

Olaudah Equiano remembers West Africa

WITH COMMENTARY BY SHANE FREEMAN

The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Written by Himself, Vol. I (London: By the author, 1789).

As you read...

WHO WAS OLAUDAH EQUIANO?

Olaudah Equiano (pronounced O-lah-oo-day ek-wee-ah-no) was born in 1745 into the Ibo tribe in present-day Nigeria. At the age of eleven, he was kidnapped by slave traders, and spent the next ten years as a slave in Virginia, the West Indies, and the British navy. Purchased by a Quaker merchant, he was permitted to buy and sell goods on his own, and he saved enough money to buy his freedom at the age of twenty-one.

As a free man, Equiano became active in the growing antislavery movements of England and America. In 1789, he published his autobiography, in which he made both moral and economic cases for ending slavery. Presenting himself as an ordinary man who had not deserved to be enslaved, he made his life a compelling argument for abolition. The book became an international bestseller and was translated into Dutch, Russian, and French before Equiano's death in 1797.

LIFE IN WEST AFRICA

In this passage, Equiano recalls his life as a boy in Africa and describes the customs of his people, the Ibo. Most Europeans in the eighteenth century wrote of Africa as a barbaric place, and Equiano intended his description to counter that. Still, you may notice that he uses words like “superstitions” — by the time he wrote his autobiography, Equiano had converted to Christianity.

NEW DOUBTS

Recent scholarship (see <http://chronicle.com/free/v52/i03/o3a01101.htm>) has suggested that Equiano may actually have been born in South Carolina, not in Africa as he claimed. His descriptions of Africa would have been based not on personal memory but on the oral traditions of African Americans and the stories of recently enslaved Africans. But many scholars still believe that Equiano *was* born in Africa, and no one has disputed the rest of his autobiography or the accuracy of his descriptions of African life.

Why might Equiano have lied about his origins? Does the possibility that he was not born in West Africa change the way you should read his descriptions of that region? If parts of the autobiography aren't factually true, does that make the rest less valuable?

THE IBO TODAY

The Ibo people (also spelled Igbo or Eboe) still live in the West African countries of Benin and Nigeria and practice their traditional culture. The city of Benin, in present-day Nigeria, exists today in what was the kingdom of Benin described by Olaudah Equiano. The Republic of Benin is small strip of land in West Africa between Togo and Nigeria, and it is a country with a modern mixed economy dependent on agriculture and offshore petroleum production.

The Ido are one of three major ethnic groups in the region. About half of the people of Benin and Nigeria still practice traditional African religions similar to those described by Olaudah Equiano.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Whether the memories Equiano relates are his own or those of his parents or someone else, his description of West Africans showed the world that they were truly human beings. Many Europeans saw Africans as a commodity, something to be bought and sold for profit. As you read this document, ask yourself:

- What similarities do their culture and society have to your own? Can you think of anything similar to age sets, for example?
- How did Equiano's lifestyle and religion differ from those of West Africa?
- Did Equiano's life away from West Africa change his opinion of his own people?
- Are parts of his description untrustworthy? Why?



Olaudah Equiano
or
GUSTAVUS VASSA,
the African

Figure 1. Olaudah Equiano,
pictured in his 1789
autobiography.

That part of Africa, known by the name of Guinea, to which the trade for slaves is carried on, extends along the coast above 3400 miles, from the Senegal to Angola, and includes a variety of kingdoms. Of these the most considerable is the kingdom of Benin, both as to extent and wealth, the richness and cultivation of the soil, the power of its king, and the number and warlike disposition of the inhabitants. It is situated nearly under the line¹ and extends along the coast about 170 miles, but runs back into the interior part of Africa to a distance hitherto I believe unexplored by any traveler; and seems only terminated at length by the empire of Abyssinia, near 1500 miles from its beginning. This kingdom is divided into many provinces or districts²: in one of the most remote and fertile of which, called Eboe, I was born, in the year 1745, in a charming fruitful vale, named Effaka. The distance of this province from the capital of Benin and the sea coast must be very considerable; for I had never heard of white men or Europeans, nor of the sea: and our subjection to the king of Benin was little more than nominal; for every transaction of the government, as far as my slender observation extended, was conducted by the chiefs or elders of the place. The manners and government of a people who have little commerce with other countries are generally very simple; and the history of what passes in one family or village may serve as a specimen of a nation³.

