In the **Mali Empire** of the 13th and 14th centuries — often celebrated for its wealth and sophistication, exemplified by Mansa Musa's famous pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324, during which he reportedly brought 12,000 slaves — slavery was thoroughly institutionalised. The same is true of the **Songhai Empire**, which succeeded Mali as the dominant power of the western Sahel and in which slave labour was central to agricultural production, trade, and military organisation.

The **Kanem-Bornu Empire**, spanning what is now Chad, Niger, and Cameroon, engaged in slave raiding and trading from as early as 900 AD — centuries before any European involvement. Slaves were traded northward across the Sahara to Arab markets, and the economy of the region was partly built on this commerce.

Among the **Asante** (Ashanti) of present-day Ghana, slavery was explicitly understood as a natural institution. The scholar Boniface I. Obichere, drawing on the work of R.S. Rattray and Ivor Wilks, summarises the philosophical attitude of Asante society toward slavery as viewing it as "a natural institution — time-honoured, practiced by the ancestors, and sanctioned and approved by the gods." Slaves in Asante could be obtained through warfare, judicial punishment, debt bondage (pawning), or purchase in slave markets. Ivor Wilks has demonstrated that slave labour was "of crucial importance to the Asante economy," underpinning gold mining, agriculture, and military capacity. Asante kings waged wars specifically to acquire captives, and the state was built, in part, on the proceeds of both domestic slavery and slave exports.

In parts of pre-colonial West Africa, the proportion of enslaved people in the total population reached extraordinary levels. By the late 19th century — largely as a result of the interaction between internal African slavery and the Atlantic trade — some historians estimate that slaves constituted up to half the population of certain West African societies.

The Aro Confederacy

A particularly important and underexamined case is the **Aro Confederacy** of present-day southeastern Nigeria. The Aro were one of the most organised and prolific slave exporters in West African history, active from around 1690 to 1902. Drawing on their control of the sacred Chukwu oracle, which lent religious legitimacy to their operations, the Aro built extensive trading networks across the region. Estimates suggest they were responsible for exporting approximately 850,000 people into the transatlantic trade. They combined commercial organisation with military force, launching wars and raids to capture more people as their business expanded.

Part III: African Kingdoms as Active Partners in the Transatlantic Trade

The transatlantic slave trade, which transported an estimated 12.5 million Africans across the Atlantic between the 16th and 19th centuries (with roughly 10.7 million surviving the Middle Passage), is frequently described in terms that imply a simple binary: European perpetrators and African victims. The actual history was a business partnership — vastly unequal in its long-term consequences for Africa, but a partnership nonetheless.

European traders were, in most cases, incapable of conducting large-scale slave raids into the African interior. The continent's diseases (especially malaria), the resistance of armed African populations, and the sheer logistical complexity meant that Europeans operated almost exclusively from coastal trading posts. They were buyers. African kingdoms were the sellers and suppliers. As the Bill of Rights Institute's educational history note puts it: Europeans "were generally prevented by disease and Africans wielding metal weapons from raiding the African continent," which forced them to deal with African states "as equal business partners."

The Atlantic slave trade peaked in the late 18th century, and the raids and wars that supplied it were "typically carried out by African states, such as the Bono State, Oyo Empire, Kingdom of Benin, Ashanti Confederacy, Aro Confederacy and the kingdom of Dahomey."

The Kingdom of Dahomey: A Case Study

The **Kingdom of Dahomey** (in present-day Benin) is perhaps the most thoroughly documented example of an African state whose political economy was built on slave raiding and export. Founded in the early 17th century on the Abomey plateau, Dahomey came to dominate the coastal slave trade through a series of military conquests.

Under King Agaja, who came to the throne in 1718, Dahomey conquered the neighbouring kingdom of Allada in 1724 and the coastal kingdom of Whydah in 1727, thereby taking control of the key ports of Porto Novo and Ouidah. These seizures gave Dahomey direct access to European slave traders and transformed the kingdom into what the scholar Robin Law has described as a state whose militarism was "best understood as a consequence of increased warfare stimulated by the overseas market for war captives."

At its peak, Dahomey supplied an estimated 20 percent of the total transatlantic slave trade. Slave sales became the kingdom's primary source of revenue. The state's famous military force — including the celebrated all-female regiment of soldiers sometimes called the "Amazons" — functioned partly as an instrument for capturing people in wars and raids on neighbouring peoples.

The dependency of Dahomey's ruling class on the trade is stated with striking directness by King Ghezo, who ruled from 1818 to 1858. When British naval officer Frederick Forbes visited Dahomey in the 1840s on a mission to convince the king to end his participation in the slave trade (Britain having abolished its own involvement in 1807), Ghezo replied with candour: "*The slave trade is the ruling principle of my people. It is the source of their glory and their wealth.*" Ghezo resisted British abolition pressure for decades, eventually suggesting only a gradual withdrawal — contingent on British economic compensation and investment in palm oil production.

