

African American Experiences in 400 years of Victimizations: A Brief Review within the Context of Deliberate Historical Deceptions

Dr. Felix O. Chima, PhD
Professor and Director
Department of Social Work Education
Prairie View A&M University
United States of America

Abstract

For the past 400 years from 1619 to 2019, African Americans continue to experience deceptive and distorting accounts of their history from slavery to the contemporary times. This article briefly discussed the experiences of the enslaved Africans in historical context, along with some of the deceptive efforts that have been made to distort their historical existence in the United States of America. The discussions traces their culture and civilization as Africans before their enslavement, from Africa to America. Furthermore, the role of religion in the development of the Africans enslavement was discussed. Included in the article's discussions are the role of Europe in the African slave trade, Africans in the American colonies, and the Institution of Slavery and the dehumanization of Africans. The resilience of African Americans from their enslaved ancestry to free people and their contributions to building America into a world super power was noted.

Keywords: African Americans, Deceptions, Institution of slavery, Dehumanization of Africans

Introduction

African Americans have been victims of oppressive practices and dehumanizing treatment throughout the history of the United States. Historically, skin color and other phenotypic characteristics have been used to identify populations for oppression, violence, and unequal treatment (Chima, 2014). African Americans are descendants of Africans who have identical physical features, identify themselves culturally with those in the continent of Africa, and are citizens of the United States (Chima, 2014). Africans who were captured and brought to the United States were readily recognizable because of skin color. After hundreds of years, skin color still identifies African Americans as belonging to an oppressed group that is subjected to abuse and servitude. Beginning from the period when Africans were enslaved in the United States, they were not allowed to learn to read or write, thus, facilitating lies and deceptions that were used for purposes of enslaving them mentally, just as the institution of slavery enslaved them physically.

This article briefly discussed the experiences of the enslaved Africans in historical context along with some of the deceptive efforts that have been made to distort their historical existence in the United States of America. The discussion traces their culture and civilization as Africans before their enslavement, from Africa to America.

Historical Deception: African Culture and Civilization

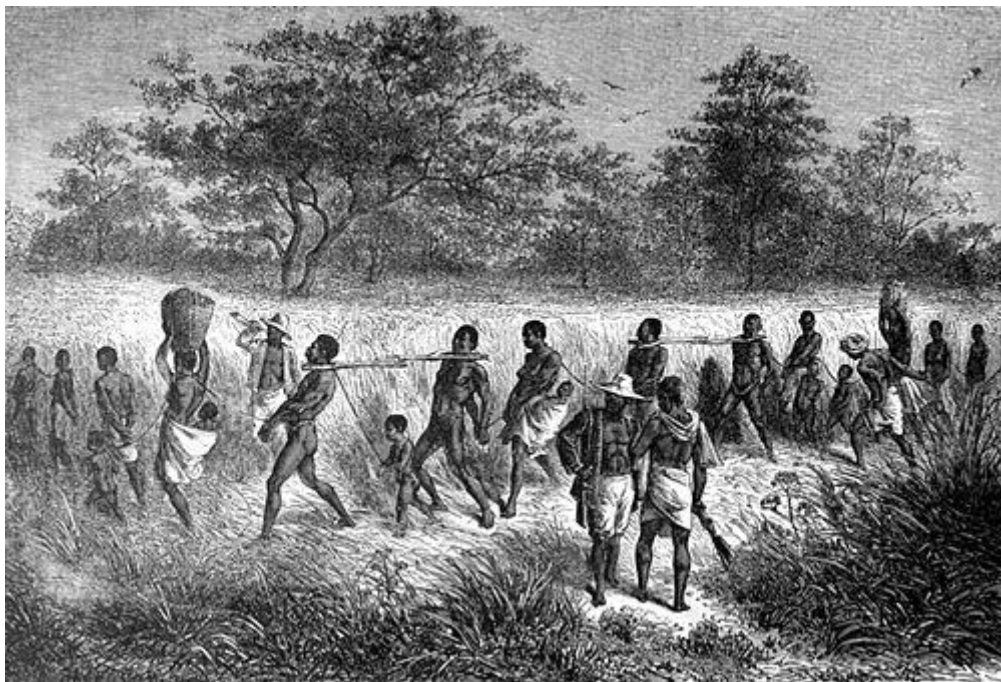
Among the many lies that were used as deceptions to justify the enslavement of Africans includes the lie that Africans did not have culture and civilization in Africa prior to their capture. Actually, the people of West Africa, the origin of most of the enslaved Africans, had a rich and varied history and culture long before the arrival of European slavers (Chima, 2014).