Administration of justice

My father was one of those elders or chiefs I have spoken of, and was styled Embrence; a term, as I remember, importing the highest distinction, and signifying in our language a mark of grandeur. This mark is conferred on the person entitled to it by cutting the skin across at the top of the forehead, and drawing it down to the eye-brows; and while it is in this situation applying a warm hand, and rubbing it, until it shrinks up into a thick weal⁴

across the lower part of the forehead. Most of the judges and senators were thus marked; my father had long born it: I had seen it conferred on one of my brothers, and I was also destined to receive it by my parents. Those Embrence, or chief men, decided disputes and punished crimes; for which purpose they always assembled together. The proceedings were generally short; and in most cases the law of retaliation⁵ prevailed.

I remember a man was brought before my father, and the other judges, for kidnapping a boy; and, although he was the son of a chief or senator, he was condemned to make recompense by a man or woman slave. Adultery, however, was sometimes punished with slavery or death; a punishment which I believe is inflicted on it throughout most of the nations of Africa: so sacred among them is the honour of the marriage bed, and so jealous are they of the fidelity of their wives. Of this I recollect an instance: a woman was convinced before the judges of adultery, and delivered over, as the custom was, to her husband to be punished. Accordingly he determined to put her to death: but it being found, just before her execution, that she had an infant at her breast; and no woman being prevailed on to perform the part of a nurse, she was spared on account of the child. The men, however, do not preserve the same constancy to their wives, which they expect from them; for they indulge in a plurality, though seldom in more than two.⁶

Marriage ceremony, and public entertainments

Their mode of marriage is thus: both parties are usually betrothed when young by their parents⁷ (though I have known the males to betroth themselves). On this occasion a feast is prepared, and the bride and bridegroom stand up in the midst of all their friends, who are assembled for the purpose, while he declares she is thenceforth to be looked upon as his wife, and that no other person is to pay any addresses to her. This is also immediately proclaimed in the vicinity, on which the bride retires from the assembly. Some time after she is brought home to her husband, and then another feast is made, to which the relations of both parties are invited: her parents then deliver her to the bridegroom, accompanied with a number of blessings, and at the same time they tie round her waist a cotton string of the thickness of a goose-quill, which none but married women are permitted to wear: she is now considered as completely his wife; and at this time the dowry is given to the new married pair, which generally consists of portions of land, slaves, and cattle, household goods, and implements of husbandry. These are offered by the friends of both parties; besides which the parents of the bride-groom present gifts to those of the bride, whose property she is looked upon before marriage; but after it she is esteemed the sole property of her husband. The ceremony being now ended the festival begins, which is celebrated with bonfires, and loud acclamations of joy, accompanied with music and dancing.

We are all of a nation⁸ of dancers, musicians and poets. Thus every great event, such as a triumphant return from battle, or other cause of public rejoicing is celebrated in public dances, which are accompanied with songs and music suited to the occasion. The assembly is separated into four divisions, which dance either apart or in succession, and each with a character peculiar to itself. The first division contains the married men, who in their dances frequently exhibit feats of arms, and the representation of a battle. To these succeed the married women, who dance in the second division. The young men occupy the third; and the maidens the fourth. Each represents some interesting scene of real life, such as a

great achievement, domestic employment, a pathetic story or some rural sport; and as the subject is generally founded on some recent event, it is therefore ever new. This gives our dances a spirit and variety which I have scarcely seen elsewhere. We have many musical instruments, particularly drums of different kinds, a piece of music which resembles a guitar, and another much like a stickado. These last are chiefly used by betrothed virgins, who play on them on all grand festivals.

