

Slavery and bias in historic West Africa: A case of he said, he said

BY SHANE FREEMAN

West African history encounters a major turning point with the introduction of the European slave trade. Although personal slavery existed as a cultural mechanism, its use was never as intensive as chattel slavery in the New World. This lesson examines the slave trade's effect on West Africans and Europeans at the end of the 18th century.

The importance of West African traditions and history is often glanced over by textbooks of American and North Carolina history. Primary source material is often difficult to find and various sources appear to contradict each other. This lesson teaches students to identify and work with bias in primary source documents while teaching them about the relationships between West African history and American history.

The lesson uses a scientific approach: The students will make observations of the events recorded in the narratives they read, and then make inferences based upon the information that they have collected. Students will use a Venn diagram to compare the similarities and differences of their observations. They will use a second diagram to test their inferences to demonstrate their validity. Because the students will read different documents within their groups, they must pool their information together to make comparisons between documents.

Learning outcomes

- Students will gain experience using primary source material to understand history.
- Students will gain an understanding of how to discover bias in primary source documents.
- Students will use graphic organizers to scientifically assess information and make inferences based upon their observations.
- Students will develop an understanding of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and its effects on human populations.

Teacher planning

TIME REQUIRED FOR LESSON

One or two class periods. Homework time may be required.

MATERIALS

- The following primary source documents from the Grand visions, rough realities: The development of colonial North Carolina¹ module of the North Carolina digital history textbook (You may choose to make printed copies for students to read, but be sure to point out to students that the scroll-over commentary appears as footnotes in the PDF version):
 - Leo Africanus describes Timbuktu²
 - Olaudah Equiano remembers West Africa³
 - Venture Smith describes his enslavement⁴
 - An account of the slave trade on the coast of Africa⁵
- Optional: Student computers with internet connections (If computers aren't available, make printed copies of the documents listed above.)
- Encyclopedia (print or online)
- Student handouts⁶:
 - Observation graphic organizer (Venn diagram)
 - Quotation chart

Activities

BELL-RINGER ACTIVITY

1. Post the following statement for your students:

It has been said that the American colonies could never have been profitable without the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Slavery, although terrible, enabled plantation owners to create the wealth that propelled the American economy both before and after the Revolution.

Have students create two responses to this statement; one that supports it and one that disagrees with it. Instruct students to explain their answers in one to two sentences.

2. Briefly discuss the answers with your students. This will give you a baseline for their knowledge. Facilitate the discussion by asking questions such as: Who would have worked on large agricultural farms if there were no African slaves? Why were Africans used as slaves? Who did these jobs before them? Were other peoples enslaved? What can we say about the slave owners? How did different groups view each other at the end of the 18th century?

DOCUMENT-BASED ACTIVITY

1. Divide the students into groups of four, with each student in a group assigned to a different document. The documents vary in length, so you may choose to assign the longer documents to stronger readers.
2. Give each student online access to (or a printed copy of) his or her assigned document, and a copy of the quotation chart. (**Note:** If you're using printed copies of the articles, be sure to point out to students that the scroll-over commentary appears as footnotes in the PDF documents.) Have the students read their documents independently, using the chart to record quotations from the text and explain in their own words what the quotations mean. Instruct the students to record the items that they think are most important or interesting. Because of the length of the documents, you may choose to have the students complete the reading and assessment as homework for the second day.
3. After the students have finished reading and taking notes on their documents, have them convene in their groups. Hand out the Venn diagram, and have the students discuss the similarities and differences of the four documents, recording their findings on the four-part Venn diagram. (It may help the students if they color the ovals to differentiate the sections.)
4. When the students have finished working in their groups, facilitate a discussion with the entire class to discuss the documents and to compare their diagrams.
5. Conclude the lesson using one of the following options:
 - Have students write a compare-and-contrast essay using from two to four of the documents.
 - Have students use what they've learned as a starting point for an internet research project, ending in a PowerPoint presentation about the slave trade.
 - In order to demonstrate understanding of the documents in the context of their time and place in history, have students write a letter from the point of view of a slave, a white slave trader, a slave dealer in Africa, or a plantation owner buying slaves in America. The letter should include the following:
 - Information on how the slave trade affects the culture of the person whose perspective the student adopts.
 - A demonstrated understanding of the opinions of the opposing side. (E.g. A slave must try to explain how he thinks the slave traders view slaves.)
 - A demonstrated understanding of the sequence of the triangle slave trade and the African and New World slave trades.
 - A narrative structure in which the student does not simply list facts, but rather tells a story that attempts to show how people viewed the world at the time.

Assessment

Assessment will vary according to which concluding activity you choose. In all cases, assess by student participation in discussion, completion of Venn diagram and quotation chart, and demonstrated historical understanding in students' final products.

On the web

Venture Smith describes his enslavement

<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-colonial/4.5>

Excerpt from a late eighteenth-century book by a freed slave in Connecticut. Describes his capture and enslavement at the age of six. Includes historical commentary.

An account of the slave trade on the coast of Africa

<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-colonial/4.6>

Excerpt from a book by a former surgeon on a slave ship, describing the horrors of the Middle Passage from Africa to America. Historical commentary is included. **Warning:** This document may not be suitable for all ages. Please use discretion.

Leo Africanus describes Timbuktu

<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-colonial/4.2>

Sixteenth-century description of the West African trading city of Timbuktu by a Spanish-born Muslim. Includes historical commentary.

Olaudah Equiano remembers West Africa

<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-colonial/4.4>

Excerpt from a book written by a freed slave in the late eighteenth century, with memories of his boyhood in Guinea. Describes the government, culture, religion, architecture, and agriculture of the region. Primary source includes historical commentary.

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Notes

1. See <http://learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-colonial/>.
2. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-colonial/1982>.
3. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-colonial/1978>.
4. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-colonial/1985>.
5. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-colonial/1904>.
6. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/multimedia/10532>.

About the author

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Shane holds a Masters degree in American history and African history from West Virginia University. He has written extensively on the transition of land ownership from native populations to European powers, and the historic reconstruction of ancient cultures.