Geographically, West Africa protrudes out distinctively into the Atlantic Ocean, thus providing ample sea transportation and merchant opportunities, as well as inland forests and tropical savannas that lie between the deserts and the ocean. The original inhabitants of this region are mostly the present-day people of Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, Mandingo, Fantin, and Ashanti. The earliest West Africans were skilled hunters and gatherers, who also had a wide mix of political arrangements including cities, states, kingdoms, and other organizations, each with their own languages and culture. Village life around 2500 B.C.E. grew into cities, eventually developing into empires and kingdoms (Chima, 2014).

The historic Songhai Empire and the kingdoms of Benin, Congo, and Mali were great and dominant with monarchs leading complex political and social structures and with governance capabilities over hundreds of thousands of subjects. Ghana was an ancient empire and a wealthy kingdom that supplied gold to North Africa and Europe between the 9th and 11th centuries. Africans were especially skilled in such subjects as medicine, mathematics, and astronomy. For centuries, West Africans traded with Europeans through merchants in North Africa. The Portuguese were the first traders to sail through the West African coast in the 15th century, and they were followed by the Dutch, British, French, and Scandinavians. Africans made fine luxury items in bronze and traded gold, ivory, spices, seeds, and tools from village to village, state to state, and continent to continent (Chima, 2014; Leashore, (1995).

Arab Muslims and Religious Zealots Effect on Africa

For several decades prior to the involvement of Europeans in African exploration, the Arabs, including strong Muslim zealots, waged religious wars against African villagers. A majority of the Africans who were enslaved were captured in battles or were kidnapped. The Muslim zealots captured many West Africans, then hauled and dragged them across the Sahara Desert into Arabia. Most captives were marched to the coast, often ending long peregrinations of weeks or even months, manacled to one another.



Captured and kidnapped Africans being marched toward shipping vehicles

Although the Portuguese, with good intentions, introduced a Catholic-influenced form of Christianity in Africa between the 16th and 18th centuries, that peremptory motives were nonetheless overshadowed by the atrocities of the slave trade and commercial exploitation of Africa. The spread of Christianity and Islam across Africa during this time contributed to the heightened religious conflict with most Africans as victims (Chima, 2014; Leashore, 1995).

In the many years of war between the Arab Muslims and African Christians, the Africans were without weaponry. As a result, the empires and great kingdoms of West Africa fell to the continuing and endless Muslim attacks. Throughout this period of wars and conflicts, both African Christians and Muslims captured and enslaved one another for religious reasons. Evidently, the history of human civilization shows that Africa had advanced civilization and rich culture before contact with Europe or the Americas. It is also evident that to say otherwise is obviously intended as deception.

Europeans and African Slave Trade Deception

Another serious lie designed for deception consumption was that Africans sold their fellow Africans into slavery. In fact, European traders from their first contact kidnapped and bought African war captives from Muslim crusaders. Although war captives were viewed as slaves, during the Middle Ages, slaves in Africa had some rights and could not be abused, bought, or sold. They often had the right to own property. While seeking gold and spreading Christianity for Portugal, Henry the Navigator, in 1444, first explored the African coasts. He and his crew attacked and captured a sleeping Africa village and carried people in chains and against their will to Portugal. From then on, Portugal was heavily engaged in slave trafficking and was transporting on the average of 1,000 African slaves annually, within a ten-year period (Chima, 2014; Leashore, 1995).

The lies and deception about the sale of Africans by other Africans was designed to justify the immoral human-rights abuses perpetrated against the humanity of Africans. It was also used to deceive the enslaved Africans into thinking that they were not wanted by their people, consequently causing distrust and division between slaves and the peoples of their homelands.

