
Activity 4: Diaries and Accounts of enslaved Africans

Quobna Ottobah Cugoano was born in (what is now) Ghana in the 1750s. Kidnapped and taken into slavery, he worked on plantations in Granada before being brought to England where he obtained his freedom.

He was baptised 'John Stewart' in 1773, a name he continued to use for the next 15 years, during which time he worked as a servant to the artist Richard Cosway.

While working for Cosway he wrote his "Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Commerce of the Human Species", the first directly abolitionist publication in English by an African, published in 1787. In London he was a friend of Olaudah Equiano and a neighbour of Ignatious Sancho. Although Cugoano may have drafted the book largely on his own, it is likely that it was extensively revised by someone else, possibly Equiano or Sancho.

Here is a passage from his publication:

"I was born in the city of Agimaque, on the coast of Fantyn; my father was a companion to the chief in that part of the country of Fantee, and when the old king died I was left in his house with his family; soon after I was sent for by his nephew, Ambro Accasa, who succeeded the old king in the chieftdom of that part of Fantee known by the name of Agimaque and Assinee.

I lived with his children, enjoying peace and tranquillity, about twenty moons, which, according to their way of reckoning time, is two years. I was sent for to visit an uncle, who lived at a considerable distance from Agimaque.

The first day after we set out we arrived at Assinee, and the third day at my uncle's habitation, where I lived about three months, and was then thinking of returning to my father and young companion of Agimaque; but by this time I had got acquainted with some children of my uncle's hundreds of relations, and we were some days too venturesome in going into the woods to gather fruit and catch birds, and such amusements as pleased us.

One day I refused to go with the rest, being rather apprehensive that something might happen to us; till one of my play-fellows said to me, because you belong to great men, you are afraid to venture your carcase, or else of the bounsam, which is the devil. This enraged me so much, that I set a resolution to join the rest, and we went into the woods as usual; but we had not been above two hours before our troubles began, when several great ruffians came upon us suddenly, and said we must go and answer for it ourselves before him.

Soon some of us attempted in vain to run away, but pistols and cutlasses were soon introduced, threatening that if we offered to stir we should all lie dead on the spot. One of them pretended to be more friendly than the rest, and said that he would speak to their lord to get us clear, and desired that we should follow him; we were then immediately divided into different parties, and drove after him.

We were soon led out of the way which we knew, and towards the evening we came in sight of a town, they told us that this great man of theirs lived there. I was kept about six days at this man's house, and in the evening there was another man came and talked with him a good while, and I heard the one say to the other he must go, and the other said the sooner the better.

Next day we travelled on, and in the evening came to a town, where I saw several white people, which made me afraid that they would eat me, according to our notion as children in the inland parts of the country. They made me rest very uneasy all night. After I was ordered out, the horrors I soon saw and felt, cannot be well described; I saw many of my miserable countrymen chained two and two, some hand-cuffed, and some with their hands tied behind.

We were conducted along by a guard, and when we arrived at the castle, [captured Africans were placed in forts before being loaded onto ships] I asked my guide what I was brought there for, he told me to learn the ways of the brow-sow, that is the white faced people. But when a vessel arrived to conduct us away to the ship, it was a most horrible scene; there was nothing to be heard but rattling of chains, smacking of whips, and the groans and cries of our fellow men.

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Some would not stir from the ground, when they were lashed and beat in the most horrible manner.

I have forgot the name of this infernal fort; but we were taken in the ship that came for us, to another that was ready to sail from Cape Coast. When we were put into the ship, we saw several black merchants coming on board, but we were all drove into our holes, and not suffered to speak to any of them.

In this situation we continued several days in sight of our native land; but I could find no good person to give any information of my situation to Accasa at Agimaque. And when we found ourselves at last taken away, death was more preferable to life, and a plan was concerted amongst us, that we might burn and blow up the ship, and to perish all together in the flames; but we were betrayed by one of our own countrywomen, who slept with some of the head men of the ship, for it was common for the dirty filthy sailors to take African women and lie upon their bodies; but the men were chained and pent up in holes.

It was the women and boys which were to burn the ship, with the approbation and groans of the rest; though that was prevented, the discovery was likewise a cruel bloody scene.

But it would be needless to give a description of all the horrible scenes which we saw, and the base treatment which we met with in the dreadful captive situation, as the similar cases of thousands, which suffer by this infernal traffic, are well known.

It is suffice to say, that I was thus lost to my dear indulgent parents and relations, and they to me. All my help was cries and tears, and these could not avail; nor suffered long, till one succeeding woe, and dread, swelled up another. Brought from a state of innocence and freedom, and, in barbarous and cruel manner, conveyed to a state of horror and slavery: this abandoned situation may be easier conceived than described.

From the time I was kidnapped and conducted to a factory, and from thence in the brutish, base, but fashionable way of traffic, consigned to Granada, the grievous thoughts which I then felt, still pant in my heart; though my fears and tears have long since subsided. And yet it is still grievous to think that thousands more have suffered in similar and greater distress, under the hands of barbarous robbers, and merciless taskmasters; and that many even now are suffering in all the extreme bitterness of grief and woe, that no language can describe.

The cries of some, and the sight of their misery, may be seen and heard afar; but the deep sounding groans of thousands, and the great sadness of their misery and woe, under the heavy load of oppressions and the calamities inflicted upon them, are such as can only be distinctly known to the ears of Jehovah Sabaoth."

Quote from "Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery", written by Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, 1787.

Activity 4

Slave diaries and accounts

Introductory Activity

- Take the full account and split it into paragraphs. Get your pupils to work in pairs to put the full passage in order.

Points to consider:

What do you think of the style of writing Cugoano uses?

Why do you think enslaved Africans wrote accounts of the horrible experiences they went through?

How does this quote make you feel?

How accurate do you think this account is? Consider how old he would have been when he wrote about these childhood memories.

Why are diaries and accounts of enslaved Africans so important as pieces of historical evidence?

Plenary Discussion Activity

Investigating conditions of life from diary entries

What did they wear? What did they eat? Did they have spare time? What did they do and why? What punishments were inflicted by slave owners? How did plantation owners treat the enslaved?