

TRANSATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE AND THE ROOTS OF AFRICA'S ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The political economy of slavery was naturally a phenomenon suited for underdevelopment. Indeed, slavery, by its nature and character, was the highest manifestation of savagery. Unlike some other forms of degradation, it annihilates the soul and devastates the body. The European slavers devised hideous methods of kidnappings, battering, branding with red hot metal blades, chaining, dehumanizing and totally emasculating their victims. No calamity or tragedy in time and space equaled the ruinous effect of slavery on Africa's development trajectory. At the human psychological level, the African victims and their families were literally chased out of history, in the sense that they lost their humanity and identity. In reality, slavery arrested and completely altered the original and autonomous process of genuine development of states in the continent. The scourge of slavery brought about anarchy, despoliation, warfare, depopulation, murder, inter-ethnic rivalry and a general culture of fear and insecurity. As a result, African economies suffered from unprecedented forced migration of the pillars of production. The foremost impact of the five centuries long slave trade, by which an estimated 50 million Africans were taken away, was that it drained the continent of her productive population and thus fatally destroyed her economy. This paper, therefore, contends that the transatlantic slave trade fundamentally accounted

for Africa's socio-political and economic woes. Scholars and extant literature tend to promote the narrative that colonialism, neo-colonialism and leadership failure explain Africa's underdevelopment. While these factors are complicit in Africa's underdevelopment conundrum, the transatlantic slave trade remains the root of Africa's arrested development.

Keywords: Transatlantic, slave trade, arrested development and productive capacity

Introduction

Africa has over the years been associated with all forms of negativity and backwardness. The continent is indeed a metaphor for multiplicity of crises, ranging from poor leadership, political instability, poverty, parlous economy, upsurge in infectious diseases to a general climate of underdevelopment. It should be recalled that modern Africa as we know it today was an artificial creation by the European states at the inglorious Berlin Conference of 1885, during which some European countries sat together and parceled Africa among themselves for political and economic domination and exploitation. This tendency gave birth to colonialism, which is essentially outside the focus of this study. Before the era of colonization which actually lasted for only 75 years (1885-1960), Africa had suffered systemic and monumental devastation of 500 years of transatlantic slave trade, a period that completely suffocated and atrophied the African humanity and environment. As corroborated by Nunn (2008), for a period of nearly 500 years, from 1400- 1900, the African continent experienced four slave trades. By comparison, official colonial rule lasted from 1885-1960, a total of approximately 75 years.

Africa's development conundrum is mainly traceable to the long and tortuous experience of the transatlantic slave trade. The slave trade contributed immensely to Africa's development stagnation because it targeted human beings who are the subjects and sources of development for destruction. As a result, the evolving trend and

culture of genuine and autonomous development process in Africa was violently arrested, disarticulated and abandoned. Prior to the slave trade era, Africa was made up of civilized societies of reputable socio-political and economic significance. According to Chinweizu (1978), the hundred years between 1450 and 1550 were a period of social reforms and innovations in statecraft in the kingdoms and empires of Africa. African princes of that era were busy expanding and consolidating their rule, curbing unruly nobles elevating king's men to important offices, establishing or reforming imperial administrations, and creating professional, full-time armies to replace the draft armies of their past. Africa was thus an authentic developing and bastion of advanced civilization. It must be noted that Africa, before the rampaging incursion of slave merchants, was not a closed society, or in any form of state of autarky. It was a continent of evolving progress.

The Development Debate

The concept of development in extant literature of social sciences is contentious. Although opinions may differ on its commonly acceptable definition, there are empirical indicators which underscore development as an objective reality. Within the context of this submission, man is recognized as the centre piece of the development process. Through the application of his creative energy, man tames and controls his environment. It is essentially a process of man coming to terms with nature. As a multidimensional phenomenon, development can be viewed from the human and other perspectives or simply as an economic imperative. The economic dimension to the understanding of the development debate often subsumes other considerations, following the primacy of the material conditions in a given milieu. Ake (1981) maintained that once we understand what the material assets and constraints of any society are, how the society produces goods to meet its material needs, how the goods are distributed, and what type of social relations arise from the organizations of production, we have come a long way to understanding the culture of that society, its laws, its religious system, its political system and even its mode of thought.

