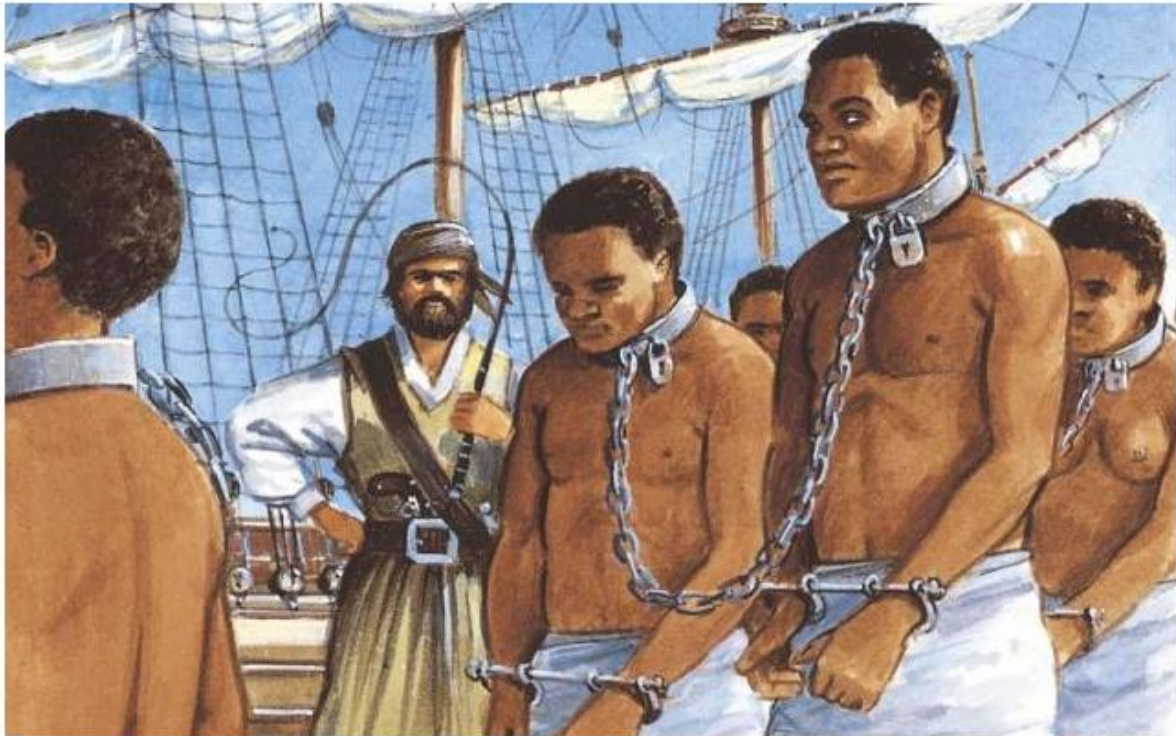


The Origins of Slavery



Slaves in chains

Slavery has been a feature of the history of mankind from the early period. In the New World, three types of labour system was used or tried by the seventeenth century. They are: The **Encomienda System**, The **Indentured Servant System** and **Slavery**. All three have been considered as or treated as slaves but the West African experience was the worst of all.

1. The Encomienda System. This as you know involved the Amerindians. It was not successful because the Indians were exterminated by the mid sixteenth century. You already know what accounted for this. Refer to your notes on the Indigenous peoples and the Europeans.

2. The Indentured Servant System. This involved the Europeans and also failed in a relatively short time for different reasons.

(a) The Indentured Servants came from Europe. They died from tropical diseases for which they had no immunity.

(b) They found it difficult, they claimed, to labour in the sun for long hours.

(c) The contract period was for four to five years. At the end of the contract they were to receive free passage back home or a grant of land. Of course, most persons wanted land. When land was no longer available, they refused to rehire themselves while new persons were no longer attracted by the scheme. This method therefore proved to be **unreliable**.

(d) A number of them ran away and broke their contract. Some joined the Buccaneers. Again you already know about this group so we travel on.

