

A Look at

The Interesting Narrative of the
Life of Olaudah Equiano or
Gustavus Vassa the African

EQUIANO'S TRAVELS

by Olaudah Equiano

---1789---

Edited by Paul Edwards

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The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa the African is the premier narrative about the life of a slave written in the 1700s. His book is one of only four known writings in English by someone born in West Africa, and is far more important a work than those of his three predecessors which include Phyllis Wheatley. It is the only account I am aware of about the horrors of slavery, the slave trade and the life of a black man in a world controlled by Europeans written by someone who actually endured it. Thus, it is a very important primary source about a period that is not well known outside of historical circles. However, according to Paul Edwards, the editor of the edition I read, it was something of a best seller in its day. Between its publication in 1789 and 1827, it went into seventeen editions and was widely read in Britain and the United States. (Equiano viii). It was also translated into Dutch and German and was popular among those people as well. It was a popular tool in the fight against slavery as it proved that not only Africans, but even enslaved Africans, were capable of being “civilized.”

Gustavus Vassa the African, born as Olaudah Equiano, lived a life full of adventure. He was born in 1745 in the village of Essaka in what is now southeastern Nigeria. He lived in the Eboe (today this is known as Ibo) nation which was then nominally part of the great Benin Empire. He grew up in what seems a very romanticized life as the youngest son of an important village elder. His was a very simple, traditional society, and he had never heard of the sea or of white men before he was sold into slavery. Slavery was also part of this traditional society, although a very different brand than he experienced. Traditionally, slaves were taken as spoils of war and then were assimilated into families almost as equals. The only difference between slave and freemen were that slaves had to eat separately. Some slaves even owned other slaves. He was also aware of red men (maybe Arabs?) who traded and bought slaves. These were called Oye-Eboe which sounds very similar to a common traditional term for white people in Nigeria – Oyibo.

His wonderful childhood in this land was “uncommonly rich and fruitful” (Equiano 7) was brought to an end at age 7 when he was kidnapped along with his sister by slave raiders. He was sold from place to place and within six months was sold to European slave traders on the coast. As he had never seen anybody of water bigger than a pond before, the ocean frightened him terribly, as did the Europeans with their pale complexions, long hair, and strange language. He thought that “I had gotten into a world of bad spirits and that they were going to kill me” (Equiano, 25) and he was so frightened that “if ten thousand worlds had been my own, I would have freely parted with them all to have exchanged my condition with that of the meanest slave of my own country.” (Equiano, 25).

His descriptions of the slave ship make one shudder at the inhumanity of it all; that it was our European ancestors who could do this to their fellow humans was unbelievable. Things were so bad that many on board died just from the “loathsome smells.” (Equiano, 28) His particular ship landed at Barbados from where he was sold to a planter in Virginia. During the slave auction, many close friends and relatives were sold separately, and this had a lasting impact on Equiano. He makes a very impassioned attack on this in the following passage which is also a powerful critique of the institution of slavery itself:

O, ye nominal Christians! Might not an African ask you, Learned you this from your God who says unto you ‘Do unto all men as you would men should do unto you?’ Is it not enough that we are torn from our country and friends to toil for your luxury and lust of gain? Must every tender feeling be likewise sacrificed to your avarice? Are the dearest of friends and relations, now rendered more dear by their separation from their kindred, still to be parted from each other and thus prevented from cheering the gloom of slavery with the small comfort of being together and mingling their sufferings and sorrows? Why are parents to lose their children, brothers their sister, or husbands their wives? Surely this is a new refinement in cruelty which, while it has no advantage to atone for it, thus aggravates distress and adds fresh horrors even the wretchedness of slavery. (Equiano, 32)

From Virginia, he was sold to a ship captain and went with him on a voyage to England. Over the next years Equiano became very handy on a ship and sailed around Europe, the west Indies and British North America. He learned English from people along the way, was baptized and was taught to read and write and to

understand mathematics. As the slave of a Quaker based between Philadelphia and Montserrat, Equiano began small-time trade and eventually earned enough money to buy his freedom for 40 pounds sterling. Thus, after 10 years of bondage, at the age of 21, he was once again free. As one can imagine, his purchase of his freedom was a moment of ecstatic joy. His description of this is one of such innocent bliss and beauty that I must quote it, even though it is almost as long as the previous passage:

Heavens! Who could do justice to my feelings at this moment! Not conquering heroes themselves in the midst of triumph – Not the tender mother who has just regained her long-lost infant, and presses it to her heart – Not the weary, hungry mariner at the sight of the desired friendly port – Not the lover, when he once more embraces his beloved mistress after she had been ravished from his arms! – All within my breast was tumult, wildness and delirium! My feet scarcely touched the ground, for they were winged with joy, and like Elijah, as he rose to Heaven, they were with lightning sped as I went on. (Equiano, 96-97)

His life as a free man was also difficult at times. As a black man in a white world, he had few rights and was often badly treated. In the west Indies at least, he realized that being a free black man was almost worse than being an enslaved black man because, as a free man you always had to be on your guard so as not to lose your freedom again.