Production is, therefore, basic to development. But production does not just happen. There are basic laws and tools which enhance productive capacity of any social system. These laws and scientific principles ultimately lead to the evolution or manufacture of tools or technology through man's attempt to subdue nature. Since man is first and foremost a producer, it then follows that other activities of man revolve around this pre-eminent attribute or take form from it. Man recreates himself through the exercise of his labour power. His ideas of political organization, law, justice religion and morality are all predicated on the nature, character and form of his productive capacity.

The substructure or the economic or production system, therefore, has preponderant influence over the superstructure or the idea system, because to subsist, man has to produce material goods from objects found in nature. Material production has always been and still is the basis of human existence (Boguslavsky et al, 1978). Development is definitely a process of transformative change. It consists of systemic interaction between people in a given society or environment and the forces or challenges of nature and existence. It is prone to positive reinforcement from one stage or level to another higher plane. Development is a dynamic reality. According to Daley (2021), development can be defined as bringing about social change that allows people to achieve their human potential. It is a process and not an outcome. Other critical aspects of development that need to be appreciated include the time element: development is not time-barred, it is rather time-driven, that is, it changes or transforms with time, subject to available human capacity. Social and human development requires a unified approach, integrating the economic and social components in plans, policies and programmes for people's betterment. The issues of environment, pollution, women, habitat, hunger and employment have come to the fore one by one. Two major contemporary concerns that require focus in any development initiative are that of human security and sustainability (Seers, 2020). Development is both disparate and cumulative. It is made up of apparently distinct components which ultimately work together to

improve the life experiences of the people. Sid-Israel (2021) contends that development is a process that creates growth, progress, positive change or the addition of physical, economic, environmental, social and demographic components. The purpose of development is a rise in the level and quality of life of the population, and the creation or the expansion of local regional income and employment opportunities, without damaging the resources of the environment. It is within this conceptual context that Africa's development before the transatlantic slave trade would be situated and analyzed. The popular narrative, especially from European apologists, had always been that nothing like development ever occurred in Africa before the massive slave trade overtook the continent. Indeed, David Hume (cited by blackhistory.org, 2021) argued that the Negroes were naturally inferior to the whites, that there scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion, nor even any individual, eminent either in action or in speculation. There was no ingenious manufacture among them, no arts, no sciences. This line of thought was evidently laced with lethal racial prejudice and immanently false.

Overview of Development in Africa before Trans Atlantic Slave Trade

In the course of our analysis, we have demonstrated that the concept of development is a universal phenomenon and not the preserve of any special people or group. It is an attribute of change and progress by people of every clime, irrespective of race, ethnicity or location. It is, therefore, conceptually misleading to describe any group of people as primitive or backward on account of their level of development. As Rodney (1978) observed, every continent independently participated in the early epochs of the extension of man's control over his environment, which means in effect that every continent can point to a period of economic development. Africa, being the original home of man, was obviously a major participant in the process in which human groups displayed an increasing capacity to extract a living from natural environment. Development is essentially a universal necessity with localized internal dynamics. The point being made here is that African societies, prior to the fatal assault by slave merchants, were