This is not the narrative of a victim. It is the narrative of a sovereign state making calculated economic and political decisions within the opportunities that the Atlantic trade presented.

The Oyo Empire and Others

The **Oyo Empire** (Yoruba, in present-day Nigeria) was at its height one of the most powerful states in West Africa. It participated actively in the slave trade, supplying captives from its wars of expansion, and at various points dominated Dahomey itself, extracting tribute partly in the form of enslaved people. The **Kingdom of Benin** and the **Fante Confederacy** also played significant roles as suppliers and intermediaries.

Even within the internal dynamics of the trade, the pattern of victimisation was complex. In 1724, when Dahomey conquered Allada, many of Allada's own people — a society that had itself grown wealthy from the slave trade — were sold into slavery. The predatory systems of the Atlantic trade could and did consume their own participants.

Part IV: The Arab-Muslim Slave Trade — The Forgotten Thirteen Centuries

Before the first transatlantic slave voyage, and long after the last, another massive system of human trafficking operated across the Sahara, the Red Sea, and the Indian Ocean. The Arab-Muslim slave trade is described by the scholar David Gakunzi as "deliberately ignored and considered a taboo subject" in contemporary global discourse.

Scale and Duration

The Arab-Muslim slave trade began formally in the 7th century CE, shortly after the rise of Islam, and continued — in legal form — until the mid-20th century. Saudi Arabia and Yemen abolished legal slavery only in 1962; Oman in 1970; Mauritania as recently as 1981. Estimates of total numbers vary, but the historian Elikia M'Bokolo, writing in *Le Monde Diplomatique* in 1998, offered a breakdown that has become widely cited: approximately four million slaves exported via the Red Sea, four million through the Swahili ports of the Indian Ocean, and perhaps nine million along the trans-Saharan routes. Combined, these figures approach or exceed the total of the transatlantic trade, stretched over a period more than twice as long.

Paul Lovejoy estimates that around six million people were transported across the Sahara alone between 650 and 1500 AD — before the transatlantic trade had even begun. Other scholars place

the total of the combined Arab-Muslim slave trade at between 11 and 18 million over thirteen centuries.

Character and Consequences

The Arab slave trade differed from the transatlantic trade in significant ways. While the Atlantic trade was overwhelmingly focused on male agricultural labourers for plantation economies, the Arab trade placed far greater emphasis on women and children for domestic service and sexual slavery. Castration of male slaves was widespread — eunuchs could command prices seven times those of non-castrated males and were used as harem guards, court administrators, and tutors. The mortality rates in the trans-Saharan crossing were devastating; estimates suggest that up to 50 percent of slaves died before reaching their destinations.

Zanzibar, under the rule of the Omani Sultan from the late 17th century, became one of the world's great slave trading hubs. Arab merchants based there exported up to 50,000 enslaved Africans per year at the trade's height in the 19th century, connecting the interior of East Africa to markets across the Persian Gulf, Arabian Peninsula, and Indian subcontinent.

The trade also had an ideological dimension. The Tunisian Arab historian Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) wrote that Africans were suited to slavery because of "their lower degree of humanity." Such racial rationalisation was not unique to Europeans.

Why It Is Forgotten

The relative absence of the Arab-Muslim trade from contemporary reparations debates is not an accident of history. It reflects the political economy of the current moment: the 2026 UN resolution was drafted by African and Global South states seeking accountability from Western nations. Arab states — many of which were deeply implicated in a slave trade more ancient and, arguably, more geographically extensive than the European one — are not the political target of this campaign. The selectivity is strategic. Journalist David Gakunzi has posed the question directly: when will there be an international day to commemorate the victims of the Arab-Muslim slave trade? When will educational materials address this history with the same urgency as the Atlantic trade?

Part V: What Made the Transatlantic Trade Distinctive

To acknowledge the universality of slavery is not to deny that the transatlantic trade had features that set it apart in historically significant ways.

Racial ideology. The transatlantic trade developed, over time, a systematic racial justification for slavery that was largely absent from earlier forms of the institution. In ancient Rome, Greece, or the Arab world, slavery was primarily justified by conquest, debt, or religious difference — not by permanent, inherited racial status. The transatlantic system created a framework in which dark skin became, in legal and social terms, presumptive evidence of slave status. This racial architecture had consequences that outlasted the trade itself.

Industrial scale and plantation economy. The integration of African slave labour into the sugar, tobacco, and cotton plantation economies of the Americas created a system of unprecedented economic intensity. The treatment of enslaved people as productive units in a rationalised agricultural enterprise — rather than as household servants, soldiers, or artisans — was distinctive in its systematic dehumanisation.

