

[Home](#)**ThoughtCo.**

---

# African Traders of Enslaved People

**By [Angela Thompsell](#)****Updated June 15, 2020**

During the era of the [trans-Atlantic slave trade](#), Europeans did not have the power to invade African states or kidnap enslaved Africans. Because of this, between 15 and 20 million enslaved people were transported across the Atlantic Ocean from Africa and purchased from traders of enslaved people throughout Europe and European colonies.

There are still many questions people have about the [triangular trade](#) of enslaved people and goods during this time, such as the motivations of those in support of enslavement and how enslavement was woven into life. Here are some of the answers, explained.

## Motivations for Enslavement

One thing that many Westerners wonder about African enslavers is why they were willing to sell their own people. Why would they sell Africans to Europeans? The simple answer to this question is that they did not see enslaved people as "their own people." Blackness (as an identity or marker of difference) was at that time a preoccupation of Europeans, not Africans. There was also in this era no collective sense of being "African." In other words, African traders of enslaved people felt no obligation to protect enslaved Africans because they did not regard them as their equals.

So how did people become enslaved? Some [enslaved people](#) were prisoners of, and many of these may have been seen as enemies or rivals to, those who sold them. Others were people who had fallen into debt. Enslaved people were different by virtue of their social and economic status (what we might think of today as their class). Enslavers also kidnapped people, but again, there was no reason in their minds that made them see enslaved people as "their own."

## A Self-Replicating Cycle

Another reason that African enslavers were so willing to sell off fellow Africans was that they felt they had no other option. As the trade of enslaved people intensified in the 1600s and 1700s, it became harder not to participate in the practice in some regions of West Africa. The enormous

demand for enslaved Africans led to the formation of a few African states whose economy and politics were centered around raiding for and trading enslaved people.

States and political factions that participated in the trade gained access to firearms and luxury goods that could be used to secure political support. States and communities not actively participating in the trade of enslaved people were increasingly at a disadvantage. The Mossi Kingdom is an example of a state that resisted the trade of enslaved people until the 1800s.

## Opposition to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade

The Mossi Kingdom was not the only African state or community to resist selling enslaved Africans to Europeans. The king of the Kongo, Afonso I, who had converted to Catholicism, tried to stop the sale of enslaved people to Portuguese enslavers and traders. He lacked the power, however, to police the whole of his territory, and traders as well as nobles engaged in the trans-Atlantic trade of enslaved Africans to gain wealth and power. Alfonso tried writing to the Portuguese king asking him to stop Portuguese traders from engaging in the practice, but his plea was ignored.

The [Benin Empire](#) offers a very different example. Benin sold enslaved people to Europeans when it was expanding and fighting many wars, which produced prisoners of war. Once the state stabilized, it stopped trading enslaved people until it started to decline in the 1700s. During this period of increasing instability, the state resumed participation in the trade of enslaved people.

## Enslavement as a Part of Life

It might be tempting to assume that African traders of enslaved people did not know how bad European plantation enslavement was, but they weren't naive. Not all traders would have known about the horrors of the [Middle Passage](#) or of what lives awaited enslaved Africans, but others at least had an idea. They simply didn't care.

There are always going to be people willing to ruthlessly exploit others in the quest for money and power, but the story of the trade of enslaved Africans by Africans goes much further than a few bad people. Enslavement and the sale of enslaved people were parts of life. The concept of not selling enslaved people to willing buyers would have seemed strange to many people up until the 1800s. The goal was not to protect enslaved people, but to ensure that you and your family were not reduced to enslaved people.

### View Article Sources