well organized and evidently developing in certain and autonomous direction. The societies moved at the pace of their needs following the rhythm of the intrinsic dynamics of change associated with their mode of production. No aspect of human endeavour expected of that stage of human development was lacking. Africa can, therefore, be credited not only with giving rise to the many scientific developments associated with Egypt, engineering, mathematics, architecture, medicine etc., but also with important early political developments such as state formation and monarchy. This demonstrates that economic and political development as well as scientific development was evident during this early period, perhaps more advanced in Africa than in other continents (blackhistorymonth.org, 2020). Even in sea voyages and navigational exploits, Africans crossed and traversed the seas and oceans in the course of business, trades and diplomatic trips. According to Blatch (2021), several lines of evidence suggest that ancient Africans sailed to South America and Asia hundreds of years before the Europeans. Thousands of miles of waterways across Africa were trade routes. Many ancient societies in Africa built a variety of boats, including small reed-based vessels, sail boats and grander structures with many cabins and cooking facilities. The Mali and Songhai built boats 100 feet long and 13 feet wide that could carry up to 80 tons. This, without any shadow of doubt, portrays the authentic African environment free from the pollution of transatlantic slave trade. Societies grew and interacted through a network of relationships borne out of mutual respect or even animosity devoid of a deliberate policy to totally dehumanize and brutally uproot a people from their natural homesteads for exportation as common merchandise.

Africans lived a life of ease and contentment, carrying out life responsibilities in the various areas of human activities. Essentially, agricultural cultivation was paramount within the economic chain of activities. Domestic animals like cattle and goats were reared. Family units were interdependent and shared things together. In most African cultures, what belonged to one belonged to all, and what affected one affected the rest. Individualism was contemptible because it was at variance with the social norms and values. Each individual as a

product of society was both an extension and completion of a larger unity. As corroborated by Falola (2020), in a decentralized civilization such as the Igbo of modern-day Nigeria and Kikuyu of Kenya, these societies were often broken into age group systems, and power was dispersed throughout the entire community, with local elders providing leadership, but with input from the population at large. Farm lands were communally owned and administered. However, family units had control over ancestral lands close to the homestead. Any claim to ownership of lands was basically collective. The land was cultivated yearly or by shifting to different areas to make for soil enrichment. Every member of the family has a specific role to fulfill. There were specific roles for the man, his wife or wives and the children. It was, therefore, important each member of the family unit knows perfectly well what tasks he or she was required to perform in their economic productivity and distribution of the family resources as to ensure the material prosperity of the group (Kenyatta, 1979).

With the discovery of iron, agriculture and warfare received fresh boost. This was quite early because knowledge of iron working was common in the savannah of West Africa about 300 B.C. (Ifemesia, 1965). Farm tools made from iron were developed, just as implements of war were manufactured. The iron age had a revolutionary impact on development in Africa. It brought a more aggressive subjugation of the external environment and a higher morale in times of war. The Kingdoms of Benin and Ife were led by the Yoruba people and sprang up between the 11th and 12th centuries. The Ife civilization goes back as far as 500B.C. and its people made objects from bronze, brass, copper, wood and ivory (abolition.org). The Savannah belt grew in power and wealth, as existing empires devised means to control and coordinate the surrounding markets. Ghana had then become the foremost imperial power in the sub-region. Its leaders extended their influence beyond the Savannah belt by routing the Berbers of the desert and annexing strategic towns like Taghaza, with all its salt deposit, and Wangara, noted for gold. Ghana grew by leaps and bounds and became renowned globally as excessively rich in gold

(Fyfe, 1965). According to aero-comlab (2020), the empire of Ghana dominated West Africa for seven centuries, reaching its peak in the 11th century. Based on the gold trade, the kings of Ghana were immensely rich and powerful. King Tunka Manin, who ruled in the middle of the 11th century, had a magnificent court in his stone-built capital of Kumbi Saleh, and is said to have been able to field an Army of 200,000 men.

Africa was well-organized, with several kingdoms emerging and contributing to the increasing fortunes of the continent. Many of the thriving states had either a central or decentralized governmental and authority structure for public administration and security.