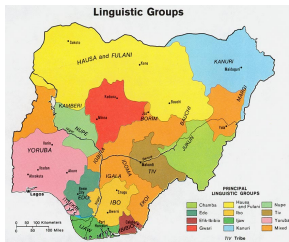


Figure 2. The Ido still live in Nigeria today, along with many other ethnic groups. This map shows some of the diversity of traditional West African cultures.

Mode of living

As our manners are simple, our luxuries are few. The dress of both sexes is nearly the same. It generally consists of a long piece of calico, or muslin, wrapped loosely round the body, somewhat in the form of a highland plaid⁹. This is usually dyed blue, which is our favourite colour. It is extracted from a berry, and is brighter and richer than any I have seen in Europe. Besides this, our women of distinction wear golden ornaments, which they dispose with some profusion on their arms and legs. When our women are not employed with the men in tillage, their usual occupation is spinning and weaving cotton, which they afterwards dye, and make it into garments. They also manufacture earthen vessels, of which we have many kinds. Among the rest tobacco pipes, made after the same fashion, and used in the same manner, as those in Turkey.

Our manner of living is entirely plain; for as yet the natives are unacquainted with those refinements¹⁰ in cookery which debauch the taste: bullocks, goats, and poultry, supply the greatest part of their food. These constitute likewise the principal wealth of the country, and the chief articles of its commerce. The flesh is usually stewed in a pan; to make it savoury we sometimes use also pepper, and other spices, and we have salt made of wood allies. Our vegetables are mostly plantains, eadas, yams, beans, and Indian corn. The head of the family usually eats alone; his wives and slaves have also their separate tables. Before we taste food we always wash our hands: indeed our cleanliness on all occasions is extreme; but on this it is an indispensable ceremony. After washing, libation is made, by pouring out a small portion of the food, in a certain place, for the spirits of departed relations, which the natives suppose to preside over their conduct and guard them from evil. They are totally unacquainted with strong or spirituous liquours; and their principal beverage is palm wine. This is gotten from a tree of that name by tapping it at the top, and fastening a large gourd to it; and sometimes one tree will yield three or four gallons in a night. When just drawn it is of a most delicious sweetness; but in a few days it acquires a tartish and more spirituous flavour: though I never saw any one intoxicated by it. The same tree also produces nuts and oil. Our principal luxury is in perfumes; one sort of these is an odoriferous wood of delicious fragrance: the other a kind of earth; a small portion of which thrown into the fire diffuses a most powerful odour. We beat this wood into powder, and mix it with palm oil; with which both men and women perfume themselves.

Buildings

In our buildings we study convenience rather than ornament. Each master of a family has a large square piece of ground, surrounded with a moat or fence, or enclosed with a wall made of red earth tempered; which, when dry, is as hard as brick. Within this are his houses to accommodate his family and slaves; which, if numerous, frequently present the appearance of a village. In the middle stands the principal building, appropriated to the sole use of the master, and consisting of two apartments; in one of which he fits in the day with his family, the other is left apart for the reception of his friends. He has besides these a distinct apartment in which he sleeps, together with his male children. On each side are the apartments of his wives, who have also their separate day and night houses. The habitations of the slaves and their families are distributed throughout the rest of the enclosure. These houses never exceed one story in height: they are always built of wood, or stakes driven into the ground, crossed with wattles, and neatly plastered within, and without. The roof is thatched with reeds.¹¹ Our dayhouses are left open at the sides; but those in which we sleep are always covered, and plastered in the inside, with a composition mixed with cowdung, to keep off the different insects, which annoy us during the night. The walls and floors also of these are generally covered with mats. Our beds consist of a platform, raised three or four feet from the ground, on which are laid skins, and different parts of a spungy tree called plantain. Our covering is calico or muslin, the same as our dress. The usual seats are a few logs of wood; but we have benches, which are generally perfumed; to accommodate strangers these compose the greater part of our household furniture. Houses so constructed and furnished require but little skill to erect them. Every man is a sufficient architect for the purpose. The whole neighbourhood afford their unanimous assistance in building them and in return receive, and expect no other recompense than a feast.

