

Piet Emmer: How unique was the Atlantic Slave Trade?

In my contribution to the workshop I plan to discuss those aspects of the Atlantic slave trade that made this trade differ from the internal slave trade in Africa and the Arab slave trade.

In many ways, the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade was unique. With the exception of the Iberian peninsula Europe did not trade in slaves nor did the Europeans enslave one another. The slave trade and slavery under dominance of the Europeans was exclusively directed towards the colonial world. Attempts to introduce slavery in Western Europe failed. Elsewhere, such a geographical difference did not exist and nowhere outside Europe were all people of the same continent considered as insiders who could not be enslaved.

Not only the origins of the European trade in slaves were unique, the same was true of the use of slaves. In the European colonies the use of slaves was based on economic motives and not on tradition. Nowhere else was slavery so directly linked to economic growth. In Africa, Arabia and in Asia, slaves were used either as conspicuous consumption or to fill certain occupations traditionally reserved for slaves such as portering, army service, and cleaning. In the European colonies, however, the transition from non-slave to slave labour was based on a cost-benefit analysis.

Last, but not least, the abolition of the slave trade and of slavery by the Europeans was unique. Nowhere else were these institutions abolished and in parts of Africa and Asia they still exist. In contrast to the introduction of slavery in the European colonial world, its abolition was not based on economic, but on humanitarian motives. Furthermore, the Europeans were unique in wanting to abolish the slave trade of the Africans and Asians once they themselves had done away with these institutions.

In conclusion the point will be stressed that the Atlantic slave trade and slavery was unique in that it contributed to economic growth and their abolition was indeed a case of "econocide", while the reverse was true in Asia, the Middle East and Africa.