



The Slave Trade, Colonialism And Africa's Underdevelopment

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Abstract:

A revisit to the episode of Africa's slave trade and colonialism is clearly two important issues that markedly affected the economic development of African continents during the last five centuries.

The triangular pattern of exchange under the Atlantic trading system led to the greatest benefit of Europe and left Africa being the loser. The Fertile and largely untapped resources of the New World (i.e the North and South America as well as the Caribbean Island) were tremendously transformed through the importation of African labour force-slave trade via the dreaded "middle passage" or the Atlantic crossing with Europe serving as the provider of capital.

The absence of data about the size of Africa's population in the 15th century makes it difficult to carry out any scientific assessment of the result of the population flow.

Britain being the first to industrialize in the 18th century spearheaded the abolishing of slave trade activities in the 19th century. The realization of Britain that instead of transporting the Africans to the New World to work under service condition in white-owned plantations, it was better to leave the Africans where they were and encourage them to produce what was needed by British industries. This gave rise to the transition between the end of the Atlantic slave trade and the beginning of colonialism.

It is against this backdrop that this paper discusses how the phenomena of the slave trade and the colonialism that played part in its underdevelopment.

1.Introduction

The external slave trade (especially between Africa on the one hand and Europe and the New World on the other) and colonialism were two important episodes that markedly affected the economic development of the African continent during the last five centuries. In other words, in order to have a proper grasp of the present stage of Africa's development or underdevelopment, one must revisit these two important episodes in the European encounter with Africa. As clearly demonstrated by Walter Rodney, in his classic study *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa (1972)*, the perpetual exploitation of Africa's human and material resources by Europe since the beginning of contact between the two continents in the 15th century has been responsible for the former's underdevelopment and the latter's development. Europe's exploitation of Africa's labour and land – the two most important factors of production – for nearly five hundred years through slave trade and colonialism had greatly undermined our capacity to develop in quite a number of ways. This paper therefore discusses how the phenomena of the slave trade and colonialism had played an important part in Africa's underdevelopment.

2.The Atlantic Slave Trade And The Origin Of Africa's Underdevelopment

Trade was the most significant factor in the establishment of contact between Europe and Africa in the 15th Century, and the slave trade was an important component of this relationship. Under the Atlantic trading system, a triangular pattern of exchange was gradually developed in which Europe became the greatest beneficiary and Africa the greatest loser. The fertile and largely untapped resources of the New World (i.e. the North and South America as well as the Caribbean Islands) were tremendously transformed through the importation of African labour force – slave via the dreadful 'middle passage' or the Atlantic crossing, with Europe serving as the provider of capital. Thus, the New World provided the veritable land that produced a variety of crops and minerals; Africa supplied the labour that worked the plantations and mines of the New World; and Europe provided the capital and largely expropriated whatever was produced by the African slaves in the New World. The 17th century saw an escalation in the Atlantic slave trade largely because of the development of the plantation system, particularly sugar plantation, in the New World. The extent to which the external slave trade retarded Africa's growth could best be gauged under its impact on the continent, which could be examined under the following:

- The Trans-Atlantic crossing, also known as the middle passage, was one of the most horrendous continuous phenomena in human history. It lasted for three centuries, peaking in the 18th century, a period within which the largest number of Africans was sent across the Atlantic into slavery in the Americas. The number of Africans who were captured, sold, and brought to the Americas and resold into chattel slavery defies quantification because of the manner of their capture and the survival rate in crossing the Atlantic as well as the difficulty in retrieving exact figures from ship logs. Estimates of Africans who survived the trans-Atlantic passage into enslavement during the 18th century, however, are put around 6,133,000. (Gadzekpo, 2005: 1375).

The massive loss to the African labour force was made more critical because it was composed of able-bodied young men and young women. Slave buyers preferred their victims between the ages of 15 and 35, and preferably in the early twenties, the sex ratio being about two men to one woman. Europeans often accepted younger African children, but rarely any older person. The most healthy were generally shipped wherever possible, taking the trouble to get those who had already survived an attack of smallpox, and who were therefore immune from further attacks of that disease, which was then one of the world's great killer diseases.

Absence of data about the size of Africa's population in the 15th century makes it difficult to carry out any scientific assessment of the results of the population outflow. No one has been able to come up with a figure representing total losses to the African population sustained through the extraction of slave labour from all areas to all destinations over the many centuries that slave trade existed (Rodney, 1972: 111; Hopkins, 1988: 80).