Commerce and agriculture

As we live in a country where nature is prodigal of her favours, our wants are few and easily supplied; of course we have few manufactures. They consist for the most part of calicoes, earthen ware, ornaments, and instruments of war and husbandry. But these make no part of our commerce, the principal articles of which, as I have observed, are provisions. In such a state money is of little use; however we have some small pieces of coin, if I may call them such. They are made something like an anchor; but I do not remember either their value or denomination. We have also markets, at which I have been frequently with my mother. These are sometimes visited by stout mahogany-coloured men from the south west of us: we call them Oye-Eboe, which term signifies red men living at a distance. They generally bring us fire-arms, gunpowder, hats, beads, and dried fish. The last we esteemed a great rarity, as our waters were only brooks and springs. These articles they barter with us for odoriferous woods and earth, and our salt of wood ashes. They always carry slaves through our land; but the strictest account is exacted of their manner of procuring them before they are suffered to pass. Sometimes indeed we sold slaves to them, but they were only prisoners of war, or such among us as had been convicted of

kidnapping or adultery, and some other crimes, which we esteemed heinous. This practice of kidnapping induces me to think, that, notwithstanding all our strictness their principal business among us was to trepan our people. I remember too they carried great sacks along with them, which not long after I had an opportunity of fatally seeing applied to that infamous purpose.

Our land is uncommonly rich and fruitful, and produces all kinds of vegetables in great abundance. We have plenty of Indian corn, and vast quantities of cotton and tobacco. Our pine apples grow without culture; they are about the size of the largest sugar-loaf, and finely flavoured. We have also spices of different kinds, particularly pepper; and a variety of delicious fruits which I have never seen in Europe; together with gums of various kinds and honey in abundance. All our industry is exerted to improve those blessings of nature. Agriculture is our chief employment; and every one, even the children and women, are engaged in it. Thus we are all habituated to labour from our earliest years. Every one contributes something to the common stock; and as we are unacquainted with idleness, we have no beggars. The benefits of such a mode of living are obvious. The West India planters prefer the slaves of Benin or Eboe to those of any other part of Guinea, for their hardiness intelligence, integrity, and zeal.¹² Those benefits are felt by us in the general healthiness of the people, and in their vigour and activity; I might have added too in their comeliness. Deformity is indeed un-known amongst us, I mean that of shape. Numbers of the natives of Eboe now in London might be brought in support of this assertion: for, in regard to complexion, ideas of beauty are wholly relative. I remember while in Africa to have seen three negro children, who were tawny, and another quite white, who were universally regarded by myself, and the natives in general, as far as related to their complexions, as deformed. Our women too were in my eyes at least uncommonly graceful, alert and modest to a degree of bashfulness nor do I remember to have ever heard of an instance of incontinence amongst them before marriage. They are also remarkably cheerful. Indeed cheerfulness and affability are two of the leading characteristics of our nation.

Our tillage is exercised in a large plain or common, some hours walk from our dwellings¹³, and all the neighbours resort thither in a body. They use no beasts of husbandry; and their only instruments are hoes, axes, shovels and beaks, or pointed iron to dig with.¹⁴ Sometimes we are visited by locusts which come in large clouds, so as to darken the air, and destroy our harvest. This however happens rarely, but when it does, a famine is produced by it. I remember an instance or two wherein this happened. This common is often the theatre of war¹⁵; and therefore when our people go out to till their land, they not only go in a body, but generally take their arms with them for fear of a surprise; and when they apprehend an invasion they guard the avenues to their dwellings, by driving sticks into the ground, which are so sharp at one end as to pierce the foot, and are generally dipt in poison. From what I can recollect of these battles, they appear to have been irruptions of one little state or district on the other, to obtain prisoners or booty. Perhaps they were incited to this by those traders who brought the European goods I mentioned amongst us. Such a mode of obtaining slaves in Africa is common¹⁶; and I believe more are procured this way, and by kidnapping, than any other. When a trader wants slaves, he applies to a chief for them, and tempts him with his wares. It is not extraordinary, if on this occasion he yields to the temptation with as little firmness, and accepts the price of his fellow creatures liberty with as little reluctance as the enlightened merchant. Accordingly he falls