The narrative is extremely interesting not only because of the powerful emotion but also because of the numerous experiences Equiano stumbled upon. Considering the relative immobility of people of his day, and especially considering that he was black, and for a time a slave, it was amazing that he travelled to so many places and did so many things. During his life, he lived in the Benin Empire, Virginia, England, several Caribbean Islands and the Musquito Coast of Central America. He travelled across the Atlantic several times, was on the Mediterranean where he visited France, Italy (while there, Mount Vesuvius had an immense eruption), and Turkey; he spent time in Georgia, South Carolina, Pennsylvania, Plymouth and even participated in a voyage to the Arctic in search of the Northwest Passage. Along the way to the Arctic, he visited Greenland, probably the first African to do so.

Equiano participated in pitched battles at sea between the British and the French in the Seven Year's War. In Philadelphia, he wandered into a church in which rev. George Whitefield happened to be preaching. He survived a shipwreck in the Bahamas. He served as a pastor for some slaves in Savannah, Georgia and later became an evangelist among the Musquito Indians. He learned the trade of hair dressing and got harassed by the Inquisition at a Carnival in Portugal.

He helped set up a plantation in Central America on which he managed slaves. He made sure that they were all from his own nation as "The West India planters preferred the slaves of Benin or Eboe to those of any other part of Guinea for their hardiness, intelligence, integrity and zeal." (Equiano, 8) He was also involved in a small way in the American Revolutionary War and he played a big part in the anti-slavery movement. Finally, he also helped to set up the ex-slave colony of Sierra Leone. I suppose it could be said that he was the Forrest Gump of the eighteenth century in that he continually and innocently stumbled into playing a part in important pieces of history.

What then does this book teach us about the society and history of the eighteenth century? To begin with, *Equiano's Travels* is one of the earliest first-hand accounts of a traditional West African society. Because traditional West African societies were predominantly oral, little was actually written down about them except where Islam prevailed. In his description of the society of his childhood, we see a very stable and cyclical way of life that worked and made sense. I am sure that romanticized it to an extent, but Equiano said nothing at all negative about his village and his family. When he was taken into slavery, he wrote about travelling through many different *nations* along the way to the coast. This use of the word *nation* was very much in contrast to the image of West Africa in his day where people believed that all of Africa was populated by little villages with no organization of any kind. It was his quiet way of telling his readers that Africa was not primitive, but was organized into *nations* just like Europe

The editor of this edition, Paul Edwards, wrote that some critics tried to prove that Equiano did not really write the book by himself, since an African could never write so well. In spite of this, all evidence points to Equiano having written

the book without any assistance. There is no reason why an intelligent person like himself would not be able to write like that after spending 33 years in English society. The simple fact that Equiano wrote his book was proof to European society that Africans were capable of “civilization.” Beyond this, he continually criticized Europeans for their perpetuation of slavery and poor treatment of the sable race. What is odd though, he still had a profound respect for European society. He wrote that, “I no longer looked upon them as spirits, but as men superior to us, and therefore I had the stronger desire to resemble them, to imbibe their spirit and imitate their manners; I therefore embraced every occasion of improvement, and every new thing that I observed, I treasured up in my memory.” (Equiano, 43)

On many occasions, Equiano is paternalistic and negative to people of his own race, although never towards other Ibos. He often called them “natives” and said things like “as yet the natives are unacquainted with these refinements.” (Equiano, 4) Thus, even though he held Africa in higher esteem than did the average European, and even though he himself was living proof to Europeans that Africans were as capable of “civilization” as anyone, he was still influenced by the overriding negative towards Africans. To justify the slave trade, Europeans had to portray Africans as a very backward and uncivilized people. This portrayal was so widely accepted that even someone like Equiano, who knew and proved them to be false, inadvertently held them.

