

THE ROOT THE A.V. CLUB DEADSPIN EARTHER GIZMODO MORE

When It Comes to the Slave Trade, All Guilt Is Not Equal



Michael A. Gomez

4/27/10 6:23am •



299



Getty Images

Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s op-ed in the *New York Times*, "Ending the Slavery Blame-Game" (April 22, 2010), is a provocative piece whose core argument is the following: Because African elites were involved in the transatlantic slave trade as commercial partners with Europeans, blame is necessarily and equally assigned to them as

well, spreading guilt around so much as to render it meaningless.

Professor Gates has assumed controversial positions before. Though his recent article will rankle many (which I suspect is his intention), I want to suggest that there is much to gain from a healthy and informed debate on this matter. And there is much to debate. The fault line of "Ending the Slavery Blame-Game" lies not in its estimates and statistics, but in its interpretation.

To begin, there is no denying that, as a direct result of the growing demand for enslaved labor in the Americas, West and West Central Africa became theaters of increasing violence and warfare from the 15th to the 19th centuries. Sugarcane, indigo, cotton, tobacco and coffee production were all labor-intensive enterprises that required large numbers of workers, which for various reasons could not be supplied from either Europe or indigenous America. The African continent just happened to be located between Europe and the Americas and became identified as the leading source of that labor.

Given the foregoing, it would be difficult to dispute that European and American demand fueled the transatlantic slave trade. Europe and America provided the capital, built and commanded the ships, and created the plantations that absorbed those captured. There are multiple studies demonstrating that the rise of American and European wealth in that period bore a strong correlation to the slave trade. Stated differently, the emergence of the West was largely at the expense of African labor. The concept of reparations is therefore not simply concerned with suffering, but also with the question of who should rightly benefit.

Since it was Europe and America that were responsible for the broad design and implementation of the slave trade, to what extent can we assign blame to those African elites who facilitated that trade? This is a fair question, for as professor Gates correctly asserts, there is no doubt that Africans played a role. But what does it mean to say that African elites or even African kingdoms were involved in trafficking human beings? What was the nature of that involvement, how extensive was it and how far did it reach?

The African environment created by external slave trades (the transatlantic sector was only one of several) became increasingly unstable from the 15th to the 19th centuries. Captives from wars (fought over religion, land, the control of trade routes and in some cases for the express purpose of creating captives), who would have been killed or absorbed into the conquering society in prior times, now found themselves funneled toward the coast, where they would eventually be taken to the Americas and elsewhere. Along the way, they were joined by others who were similarly bound, but for other reasons. (They were accused of crimes or were victims of kidnapping, etc.)

As the tentacles of the trade reached deeper into the hinterland, more communities became susceptible and responded by defending themselves. Ironically, captives taken by those acting in self-defense were also often fed into domestic commercial relays that ultimately led to the sea. Relations between communities became increasingly complex, but the point here is that individuals and populations "involved" with the slave trade were drawn in for many different

reasons. It is difficult to imagine assigning equal culpability to a community fending off the slave trade with the European nations bankrolling and in ultimate control of the entire affair, especially when those European nations were providing the weaponry.