on his neighbours, and a desperate battle ensues. If he prevails and takes prisoners, he gratifies his avarice by selling them; but, if his party be vanquished, and he falls into the hands of the enemy, he is put to death: for, as he has been known to foment their quarrels, it is thought dangerous to let him survive, and no ransom can save him, though all other prisoners may be redeemed.

War

We have firearms, bows and arrows, broad two-edged swords and javelins: we have shields also which cover a man from head to foot.¹⁷ All are taught the use of these weapons; even our women are warriors, and march boldly out to fight along with the men. Our whole district is a kind of militia: on a certain signal given, such as the firing of a gun at night, they all rise in arms and rush upon their enemy. It is perhaps something remarkable, that when our people march to the field a red flag or banner is borne before them. I was once a witness to a battle in our common. We had been all at work in it one day as usual, when our people were suddenly attacked. I climbed a tree at some distance, from which I beheld the fight. There were many women as well as men on both sides; among others my mother was there, and armed with a broad sword. After lighting for a considerable time with great fury, and after many had been killed our people obtained the victory, and took their enemy's Chief prisoner. He was carried off in great triumph, and, though he offered a large ransom for his life, he was put to death. A virgin of note among our enemies had been slain in the battle, and her arm was exposed in our market-place, where our trophies were always exhibited. The spoils were divided according to the merit of the warriors.¹⁸ Those prisoners which were not sold or redeemed we kept as slaves: but how different was their condition from that of the slaves in the West Indies!¹⁹ With us they do no more work than other members of the community, even their masters; their food, clothing and lodging were nearly the same as theirs, (except that they were not permitted to eat with those who were free-born); and there was scarce any other difference between them, than a superior degree of importance which the head of a family possesses in our state, and that authority which, as such, he exercises over every part of his household. Some of these slaves have even slaves under them as their own property and for their own use.

Religion

As to religion²⁰, the natives believe that there is one Creator of all things, and that he lives in the sun, and is girted round with a belt that he may never eat or drink; but, according to some, he smokes a pipe, which is our own favourite luxury. They believe he governs events, especially our deaths or captivity; but, as for the doctrine of eternity, I do not remember to have ever heard of it: some however believe in the transmigration of souls in a certain degree. Those spirits, which are not transmigrated, such as our dear friends or relations, they believe always attend them, and guard them from the bad spirits or their foes. For this reason they always before eating, as I have observed, put some small portion of the meat, and pour some of their drink, on the ground for them; and they often make oblations of the

blood of beasts or fowls at their graves. I was very fond of my mother, and almost constantly with her. When she went to make these oblations at her mother's tomb, which was a kind of small solitary thatched house, I sometimes attended her. There she made her libations, and spent most of the night in cries and lamentations. I have been often extremely terrified on these occasions. The loneliness of the place, the darkness of the night, and the ceremony of libation, naturally awful and gloomy, were heightened by my mother's lamentations; and these, concurring with the cries of doleful birds, by which these places were frequented, gave an inexpressible terror to the scene.