Equiano's Travels is a powerful critique of the slave trade. From reading it, one can rate the treatment and status of slaves and black people in general in different parts of the slave world in the 1700s. Equiano was treated by far the best in England. That is where he was baptized and where people began to teach him to read and write English. England is also where he returned to as soon as he could after purchasing his freedom. In general, slaves there were used as household help, as secretaries, deckhands on ships, and so on. They were not used for back-breaking labour. Once he had his freedom, he did not feel that he was in danger of losing it when in England, so he wanted to live there permanently. The West Indies, on the other hand, was the worst place to be a

slave. Slaves there were treated miserably and their lives were worth very little to the plantation owners. The following law in Barbados exhibits this quite plainly:

That if any negro, or other slave, under punishment by his master, or his order, for running away, or any other crime or misdemeanor towards his said master, unfortunately shall suffer in life or member, no person whatsoever shall be liable to a fine, but if any man shall out of wantonness, or only of bloody-mindedness, or cruel intention, willfully kill a negro, or other slave, of his own, he shall pay into the public treasury fifteen pounds sterling. (Equiano, 70)

In summary, this law put the value of the life of a negro at 15 pounds sterling! Obviously, this was an insult to their humanity and status as image bearers of God. This law and others like it so angered Equiano that he wrote:

And do not the assembly which enacted it deserve the appellation of savages and brutes rather than that of Christians and men? It is an act at once unmerciful, unjust, unwise, which for cruelty would disgrace an assembly of those who are called barbarians... (Equiano, 71)

In spite of this, Equiano still respected the culture of the Europeans and wanted to emulate them.

The status of free blacks in the West Indies was also very lowly. Many were captured and resold into slavery and all of them lived in constant fear of once again losing their liberty. An interesting point he makes about the status of slaves in the West Indies was that, in general, slaves were treated better on French islands than on British ones. Equiano was also poorly treated in the southern colonies of British North America, especially Georgia. Even after he had bought his freedom, he felt threatened there and in one case was almost sold back into slavery just for outsmarting a white man which made the white man very angry. His attitude towards the northern colonies was much more positive and he really liked the city of Philadelphia. I found it a telling point that in Philadelphia he could freely enter a Quaker meeting and a church in which Whitefield was preaching, even though he was black. That was not a typical thing in those days. However, he obviously still felt safer and more equal in England because that is where he headed when his liberty became a reality.

Olaudah Equiano was an Ibo. Even if he had not stated that in the book, I would have guessed it. First of all, his skill at trading in the West Indies, the means by which he bought his freedom, is very typical of Ibos. Today, the Ibos are the merchants of Nigeria, and, if you meet a Nigerian abroad who owns a store or is a businessman, chances are he is Ibo. Furthermore, his writing style is typical of Ibos even today. Some of his flowery language is a result of the period in which he was writing, but many Nigerians today, learning English as a second language, write in a similar style. In addition, Equiano often used very clumsy and long sentences, something typical of a brand of African Literature known as Onitsha Market Literature – and, yes, you guessed it, Onitsha just happens to be in the center of Iboland! Let me give an example:

But, being still of a roving disposition, and desirous of seeing as many different parts of the world as I could, I shipped myself soon after, in the same year, as steward on board of a fine large ship, called the *Jamaica*, with Captain David Watt; and we sailed from England in December 1771 for Nevis and Jamaica. (Equiano, 130)

When reading the book, I had many hearty chuckles because of sentences like these. Finally, from reading Equiano's book, one would get the feeling that over and over again, he saved the day. This continues to be very characteristic of Ibos who have the feeling that the earth probably would not exist if it was not for them!

The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa the African is a fascinating book about a man who beat all odds to thrive in a society which did not respect him, his people, or his homeland. There were many instances where people tried to cheat him because he was a slave or because he was black, but there are an equal number of occasions where people treated him kindly. It was very refreshing to see that even in the heyday of slavery, there were still countless decent people who saw Africans as human beings who were as deserving of respect as anyone. Equiano's book is filled with the irony that, even though they often acted so uncivilized in their treatment of him, he still saw European society as superior to his own.

The book ends with a plea to end the slave trade with a claim that, through legitimate trade, Africa could become a huge market for European goods which would be far more profitable than the plantation system built on the backs of slaves. He calls on everyone “to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly before God.” (Equiano, 160) We can learn a great deal from this complicated man who suffered so much, forgave so quickly, made the most of his situation and so made his name survive the ages far better than anyone who once oppressed him.