The actual numbers of the slaves carried from Africa to the Americas are unknown. The debate on the exact volume of the trade which has recently developed into what is often referred to as "the numbers game" has generated a lot of interest among scholars. The totals cited by the majority of writers range from 15-20 million African slaves exported to the Americas; to 18-24 million shipped from Africa, the difference being accounted for by losses on the way. The following estimates of world population (in millions) according to continents given one European scholar are perhaps instructive: (Rodney, 1972: 111):

• Africa	• 1650	• 1750	• 1850	• 1900
	• 100	• 100	• 100	• 120
• Europe	• 103	• 144	• 274	• 423
• Asia	• 257	• 437	• 656	• 857

Table 1

The above table indicates that whilst the population of Europe and Asia recorded an increase between 1650 and 1850, that of Africa virtually stagnated, largely because of the Atlantic slave trade. In other words, the trans-Atlantic slave trade, which was a global economic system of forced migration, shipped approximately 15 to 18 million Africans to the Caribbean, North America, and South America. This forced migration had a devastating demographic impact on Africa, which seriously undermined its capacity to develop well into the present century.

- Closely related to the above impact is that the overseas slave trade in the New World was responsible for populating and developing the abundant land resources of the Americas and the West Indies. Before the trade across the Atlantic most of the Caribbean and other parts of the New World were sparsely populated. Similarly, the vast resources of this part of the New World were largely untapped until the arrival of the African slaves. The trade in African slaves was the first great human migration across the Atlantic; as such, it provides an extraordinary or classical historical example of international labour mobility, though of an enforced kind. Therefore, whether for better or for worse, the Atlantic slave opened up the floodgates for the exploitation of the enormous resources – both agricultural and mineral – of the New World (Hopkins, 1988: 111). In this regard, while the population and resources of the New World were developed, as a result of the overseas slave trade, the African continent deprived of its most vital resource – humans – was underdeveloped.
- There is a general consensus among economic historians that in one way or the other the African and Atlantic commerce also had contributed to the Industrial Revolution in Britain in the 18th century. What is in dispute is the extent to which the process of industrialization benefited from the Atlantic slave trade. However, the fact that there is even a consensus among specialists about the contribution of the Atlantic commerce to British industrialization is in itself enough to assign a role of the Atlantic slave trade to the phenomenon of Industrial Revolution. Here

again, we could see the rationale behind Rodney's argument that Europe's industrialization and development were achieved at Africa's expense. In other words, as Europe developed, Africa was being underdeveloped.

- The Atlantic slave trade increased the propensity for violence and warfare in West Africa, which in turn gave rise to a general state of insecurity. As the entire process of enslavement boarded on violence, communities prone to the slave raiding enterprise usually became suspicious of their neighbours and vice-versa. Prolonged raiding for slaves disrupted normal community life and engendered insecurity. It is perhaps worth nothing that there could never be development without peace and security. The escalation of violence and insecurity brought about by the slave trade undoubtedly increased the incapacity of Africa to develop.
- Closely related to the above, the Atlantic slave trade retarded the growth of African societies in a number of ways. For instance, both agriculture and industry were seriously affected by the slave trade, especially because the most priced human merchandise shipped across the Atlantic Ocean were largely the able-bodied men and fewer women. These were people mostly in their prime (between the ages of 15 and 35) who would have contributed to the development of their societies. Besides being the most highly productive part of their various societies, biologically, people of this age bracket are also known to constitute the highest reproductive component of every society. In other words, the population of West African societies prone to enslavement was largely depleted, thereby leaving such societies with either relatively too young or too old to positively contributed to the development of their respective societies.

3.Colonialism And The Intensification Of Africa's Underdevelopment

The Atlantic slave trade was largely abolished in the early 19th century by the same promoters of the enterprise, i.e the Europeans because it had by then become counterproductive. Interestingly, Britain, the main slave trading nation in the 17th and 18th centuries, was at the forefront of the campaign to stop it. Being the first country to industrialize in the 18th century, Britain gradually realized that instead of transporting the Africans to the New World to work under servile condition in White-owned plantations, it was better to leave the Africans where they were and encourage them to produce what

was needed by British industries. This therefore was the transition between the end of the Atlantic slave trade and the beginning of colonization. This period of trade in non-slave products – mainly vegetable oils such as palm oil and palm kernel and groundnuts and forest produce such as a gum Arabic and rubber – is whether rightly or wrongly referred to as “legitimate commerce”.