3. Slavery. This involved the West Africans. In 1640, the Sugar Revolution began in Barbados courtesy of the Dutch. Once it became clear that there were profits to be made, the revolution quickly spread to the other British colonies and the French ones as well. In order to make a profit sugar has to be cultivated on a large scale- that is on an estate or plantation. These large estates or plantations needed a sure, steady, reliable, efficient and cheap source of labour. The Africans were introduced as they seemed to fit the criteria.



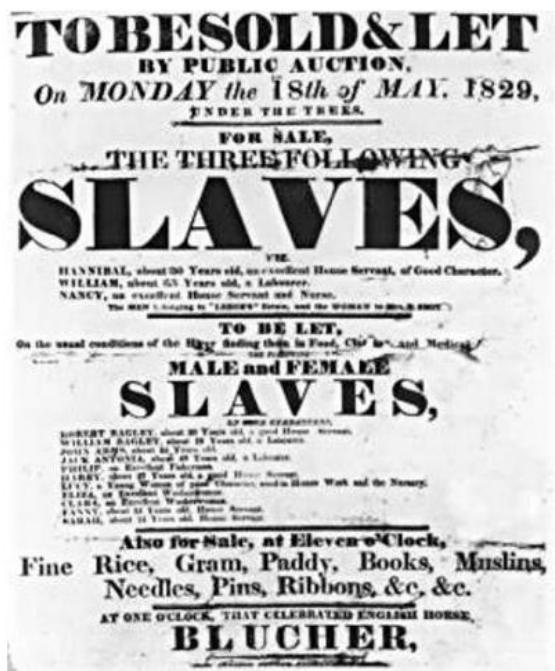
Slaves planting sugar cane in the West Indies. On a typical Barbados plantation in the seventeenth century, the working day in the fields lasted from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., with a two-hour break at midday.

But African slavery did not start with the English in Barbados. The Portuguese were the first ones to obtain the asiento (1515-1580) from Spain to sell slaves to her New World territories.

Why was Spain the first one to import slaves to the New World?

- 1.** At that point in time- early sixteenth century she was the sole 'owner' of all the countries in the New World except Brazil.
- 2.** The indigenous population had rapidly decreased by then. In fact they were exterminated by the 1550's.
- 3.** In addition they were not seen as suitable for hard agricultural work. Indeed they were not used to it and they had proved their frailty when they were sent to work in the mines. The mortality rate was alarming!
- 4.** After the colonists in the New World decided to produce for export, they needed a large, steady and sure supply of labour.
- 5.** It was a Spanish Roman Catholic Priest: Las Casa who, in a desperate attempt to save the Indians from extinction suggested that the African slaves be used instead. Sadly, his advice was heeded.

A slave is the property of his master. He is bought and paid for and belongs to his master for life. His enslavement meant that the owner controlled him and more importantly his time, talent and labour. Any child or children born to the enslaved became the property of the master also. Slavery then, was first and foremost a labour system that up to the 18th century provided a **sure, steady, reliable, efficient** and **cheap** source of labour for the sugar estates of the West Indian colonies.



What were the other reasons that accounted for the use of African slavery as the most suitable for the sugar estates?

Most of these reasons you will find, are mere justification for the enslavement of the African race. And as you would suspect or expect most of them were advanced by slave traders, slave partners or those who had an interest in the profitable operation of the sugar estates.

1. The West Africans also came from a tropical climate. They were already immune to tropical diseases.
2. Many of those who were captured were agricultural labourers possessing the necessary skills required on the estates.
3. The usual God excuse- the slaves were heathens and would be introduced to Christianity. Please take note of this because later on, the English planters in particular are going to deny them free access to their Churches.
4. They were physically strong, able to endure hard work.
5. They also practiced a form of slavery in their homeland. The participants in this evil trade failed to consider the fact that slavery in West Africa could not be compared to that in the New World in terms of the atrocities perpetuated or the inhumane qualities of that system.