Africans and American Colonies: Deception on Indenture Africans

In the 17th century, transatlantic slaving became an imperious trade, when plantation owners required more and more slave labor to meet the increasing demand for sugar in Europe. It is essential to acknowledge that the first groups of Africans to come to the North American colonies, also referred as the New World, were not slaves. Many arrived in the New World with European explorers long before the beginning of slavery. There are historical accounts noting that Vasco Núñez de Balboa's crew included 30 Africans in 1513, when he came upon the vegetation of Panama to the Pacific Ocean. Also, Africans were with Juan Ponce de León in Florida and Francisco Pizarro in Peru; Africans accompanied Hernán Cortés when he came to Mexico; and Africans were members of the crew engaged in French explorations of the New World, as well as Jesuit missionary expeditions into Canada. It is important to note that the first Africans to arrive in England came voluntarily in 1555. Africans sailed with Christopher Columbus on his first, second, and third voyages to the New World. One year before the commemorated *Mayflower* landed at Plymouth Rock, 20 Africans had already come ashore in Jamestown, Virginia, in the summer of 1619 (Chima, 2014; Leashore, 1995; Dixon, & Wilson 1994). They joined the ranks of white indentured servants, since slavery did not exist in North America during this period.

Hundreds of Africans eventually came to the American colonies as indentured servants or freemen from England, Spain, Portugal, and the West Indies. As indentured servants, they were often freed from their labor obligations after a specified time of service and were able to live legally as citizens and own property and had opportunities for education and advancement. They served alongside other Europeans who were also serving a term of indentured servitude. By contrast, the institution of slavery supported the denial of basic human rights and the extraction of human labor through physical and mental abuse.

A preponderant number of enslaved Africans were brought to the British North America between 1720 and 1780. Over 80,000 Africans a year were carried out of the continent in slave ships in the decade from 1821 to 1830. Within the next twenty years, over one million more were shipped out of Africa, constituting one tenth of the volume that were carried off during the slave trade era. Most of the Africans that were carried to the region of Brazil overwhelmingly originated from the African area of Angola. The majority of the enslaved Africans that were carried to North America, including the Caribbean, originated mainly from West African. Significantly, over 90 percent of African captives were enslaved and carried into the Caribbean and South American territories (Chima, 2014; Leashore, 1995; Dixon, & Wilson 1994).

The Institution of Slavery: Dehumanization of Africans Deception

The institution of slavery brutalized and subjected African Americans to systematic violence and oppression. The increasingly huge economic benefits from sugar plantations created a demand for more laborers. Plantation owners tried to enslave the Native Indian population, but most Indians died of small pox and other diseases transmitted by Europeans. Attempts to institutionally enslave white people failed, because they could more easily escape and blend in with the larger white community. Africans were selected to become a permanently enslaved work force because they were considered stronger than whites and Indians. It was also concluded that Africans could work in extreme heat for long hours without dying of heat exhaustion. Africans who ran away could not blend easily into the larger community. Most important, Africa was seen to offer an inexhaustible supply of strong new laborers.

Within a few years, hundreds of thousands of slaves were crossing the Atlantic each year. Known as the “Middle Passage”, the voyage from Africa to the United States was one of massive, forced migration. It involved overcrowded ships, harsh conditions, disease, suicides by jumping overboard, and maimed hands and feet because persons were chained to one another. It has been estimated that 5 to 20 million Africans were enslaved in the United States before the Emancipation Proclamation. The two and a half centuries of slavery as an economic institution caused the displacement and death of over 100 million Africans, including those who died during the passage (Chima, 2014; Leashore, 1995; Dixon, & Wilson 1994).



African Slaves' Contribution in Building America

The involuntary removal of millions of Africans from their homeland and the horrific journey to America is one of the most tragic events in the history of humankind. Slavery is considered the single most important historical event distinguishing the African American experience as uniquely distinct from any other racial and ethnic group. The justification for African American enslavement was to create more lies and deceptions in response to the dehumanizing effect of slavery. These lies and deceptions laid the foundation for the racist theories that tended to falsely classify slaves as a subhuman species, who was physically and intellectually inferior to whites. This contradicted the earlier justification for slavery based on the claim that Africans were stronger than whites and Indians. Slaves' resistance to slavery continued, and by 1831 the power of the antislavery movement had intensified.