We compute the year from the day on which the sun crosses the line, and on its setting that evening there is a general shout throughout the land; at least I can speak from my own knowledge throughout our vicinity. The people at the same time make a great noise with rattles, not unlike the basket rattles used by children here, though much larger, and hold up their hands to heaven for a blessing. It is then the greatest offerings are made; and those children whom our wise men foretel will be fortunate are then presented to different people. I remember many used to come to see me, and I was carried about to others for that purpose. They have many offerings, particularly at full moons; generally two at harvest before the fruits are taken out of the ground: and when any young animals are killed, sometimes they offer up part of them as a sacrifice. These offerings, when made by one of the heads of a family, serve for the whole. I remember we often had them at my father's and my uncle's, and their families have been present. Some of our offerings are eaten with bitter herbs. We had a saying among us to any one of a cross temper, 'that if they were to be eaten, they should be eaten with bitter herbs.'

We practised circumcision like the Jews, and made offerings and feasts on that occasion in the same manner as they did. Like them also, our children were named from some event, some circumstance, or fancied foreboding at the time of their birth. I was named Olaudah which, in our language, signifies vicissitude or fortune; also, one favoured, and having a loud voice and well spoken. I remember we never polluted the name of the object of our adoration; on the contrary, it was always mentioned with the greatest reverence; and we were totally unacquainted with swearing, and all those terms of abuse and reproach which find their way so readily and copiously into the languages of more civilized people. The only expressions of that kind I remember were "May you rot or may you swell, or may a beast take you."

I have before remarked that the natives of this part of Africa are extremely cleanly²¹. This necessary habit of decency was with us a part of religion, and therefore we had many purifications and washings; indeed almost as many, and used on the same occasions, if my recollection does not fail me, as the Jews. Those that touched the dead at any time were obliged to wash and purify themselves before they could enter a dwelling-house. Every woman too, at certain times, was forbidden to come into a dwelling-house, or touch any person, or any thing we ate. I was so fond of my mother I could not keep from her, or avoid touching her at some of those periods, in consequence of which I was obliged to be kept out with her, in a little house made for that purpose, till offering was made, and then we were purified.

Though we had no places of public worship, we had priests and magicians, or wise men²². I [do] not remember whether they had different offices, or whether they were united in the same persons, but they were held in great reverence by the people. They calculated our time²³, and foretold events, as their name imported, for we called them Ah-

affoe-way-cah, which signifies calculators or yearly men, our year being called Ah-affoe. They wore their beards, and when they died they were succeeded by their sons. Most of their implements and things of value were interred along with them. Pipes and tobacco were also put into the grave with the corpse, which was always perfumed and ornamented, and animals were offered in sacrifice to them. None accompanied their funerals but those of the same profession or tribe. These buried them after sunset, and always returned from the grave by a different way from that which they went.

Medicine, magic, and superstitions

These magicians were also our doctors or physicians.²⁴ They practised bleeding by cupping²⁵; and were very successful in healing wounds and expelling poisons. They had likewise some extraordinary method of discovering jealousy, theft, and poisoning;²⁶ the success of which no doubt they derived from their unbounded influence over the credulity and superstition of the people. I do not remember what those methods were, except that as to poisoning: I recollect an instance or two, which I hope it will not be deemed impertinent here to insert, as it may serve as a kind of specimen of the rest, and is still used by the negroes in the West Indies. A virgin had been poisoned, but it was not known by whom: the doctors ordered the corpse to be taken up by some persons, and carried to the grave. As soon as the bearers had raised it on their shoulders, they seemed seized with some sudden impulse, and ran to and fro unable to stop themselves. At last, after having passed through a number of thorns and prickly bushes unhurt, the corpse fell from them close to a house, and defaced it in the fall; and the owner being taken up, he immediately confessed the poisoning.