Impact of Transatlantic Slave Trade on Africa's Development Trajectory

The greatest and most devastating impact of transatlantic slave economy was on the humanity of black Africans, both as individuals and as society. Slavery of the transatlantic variety was designed to terrorize, dehumanize, animalize and reduce the status of the average African to mere chattel to be bought and sold in the open market. The essence of the African person as a human being, his mind and spirit was completely crushed by the unspeakable savagery of violence unleashed on the victims by the white predators and their corrupt native allies. In essence, the cost and pains of slavery are beyond the physical. It was an unprecedented hideous attack on a people, their culture, history, civilization and development. Whatley and Gillezeau (2009, citing Patterson,1982) call the production of slaves the production of “social death”. It is a violent process where a person is brought to the brink of death, spared and then ritualistically put to social death, left to owe the remainder of his life to another person. One would think that centuries of producing social death would leave a mark on social outcomes and institutions, some with lasting consequences for development.

Slavery did not just arrest Africa's development; it disfigured, disoriented, disarticulated and mummified it. Any discussion of

African development is a discussion of rented ideas without historical foundations, the narrative of a paradise lost. The depth and profundity of slavery on the African mind over a period spanning some five hundred years totally distorted the African identity, his essence and dignity and left him a benighted spectator on the global stage. The plague of slavery caught Africa unawares. It tore through her very marrow and choked all attempts at advancement. Slavery forced Africa into systematic and potentially irreversible retrogression and structural decadence. According to M'Baye (2006), the trade brought about enduring insecurities, economic chaos, and political disorders in Africa. It arrested its development by exploiting its technological, agricultural and cultural skills for the development of the West only. It hampered Africa's mercantilist economy by halting its capacity to be transformed into the capitalist economy.

Armed with more sophisticated instruments of violence and repression, the invading European slave dealers encountered little or no resistance, as they pounded their way into the heart of Africa. The continent became deserted and impoverished because of slave raids. People fled their communities to escape enslavement. It is, therefore, pertinent to observe here that refugee problem in Africa was originally instigated by slave trade. This trade in human merchandise completely disorganized the African social setting. The continent was under siege, every form of freedom was drastically curtailed. Freedom of movement, association, farming, trade and other forms of social activities were severely threatened. People spoke in hushed tones, afraid of the air around them. A paralyzing culture of fear and insecurity was foisted on the minds of the people. There were occasions when entire villages were sacked at night by a barrage of gun fire. Houses were set ablaze. Natives wept in agony, as they ran with their family members struggling to escape the clattering chains of the slave raiders. More often than not, the fleeing Africans ended up in the cold embrace of their predators who then subdued them with more violence. In some heroic instances, some victims would summon the last reserve of their strength to fight to preserve their humanity. Kunta Kinte reacted in such vein when he was attacked by slave merchants:

“...rushing at him, he saw a white face, a club upraised, heard heavy footfalls behind him’ Toubob! His foot lashed up and caught the man in the belly- as something hard and heavy grazed the back of Kunta’s head...Kunta leaped into them - clawing, butting, kneeling, gouging- hardly feeling the club that was pounding against his back”(Haley, 1978).

It was a heroic fight for freedom by Kunta Kinte, but he lost out in the end. Although initially some forms of resistance were mounted against this infamous trade, these counter measures were either late in coming or unable to withstand the superior fire power of the invading slave dealers. Another critical dimension was the white man did not initially show himself as an oppressor. He came as a harbinger of a strange religion. People did not take him seriously. He was more like a tolerable nuisance. He successfully deluded the African leadership to believe that his mission was to bring back the lost tribes of Africa from the pit of darkness to the portals of light. There was no immediate reason to suspect the white man who, according to Achebe (1988), “came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay, he has now won our brothers and our clan can no longer act as one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart”.

M’Baye (2006) also observed that the disruption of Africa’s political structures and socio-economic potentials was part of the stagnation of Africa’s technological progress caused by the slave trade. As Rodney has shown, the trade affected Africa’s economy by bringing about a loss of industry, skills, technological invention and production of Africans. On the other hand, Rodney argues that “what Africa experienced in the early centuries of the trade was precisely a loss of development opportunity, that is the ability to achieve the self-sustaining growth and progress that its enslaved young population could have secured.”