The conflict of interest between the European merchants operating along the coast of West, Central and Eastern Africa on the one hand and the African middlemen conducting business in the interior of Africa during this transition period on the other, especially in 1879-1896 would set the stage for the eventual colonization of Africa by a number of West European nations. World trade experienced a depression or downturn during this period, which deeply affected the profits realized by the European traders who had for centuries been their trading partners. The attempt by the European traders to reach the sources of the produce they needed in the interior was naturally vehemently resisted by the African middlemen who had been making a fortune through their relationship with the White traders. In the course of this clash of interest between the two parties, the European traders, whenever threatened by African opposition in their attempt to reach the interior would resort to their home governments to intervene militarily on their behalf.

4. Impact Of Colonialism On Africa

- European powers in Africa set up administrations whose main focus was the maintenance of order rather than any type of economic or social development. At the same time, there was a notion that the colonies should be made to pay for themselves. European powers wanted the colonies but did not want them to become economic burdens. As a result, during the early years of colonialism European governments either kept relatively small colonial staff or contracted out the duties of governance to chartered companies (as with the British Royal Niger Company in Northern Nigeria).
- With economic consideration being the main motive behind colonization, the typical economic system that emerged was the metropolitan country – given its level of industrialization – serving the major supplier of manufactured goods to the colonies and the latter serving as the major suppliers of raw materials to the factories of the former. Under this arrangement, the colonies capacity to

industrialize was invariably thwarted, as they were perpetually designed to be primary producers and suppliers of raw materials to the industrial West and consumers of finished goods from the latter. Their capacity and initiative to break loose from this various cycle of dependency could therefore not be realized under this arrangement.

- Similarly, to reinforce the above dependency pattern, virtually all the basic infrastructural facilities constructed under colonialism were meant to serve foreign, metropolitan interests rather than domestic needs of the colonies. For instance, all roads, ports or harbours and railway lines that emerged were geared towards transporting raw materials from the interior to the coast for onward shipment to Europe. These same transport networks were meant to facilitate the movement of imported goods to the hinterland. This pattern of development distorted the economies of the colonies in the sense that the infrastructural facilities were not aimed at the meaningful transformation of the colonies, but rather to serve the interests of the colonizers. Furthermore, the colonial currencies introduced to the colonies were also meant to tie them down in monetary terms to the metropolitan countries.
- The kind of economy introduced by the colonial powers, therefore, turned the colonies into the dependencies of the colonizers. More often than not, most colonies specialized in the production of very few primary produce whose were largely determined by the colonizers and not by the producers. Interestingly, the prices of the imported goods were also dictated by the same colonial powers and not by the consumers.
- Politically, the structures imposed on the colonies were not meant to prepare them towards meaningful development. The colonizers just transplanted what they thought was good for the colonizers. Most of the post-independent political problems of the former colonies could be traced to the kind of political systems enshrined by the colonizers which bred instability. Similarly, the manner in which the colonial boundaries were arbitrarily created was great recipe for problems among the independent countries of Africa. The borders cut across cultural and linguistic heartlands of different ethnic groups. In other words, African societies and cultures experienced significant dislocations and alterations during the colonial era. As colonies were established in the continent, borders

were drawn that in many cases bore no relationship to indigenous and political realities. Colonial borders thus served to group together traditional enemies and to divide communities that had previously been united, the worst example of the latter being the division of the Somali people among British, Italian, French, and Ethiopian authorities (Johnson: 2005: 278).

5. Conclusion

The slave trade and colonialism were important turning points in Europe's relations with the African continent. The European exploitation of the continent's human and material resources through the two systems had impacted so negatively on Africa's capacity to develop and take its rightful position among the comity of nations. For almost three centuries Africa's able-bodied men and fewer women were shipped across the Atlantic Ocean under the obnoxious slave trade. These were peoples that would have contributed to the development of the continent, but instead their labour force was expropriated for the benefit of Europe and the New World. Similarly, under colonialism, Africa's labour force and material resources – in mineral and agricultural resources – were exploited by the colonizers for the development of their economies at the expense of the colonies. Perhaps no other continent had been exposed to such degree of exploitation and degradation as experienced by Africa. Thus, the slave trade and colonialism were two important episodes that had retarded Africa's capacity to develop in comparison to other continents.

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