The natives are extremely cautious about poison.²⁷ When they buy any eatable the seller kisses it all round before the buyer, to show him it is not poisoned; and the same is done when any meat or drink is presented, particularly to a stranger. We have serpents of different kinds, some of which are esteemed ominous²⁸ when they appear in our houses, and these we never molest. I remember two of those ominous snakes, each of which was as thick as the calf of a man's leg, and in colour resembling a dolphin in the water, crept at different times into my mother's night-house, where I always lay with her, and coiled themselves into folds, and each time they crowed like a cock. I was desired by some of our wise men to touch these, that I might be interested in the good omens, which I did, for they were quite harmless, and would tamely suffer themselves to be handled; and then they were put into a large open earthen pan, and set on one side of the highway. Some of our snakes, however, were poisonous: one of them crossed the road one day when I was standing on it, and passed between my feet without offering to touch me, to the great surprise of many who saw it; and these incidents were accounted by the wise men, and therefore by my mother and the rest of the people, as remarkable omens in my favour.

On the web

Unraveling the narrative

<http://chronicle.com/free/v52/io3/o3a01101.htm>

This article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* examines the work of Vincent Carretta, a professor of English at the University of Maryland who has argued that Olaudah Equiano was born in South Carolina, not in West Africa as he claimed.

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Notes

1. The line Equiano is referring to is the equator. He may be referring to a theory that the closer people lived to the equator, the less civilized and more savage they were.
2. Although these political divisions were not as big as a state in the United States, they suggest a separation between the king's authority and local government, just as we have divisions between federal and state power. The statement suggests that Benin has a complex and "civilized" government.
3. Equiano wants to use the descriptions of his own home as an example of the entire kingdom. He will then be able to speak for all the people living in the kingdom of his birth.
4. A *weal* is a heavy blister or welt. In this case, it led to permanent scars that signified the owner's position in society.
5. This form of punishment allows a judge to sentence criminals to repay the victim for the loss caused by a crime. It does not necessarily mean that the criminal was physically injured as punishment, although that was a possibility.
6. The women of Benin could be convicted of adultery, but the men of West Africa were often allowed more than one wife. In many cultures that practice *polygamy* (in which men may have multiple wives), the husband must have enough wealth — in land, livestock, or cash — to be able to take care of all his wives and the children they would give him.
7. *Betrothed* means engaged to be married. Arranged marriages can be used to link families, communities, towns, political groups, or kingdoms. They can also be used by the king to link him to wealthy families by giving his daughters in marriage. (Leo Africanus mentions this in his description of Timbuktu.) If men *betrothed themselves*, they chose their own wives.
8. This is the first time in this document that Equiano refers to Africans as "we." (The previous paragraph begins with "Their.") The change is important to the way Equiano is communicating with his audience — he is trying to make himself an example of Benin civilization. As you read, pay attention to what he is describing when he uses "we" instead of "they."
9. This is the older form of a Scottish kilt. The long fabric is wrapped around the waist like a skirt, with a large section thrown over one shoulder or across the back. ("Highland" refers to the highlands, or mountainous regions, of Scotland.)
10. Although this statement begins with "our," Equiano then refers to "the natives." Either he wants to show a separation between his family and people of a lower class, or he is showing that the cooking practices of West Africans appear primitive to Europeans.

11. A thatched roof is created from dry branches or reeds woven together, from one to two feet thick. The densely woven material makes a waterproof layer that protects the mud structure. This is a common building material in West Africa and a renewable resource.
12. Slaves from this region were preferred by both slave traders and planters, and over time millions of Africans were sold out of the region. European trading posts, such as the fortress at Elmina, were established along the coast and on islands offshore to handle the slave trade.
13. Communal agriculture allows the town to share in local agricultural wealth. It is usually practiced in an “out-field” away from the town or village center.
14. Using no “beasts of husbandry,” or “beasts of burden,” means not using animals to work fields or pull large tools such as plows. (*Husbandry* is the practice of caring for livestock.)
15. The “theater of war” is a European phrase used to refer to the place where battles are fought — not a reenactment or a play, but the location of actual violence.
16. Slavery as a result of warfare was common in West Africa long before Islam or Europeans arrived in the region. When one group attacked another, the winning side had the right to keep people captured as personal slaves. These slaves became additions to their owners’ families. It was possible for slaves to gain their freedom and become a full part of the family that had owned them. Slavery could also result from criminal action.

