

# The transatlantic slave trade

Spanning an entire continent, the Slave Trade Route Heritage Sites constitute an international memorial to one of the most shameful episodes in human history.

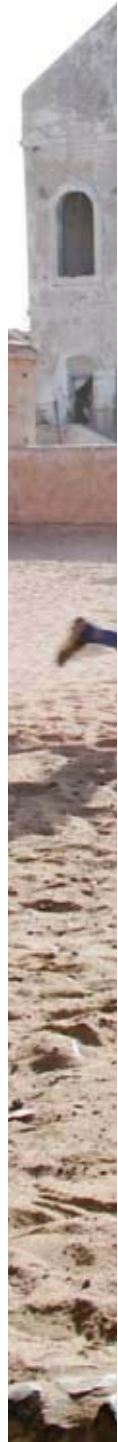
The trade in enslaved Africans which took place from the 15th to 19th centuries was the largest deportation in world history. Over the course of four centuries, an estimated 25-30 million people were violently torn from their homelands and shipped abroad, causing untold human suffering, and leaving an indelible imprint on culture and society worldwide. Between twelve and 17 million Africans crossed the Atlantic as part of the infamous ‘triangular trade’; many more died on the long forced march to the coast and on board ships to the New World.

The triangular trade – so named for the rough shape of a triangle created by the three journeys between continents – began in Europe with the shipping of weapons, textiles and other commodities to Africa. There they were exchanged for Africans sold into slavery, often those vanquished in wars, mentally ill or convicted of crimes. Loaded up with human cargo, the ships set sail for the Americas, where in turn they were exchanged for a cargo of sugar, tobacco, coffee and cotton bound for Europe.

The millions forcibly sent to the Americas re-peopled lands in which the native population had been decimated, largely due to diseases carried by invading Europeans. These newly acquired territories

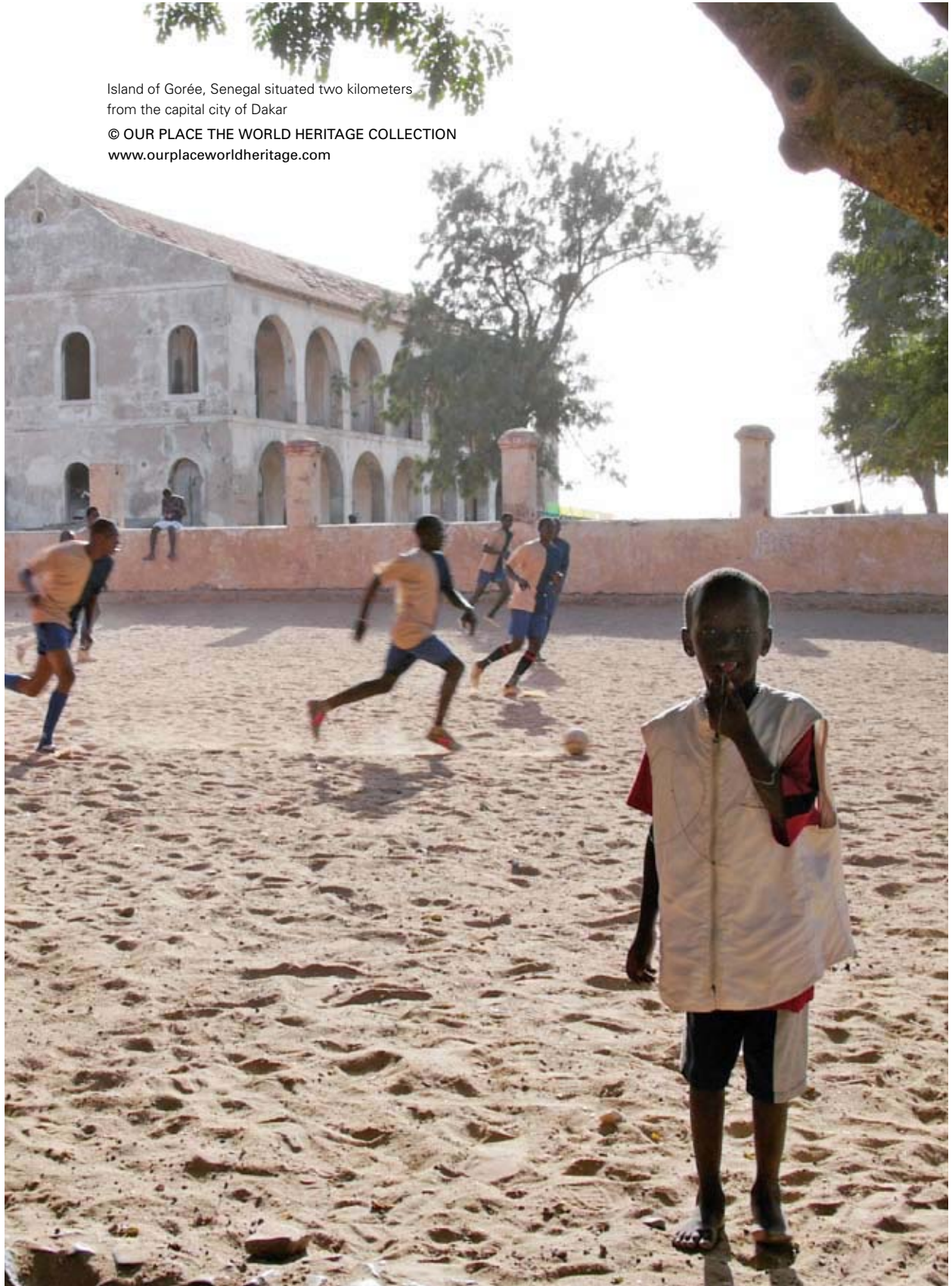
allowed colonisers the opportunity to grow an abundance of luxury crops such as sugar, tobacco and coffee, impossible in the climatic conditions of Europe. Yet the destruction of the local population left them without a potential workforce. With insufficient European migrants or convicts to meet the need for labour, they turned to Africa.