Abolition of Slavery and Reconstruction Era Deceptions

African American slavery was an important factor in the American Civil War, which began in 1861. On January 1, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, declaring that all slaves would be free. Slavery in the United States was officially abolished for approximately 4 million African Americans with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, which was ratified on December 6, 1865.

Reconstruction following the Civil War brought about three major pieces of legislation: the Fourteenth Amendment, providing due process in the protection of individual rights and liberties; the Fifteenth Amendment, allowing African American men the right to vote and hold political office; and the Civil Rights Act of 1875, which outlawed racial discrimination toward African Americans and offered equal access to public facilities (Chima, 2014; Leashore, 1995; Dixon, & Wilson 1994).

These new rights were interrupted as numerous white supremacy groups formed in opposition to the new status of African Americans. Terrorist and vigilante organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan and the Knights of the White Camellia, engaged in a campaign of violence and promotion of lawlessness by these racist organizations, southern legislators enacted the Black Codes of conduct in support of social oppression and the era of Jim Crow segregation. The conglomeration of American racist practices toward African Americans during and after slavery culminated in the stigmatization of their status. This stigma has persisted until the present.

Accomplishments of African Americans and Contributions to American Society

From the 1950s and 1960s, with the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* - to the 1990s, African Americans have fought and endured institutional racism, discrimination, and oppression unlike any other group in the United States. They have persevered amid inhumane assaults and in the face of adversity. They have shown remarkable resilience for living through the eras of slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and racial terror. Through their struggles, they have made momentous contributions toward advancing the civil rights of all Americans and the quality of their lives against ponderous odds (Chima, 2014).

Yes, Slaves Did Help Build the White House



“I wake up every morning in a house that was built by slaves,” Michelle Obama said on Monday night at the Democratic convention. Her mention of the role played by African-American slaves in building the White House drew backlash from conservative critics. Credit Stephen Crowley/The New York Times.

Undeniably, the accomplishments of African Americans and their contributions to the American society have been deceptively left out of most history books. The peoples of Africa were captured and trafficked to the Americas for no reason other than to work. From the 16th through the 19th century, most European colonial economies were largely contingent on enslaved African labor for their survival. Slavery systems of labor exploited an average of 80 percent of enslaved Africans men, women, and children, primarily as field workers.

Therefore, the African slave labor helped to build the United States of America into the great nation it is today, and yes, including the White House, as Michele Obama stated correctly.

Although African slaves performed all kinds of labor intensive jobs and made important contributions to the civilization of the United States of America, most present day African Americans do not know of their contributions to the betterment of the United States history. Through deliberate omissions and deceptive practices of distorting historical events, all Americans lack actual knowledge of the contributions made by the enslaved Africans. For the past 400 hundred years from 1619 to 2019, African Americans have been making significant contributions to every aspect of American society including in business, arts and entertainment, sciences, literature, and politics and law. Despite issues of racism and persistent discriminatory practices against them (Chima, & Wharton, 1999), African Americans endure, accomplish, and lead.

Many perceive the election of President Barack Obama in 2008 and his reelection for a second term in 2012 as steps forward in U.S. race relations. Although many African Americans have become successful in various professions and careers, the struggle for equity on all levels continues. Many African Americans remain victims of negative categorizations and evaluations on the basis of skin color. They are victims of stereotypes and prejudice that persist against them in American society.

References

- Chima, F. O. (2014). African Americans. In Levine, Timothy R. & Golson, J.Geoffrey, (Eds.). *Encyclopedia of Deception*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publication. Inc.
- Chima, F. O. & Wharton, W. D. (1999). African Americans and the Workplace: Overview of Persistent Discrimination. *The Journal of Intergroup Relations*. , Vol. 26, No.1.
- Dixon, B.M. and Wilson, J. (1994). *Good Health for African Americans*. New York: Crown Publishers.
- Leashore, B.R. (1995). *African Americans. Encyclopedia of Social Work*, (19th.ed.). Washington D.C., NASW Press,