Demographic impact on Africa. The scale of extraction — estimated at between 12 and 20 million people over three centuries, concentrated in specific coastal regions of West and Central Africa — had severe demographic consequences. Regions that supplied the most slaves suffered long-term population depletion and destabilisation that compounded the harms of later colonialism.

These features matter and deserve acknowledgment. They do not, however, support the conclusion that the West alone bears responsibility for a practice that was, at its structural roots, built on African supply chains, Arab precedent, and universal human tendencies toward the exploitation of the vulnerable.

Part VI: The Western Abolition — An Unprecedented Achievement

What is historically distinctive about the West is not the invention of slavery but its *abolition*.

Organised moral opposition to slavery as an institution — rather than to specific abuses within it — emerged first and most powerfully in the Protestant Anglo-American world in the 18th century. Quaker abolitionists in Pennsylvania and Britain from the 1750s onward, the formation of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade in London in 1787, and the parliamentary campaigns of William Wilberforce produced the British Slave Trade Act of 1807 — the first major legal step toward suppression of the trade. After 1807, the British Royal Navy deployed a West Africa Squadron that patrolled the Atlantic for slaving vessels, intercepting over 1,600 ships and liberating approximately 150,000 enslaved people over several decades. Britain negotiated abolition treaties with dozens of states, including West African kingdoms.

This was not merely a legal formality. Britain expended significant diplomatic, military, and financial resources to impose abolition on reluctant partners — including the very African kingdoms that depended on the trade. King Ghezo of Dahomey resisted British pressure for decades. The Ashanti resisted. Arab slave traders continued for a century after British abolition of the Atlantic trade.

No comparable indigenous abolitionist movement emerged in West Africa, in the Arab world, or in most other regions where slavery flourished. This is a historical fact, not a moral condemnation of entire civilisations. But it belongs in the story.

Part VII: The 2026 UN Resolution — Selective History in the Service of Politics

Against this historical backdrop, the 2026 UN resolution invites critical scrutiny.

Ghana's reference to the 1235 Kouroukan Fouga (Manden Charter) of the Mali Empire as evidence that slavery violated universal African norms deserves examination. The charter does contain passages protecting human dignity. But a careful reading reveals that it *regulated* the treatment of slaves rather than abolishing the institution. Slavery remained ubiquitous in the Mali Empire and across the Sahel. Citing this document as proof of pre-colonial African abolitionism is an anachronism.

The resolution's framing of the transatlantic trade as uniquely "the gravest crime against humanity" raises an ethical question: by what measure? The trans-Saharan and Indian Ocean trades affected comparable numbers of people over a far longer period, with equally brutal conditions and, in the case of castration rates, arguably greater physical destruction. The Holocaust, the Stalinist gulag, and other 20th-century atrocities involved industrialised murder on a scale without parallel in earlier history. The claim of unique "graveness" serves a legal and rhetorical purpose in reparations discourse; it is not obviously defensible as history.

The United States, one of only three countries to vote against the resolution, characterised it as "a cynical use of historical injustices." The 52 abstentions, including the Netherlands and most EU member states, reflect genuine discomfort not only with the reparations mechanism but with the selective historical framing.

None of this means the resolution's aspirations toward remembrance, education, and acknowledgment of historical harm are wrong. They are not. What is wrong is the selective telling of history that serves the financial and political agenda of states whose own predecessors were among the most active participants in the very trade being condemned.

Conclusion: Truth Before Justice

The history of slavery is the history of humanity at its worst — and, eventually, at something approaching its best. It is a story of universal human capacity for the exploitation of others, dressed in the languages of religion, conquest, debt, and race across every continent and every age. The transatlantic trade was horrific. So was the Arab trade. So was slavery in ancient Rome and Greece. So was the internal African trade that continued long after European abolition.

A reparations process — if one is to be pursued — that acknowledges only one chapter of this story, directs accountability only at Western states, and renders invisible the roles of African kingdoms and Arab traders is not justice. It is politics dressed as history. It risks, as the earlier draft of this essay put it, replacing one myth (Europe as sole perpetrator) with another (Africa as eternal innocent).

True reconciliation — the kind that might actually heal rather than simply redistribute grievance — requires what the historian Orlando Patterson called a willingness to confront "social death" in all its forms and origins. It requires Ghana to reckon with the Ashanti. It requires Arab states to reckon with Zanzibar. It requires everyone to reckon with the truth that slavery was not an aberration inserted into human history by one civilisation, but a feature present in virtually all of them, abolished first and most persistently by the very West that is now asked to pay for it alone.

That is not a comfortable conclusion. It is, however, an honest one.

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This essay was written in April 2026 in the context of the UN slavery resolution debate. It draws on peer-reviewed historical scholarship and is intended for public and academic use. Correspondence: constable.blog