

West African Kingdoms – Enslaved People Fact Sheet

Slavery in the Kingdom of Ghana

The need for slavery started with the growth of Trans-Saharan trade and the growing demand for labor in the salt mines. Working in the salt mines was one of the most dangerous jobs so a lot of labor was needed to keep up with trade demands. Also, Mediterranean and Middle Eastern civilizations were requesting labor from West African Kingdoms. They could only send between 6,000 to 7,000 slaves a year to other civilizations because it was too difficult to walk them through the Sahara Desert. The enslaved people would die from dehydration or starvation on their walk through the desert, if they tried to send too many at one time. They only sent enslaved people that were war captives or criminals because they didn't want to turn against their own people.

Slavery in the Kingdom of Mali

Enslaved people were typically individuals who lacked kinship (family) ties and were seen as having no place in the social hierarchy. They were used as soldiers, advisors, house servants, or farmers, and were often valued for their loyalty. They were thought to be trusted and unbiased because they had no personal stake. As the need for labor grew, captives of war and people with large debts were taken into slavery. Slaves could earn back their freedom through paying off their debts or accomplishing great tasks. When the Kingdom of Mali collapsed, enslaved people started to be stolen and traded by other neighboring tribes who saw them as a way to make more money.

Slavery in the Kingdom of Songhai

The Kingdom of Songhai wanted to maintain the many forms of slavery seen in the Mali Empire, but demand for slavery in West Africa and around the world required more slaves and harder labor. They tried to have policies that valued the human dignity of the enslaved people. For example, children of slaves were not automatically slaves – there was no way to be born into slavery. Also, it was an Islamic law that a free Muslim could not enslave another Muslim. If slaves converted to Islam, they were often granted their freedom. The spread of Islam throughout Africa encouraged people to start bringing into slavery individuals from tribes that were not Muslim.

*When the Portuguese made contact with West Africa in 1418, it will shift the view of slavery and slave trade. When they first arrive, the West Africans agree to sell their captives, not their own people. As the demand for labor grew, West African leaders saw the chance to make more money by trading greater numbers of enslaved people. Slavery became seen as a way to profit instead of a way to pay off debts/crimes like it was before.