There was nothing of value that came into Africa throughout the long period of slavery. Instead, the European slave traders imported

spurious goods, ornaments of doubtful worth and those items which naturally tended to reinforce the depopulation of the continent. It was, therefore, no surprise that in exchange for slaves, the Europeans offered fire arms, gun powder and gin which intoxicated their African collaborators and made them act with maximum brutality and irrationality. These items offered for slaves were a novelty then and invariably conferred on their possessors a measure of invincibility. As a result of the rush for fire arms and other manufactured goods from Europe, the drive for slaves assumed frightful proportions. As observed by Nunn (2008, citing Bairoch, 1993), slavery was corruption: it involved theft, bribery, and exercise of brute force as well as ruses.

With the crumbling of the economic sector, the political structure followed suit. African leaders were whittled down by the rapacious army of instability, through the use of brute force and bribery. The local territories were now run from the slave ships, with the European slave merchants determining the terms of trade. In addition, they began to control the affairs of the land, at the expense of the local authority. The chiefs became mere stooges who invariably became bridges between the white man and his own people. Allegiance was, therefore, first to the slave cartel which sustained him on the throne. As corroborated by M'Baye (2006), the political impact of the Atlantic trade is visible in the changes it wrought in African societies. It subverted the existing political balance in traditional African societies. Since slavery became a dominant source of revenue in the continent, personal wealth was thought to derive from one's ability to help capture and sell one's neighbours or criminals to strangers. As a consequence, the scenario Europeans created became a Darwinian universe in which the African turned into a wolf preying on other Africans.

The resultant effect was that leadership was turned into a tool of oppression. Assumed enemies were rounded up by the local militia and sent off to the waiting slave ships. Revolutionaries and true leaders of the people were also hounded and destroyed. Governance

became arbitrary, as criminals held sway. At the level of culture, the African equally suffered untold devastation. Firstly, he was told that his religion was devilish. His language was also snubbed. He was forced to believe that he had no education because he could not read or write. His arts and crafts were described as creations of his demonic self. Indeed, the Africans before the slave masters were a bunch of sub-human species, created to fulfill their natural calling as slaves. Abiola (1992) argues that the rape of our religions, culture and folklore was meant to deny our humanity, so that we would be treated as beasts.

Conclusion

The transatlantic slave trade was the first form of crime against humanity, with respect to black Africans. It was a hideous and unprecedented form of genocide, because victims were subjected to both physical and social death, essentially, for whom they were as black Africans, akin to the Holocaust against the Jews. Slavery really took its toll on the African continent in a manner yet unrecorded in the history of any other people. Nothing in the annals of human degradation compares with the oddity of slavery, especially when viewed against the background of what Africa would have been without the blight of transatlantic slave trade. The greatest tragedy of the slave trade was the impact on the humanity and dignity of the victims. Having depicted and treated African peoples as less than human, the perception got engraved into the distorted minds of the Africans who began to accept the inferiority status in all ramifications of human endeavour.

Consequently, the flourishing achievements and civilizations of different parts of the continent began to crumble under the massive crises engendered by the rampaging horde of slave raiders. African societies steadily collapsed in all facets of its previous remarkable progress. The cultures were uprooted; the trade patterns, routes and commodities were drastically altered from non-human goods to human consignments. The political system was overthrown, with groups set against each other in the hunt and capture of human beings

as slaves. The slave economy shattered the society with depopulation, internal wars, displacements, and famine, arising from the destruction of the people's productive capacity. Due to the long duration of this despicable business, Africa suffered the greatest shock in her evolutionary process. Development in the continent was not just arrested. It was suffocated and laid to waste as if nothing ever happened in Africa. No other continent in the whole wide world was ever subjected to this heinous evil of developmental annihilation. Essentially, this accident of history explains the continent's consistent inability and indeed incapacity to overcome the crippling inheritance of negativity in virtually all areas that define or constitute genuine or autonomous development paradigm. It would take a great revolutionary effort by enlightened leadership to pull the continent out from this vicious cycle of underdevelopment.

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