According to Professor David Eltis, author of *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (Cambridge, 2000), the use of Africans as slaves resulted at least in part from the relatively sudden large-scale interaction between the people of the European and African continents, brought about by rapid advances in shipping. Thus, while slavery was no longer practised in Western Europe – due, Eltis speculates, to the development of a Pan-European sensibility, a sufficient recognition of fellow humanity to make other Europeans ineligible for slavery – the speed with which Europeans and Africans were brought into contact on a large scale allowed little time for a similar recognition to develop, one transcending differences in appearance, culture and societal norms. ‘The English and Dutch were more likely to view non-European peoples as lying outside the social contract and therefore beyond the protection of the web of individual rights they were weaving



Island of Gorée, Senegal situated two kilometers  
from the capital city of Dakar

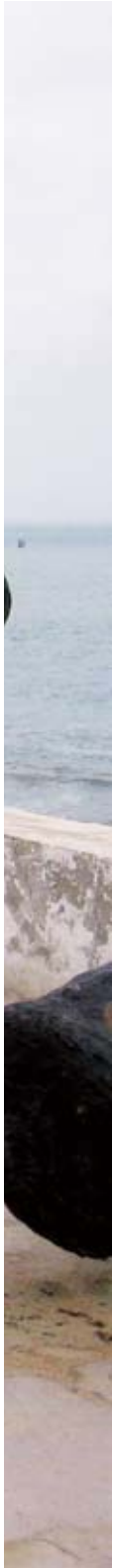
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Forts and castles, Greater Accra, Ghana  
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for themselves’, he told *Time* magazine in an interview in 2000. ‘As long as some group is regarded as outsiders then freedom for insiders is perfectly compatible with enslavement and exploitation’.

Eltis also argued that the transatlantic slave trade followed from the power of African states to resist European colonisation until the late 19th century, making it impossible to establish plantations in the much closer West Africa. ‘They were forced to treat Africans as equals’, he told *Time*. ‘The plantations were established in the Americas instead, and the expensive transatlantic slave trade was necessary to bring them labour. In this sense the slave trade was the result of African strength. Europeans bought slaves, they did not obtain them through European-led raids’.

So why were Africans prepared to sell other Africans into slavery? According to Eltis, a similar pan-African identity had not yet developed in Africa, perhaps in part due to the size of the continent. ‘The insider-outsider divide was, for whatever reason, much more localised in sub-Saharan Africa’ he told *Time*.

Despite being from a wide range of places across the continent, the people traded as slaves were generally deported from only a few ports on the coast of Africa, the most active of these being Whydah on the so-called ‘Slave Coast’ of North Africa; Bonny, on the Bight of Biafra; and Luanda, on the West Coast of Africa. Indeed, West Central Africa was one of the largest suppliers of slaves, sending nearly half of the entire African labour bound for the Americas and roughly 80 per cent of those shipped to

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South East Brazil. For the duration of the voyage – usually around two months – slaves were sexually segregated and kept naked, with the men frequently in chains. About a quarter were children. Both outbreaks of disease due to unsanitary conditions and episodes of violent resistance meant that a significant percentage did not survive the voyage.

The Transatlantic Slave trade was brought to an end in the mid 1800s, at a time, Eltis claims, when slaves were fetching record prices – suggesting that its demise was influenced by moral considerations. Brazilian authorities began arresting slave ships at the end of 1850, and in 1867 the last slaving expedition – to Cuba – took place. By this time an estimated 3 600 000 Africans had been brought to Brazil alone, where their culture played a massive role in the

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Ilha de Mozambique, an Arab port and boat building center formerly used as a slave, gold and spice trading post

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developing beliefs and culture of the country. The move to end slave trading was not always welcomed by those African nations that had profited from its practice – ironically, the quest to end slavery in Africa became one of the secondary justifications for the colonisation of the continent.

Worldwide, the fusion of African cultures with those of their destinations brought about new societies and cultural forms, a legacy reflected in UNESCO’s Representative List of Intangible Heritage of Humanity, which includes several nominations highlighting the ‘cultural interactions of the slave trade and slavery’. Those most recently added include Argentina’s Tango, Uruguay’s Candombe and France’s Maloya; but there are many others.





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Historic Centre of Salvador de Bahia, Brazil, one of the oldest cities of the New World that housed the slave market



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Cidade Velha, Cabo Verde, formerly Ribeira Grande served as a place of concentration for enslaved Africans



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Aapravasi Ghat, Mauritius