



Discussion about then and now

Lesson 3.2: Western Africa

Topics that may provide an opening for a discussion about slavery

Slavery

Slavery has always been a part of society. We speak of slavery when a laborer or employee:

- must conduct un-free labor, of which the profits or results must be fully or partially surrendered.
- has no political or civil rights.
- is the physical property of another human being.

If a combination of these three is present, we can speak of slavery.

In many countries slaves are considered movable assets, not as human beings.

Slaves, in principle, were not allowed to own property and they had no civil rights. Not until the late eighteenth century laws were established ending this.

Then:

In all parts of the world there was slavery: in America, Asia, Europe and in Africa. It was deemed normal. Soldiers who lost a war were killed or enslaved. This also often happened to their women and children. A person could also be forced into slavery when a debt could not be paid. Poor parents sold one or more of their children into slavery. Criminals were sometimes also sentenced into slavery.

In colonial times and during the time of trans-Atlantic slave trade, Danish, English, French, Dutch, Spanish or Portuguese captains bought slaves from African traders, who had brought the slaves from the inland to the coast of Western Africa. Subsequently cargo ships shipped them to the other side of the Atlantic Ocean.

The slaves who survived the passage were sold with a profit to the owners of the plantations in the America's. There they were forced to do hard labor. They were not paid. They received insufficient food, some clothes and a shack to live in. The owner could do with them as he pleased. He was allowed to punish them severely without interference of a judicial system. If, for instance, they had not done enough work, they could receive 50 lashes with a whip. The owner could sell them to somebody else, even if this meant a child would never see his mother or father again.

1. What do you think about one human being as the owner of another human being?
2. In the past people thought of many reasons to justify slavery: a different skin color, a different language, culture, religion, or no education. In fact they thought other humans were less civilized and not fully human, but that they were something between human and animal. Which is why the Europeans and American often treated the African slaves as animals. What do you think of this? Is this way of thinking about other humans still present today?
3. In the past, if you were born into slavery, specifically if both your parents were enslaved, the law determined that you too were a slave and property of the slave owner. What do you think of such a law?
4. Do you think it makes a difference if the slave owner keeps a person who is from his own people, religion and culture as a slave, or people from a different country or part of the world? Why does / doesn't it make a difference?
5. And would it have made a difference for the slaves if they were enslaved in their own country by people who were like them, or enslaved in a different country, other part of the

world, with a different culture and other rules and legislation by people who were very different in appearance, thinking and behavior.

6. Many slave owners treated their slaves poorly. They made them work too much and too long, gave them too little food and often gave them unjust and evil punishments. It is no wonder that from time to time groups of slaves revolted. These slaves were almost always beaten down severely. During these revolts many died and the rest was imprisoned and punished ruthlessly. The slaves were, for instance, hung, burnt or beheaded. As a response to the revolts some slave owners wanted to become even stricter, while others thought that perhaps the living conditions for the slaves needed to be improved or that slavery should be abolished. What do you think? Was it a good or bad idea that the slaves revolted? Why do you think so?

Now:

Slavery is illegal nowadays. Slavery is considered a crime against humanity. This does not imply there is no more slavery. Millions of child slaves are used for slave labor in factories, in underground mines, on the land, in prostitution, in drug trafficking and are used as child soldiers.

In 1989 the United Nations drafted the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In this attention was paid to modern forms of slavery, such as child slavery. An international organization dedicated to the protection of children's rights is [Unicef](#).

1. Have you ever thought about slavery? What do you think of the fact that slavery still exists today?
2. Can you compare colonial slavery, during the time of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, to slavery now? Why can you / can't you?
3. The Netherlands ended slavery in her colonies in 1863. A subject that is often spoken about is offering apologies to the descendants of the slaves. What do you think about this? Is it good to do so? Why is it / isn't it?
4. A subject closely related to this is the question if descendants of the slaves should be paid a compensation. What do you think about this? Do you think it would be good to do so? Why do you / don't you?
5. Do you have any ideas about what people, children and adults, can do together to collectively bring our attention to the legacy of slavery, to process it and give it an appropriate and dignified place in our collective history?
6. Despite the fact that slavery is seen as a crime against humanity, slavery still takes place. Men, women and children can still be property of other humans and be forced to work in terrible conditions. Can you name any examples of modern day slavery? Name them and indicate if the form of slavery is mostly for boys, girls, men or women.
7. It is clearly not enough to only create laws that make slavery illegal or punishable. What else is needed, according to you?
8. What do you think of organizations that try to place attention on the existence of modern slavery, such as [Anti-Slavery International](#), which was founded in 1839, and is the world's oldest international human rights organization and works to eliminate all forms of slavery around the world. Anti-Slavery International also has a [Facebook page](#). Would you like a page such as theirs and actively join such an initiative?
9. What would you do in your own region to call attention to the fact that slavery still exists?
10. Do you have any ideas on what you can do to stand up against child slavery? And what could you do with your group/class or the whole school?

More information

Dutch Canon of National History – [Slavery](#).