After Islamic peoples and Europeans began trading with West Africans, warfare for slavery changed to create a large supply of slaves who were exported from West Africa to Europe and the Americas. Equiano’s description of the methods of slave traders is a typical account of the methods they used.

17. West Africans had known how to forge iron into tools and weapons before Islam or Europeans arrived. West African warriors used bows and arrows as well as swords and throwing spears (javelins) for centuries.

The introduction of firearms (guns), however, changed the way wars were fought. Europeans brought firearms to trade for gold and slaves. To convince leaders to trade with them, slave traders threatened to sell these firearms to neighboring towns or kingdoms — who would then use them against the leader’s own people.

18. Because they had been attacked by another group, the *spoils* or trophies taken by Equiano’s people in battle may have included weapons and equipment carried by their attackers — or, as he notes in the previous sentence, even the body parts of their attackers. They may also have kept the survivors as slaves. The chief of the attackers was killed, because if his people had *ransomed* him, or paid money to save his life, he might have led them in another attack.
19. It was important for Equiano to show that West African slavery was different from the slavery practiced in the Americas. The main point of his argument is that slaves in West Africa were treated as part of their owners’ families, and that slavery was an individual condition. Slaves in the Americas were enslaved based on their race and were *chattel* who could be bought and sold and were worth no more than the work they could perform.
20. Traditional religious beliefs vary widely across Africa. Equiano is using the religion of his people as an example of the differences between African traditional religions and the religions of Europe. Although the religion he describes may seem primitive, there are similarities to European religions, such as the idea of a single creator, the afterlife, and remembering of ancestors.

21. Physical cleanliness and spiritual or moral cleanliness are traditionally linked in much of Africa. Being physically clean meant that you were spiritually pure, and physically impure people may contaminate others. Women were traditionally considered to be impure for several days each month during menstruation, and during that time they were considered to be magically quite powerful.
22. The term “magician” is misleading. Prescientific cultures have different ways of explaining the world around them. The role of the magician in West Africa is similar to that of a medicine man in American Indian culture. This person helped the community to interpret mysterious happenings in the world and kept mental records of festivals and important religious events. Equiano’s use of the term “magician” reminds us that he had converted to Christianity after his enslavement.
23. Calculating the time means keeping track of the calendar but also of longer terms of time that had significance to a community. For example, the Ibo grouped people into age sets — a kind of group birthday. Age sets are used to move people collectively through the stages of life. There are age sets for childhood, adolescence, manhood or womanhood, maturity, and elder status. Each group has a name and the sets usually work in a cycle. Depending on the number of age sets they can be from five to fifteen years long. When a child is born he or she is placed into a set, and when it is time for the set to move from one phase to another, everyone moves up together. When a set moves from adolescence to adulthood, for example, everyone in the set becomes an adult and has full status as an adult whether an individual person in the set is twelve or eighteen.
24. Just as there was a connection between physical and spiritual cleanliness, the roles of wise man and doctor were connected. Since spirit and body were closely connected, and spiritual illness might cause physical illness, the same person must treat illnesses of both spirit and body.
25. “Bleeding by cupping” involves pressing a metal or ceramic cup against a wound or against a series of cuts made by the doctor to create a suction that draws blood into the cup.
26. The practice of “divining” the truth by magical means is found in all prescientific cultures. The diviner, or truth seer, interprets a set of ritual symbols to determine the answer to a specific question.
27. Although doctors might be able to treat some poisons, there are many natural toxins and diseases in West Africa that cannot be cured.
28. The snake was considered an ominous creature because it carried poison, and also because it seemed to be reborn by shedding its skin. *Ominous* doesn’t necessarily mean bad; it means that the snake was an *omen* — a symbol of luck or something that foretells future events.

About the author

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Figure 1 (page 2)

From Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789). This image is believed to be in the public domain. Users are advised to make their own copyright assessment.

Figure 2 (page 4)

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