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**THE SLAVE TRADE AND MODERN AFRICA**

## ***The Significance of the Slave Trade on Modern Africa***

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1948 words



Source: Interactive.britishart.yale.edu. n.d. *The Slave Trade*. [image] Available at: <<https://interactive.britishart.yale.edu/slavery-and-portraiture/284/the-slave-trade>>

Instrumental in the shaping of a continent, the slave trade influenced and continues to influence Africa in an economic, social and political sense. This essay explores how this horrendous period of history played a significant role in initiating the poor conditions of modern Africa, buried under its history of enslavement.

Slavery is widely acknowledged as an atrocious chapter in world history and whilst its devastating impacts on African communities are well recognised there is little understanding of how these impacts continue in a modern context. Slavery, a practice treating humans as legal property of others, was responsible for millions of Africans being kidnapped and sold into manual labour. As such, the African region experienced the consequences of slavery profoundly, and an understanding of these effects allows historians to see the persisting legacy of slavery. Slavery allowed European and American powers to grow at the expense of African communities, initiating economic stagnation, social loss and political volatility in Africa. However, the ramifications of slavery are multi-generational and far-reaching, perpetuating through generations to cause ongoing suffering and instability that contributed to the underdeveloped state of Africa. Therefore, the consequence of the slave trade presents an important concept for historians: how an understanding of events that took place centuries ago still have a tangible impact on events in the present day.

The slave trade refers to the transatlantic trading patterns that started from as early as the 15<sup>th</sup> century and continued to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. During this period of history, ships would sail from Europe with manufactured goods to the west coast of Africa. European voyagers would then trade the goods brought for slaves captured by African traders. These ships would go to the Americas or Caribbean and during this voyage ships were overcrowded with limited space and inhumane conditions. The European ships would then re-enter Europe with goods like sugar, rum and tobacco. The slaves were forced to work as manual labourers for plantations in the Americas and Caribbean. This was where large areas of the American continent were colonised by Europe, to produce products for consumption in Europe. Overall, Africa experienced four major slave trades with around 20 million slaves taken in total.<sup>1</sup>

The impact of slavery on modern Africa is profound and detrimental, creating a system of disarray which stifled economic development. Before the slave trade, Africans were a dominating force in the areas of resin, orchil, gold, spices and cattle. The high purchasing power of West Africans can be seen in 1650 when 1.5 million Senegambians imported 1200

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<sup>1</sup> N Nunn, Understanding the long-run effects of Africa's slave trades, *Voeux*, 2017

tons of iron for 300000 households. Additionally, they imported 300 tons of iron a year for their households in 1680.<sup>2</sup> Hence, Africans had formed an economically sufficient society where Europeans arrived to trade. However, within less than a century of slave trading with the Western world, Africa had lost its economic autonomy, with its resources and human capital depleted. Instead, it entered a period of economic stagnation between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. This period of stagnation caused its economic performance to fall further behind that of the world<sup>3</sup>, the continent still suffering from these effects today, reflected by the ever-present poverty in Africa.

Average real GDP per capita and the flow of resources into and out of Africa are effective measures of the impact of slavery in contemporary society. This can be seen in the relationship between the number of slaves taken from each country during the slave trade and the countries' average real per capita GDP.<sup>4</sup> It's noticeable that the countries where the most slaves were taken are now the most economically underdeveloped, causing poverty to continue into contemporary African communities. In a broader sense, when comparing Africa to the world, in 2016, the GDP per capita (\$US) was \$1809, a significantly lower value than the rest of the world's average, \$10,300. Nunn argues that if the slave trade had not occurred, around 72% of the existing income gap between Africa and the rest of the world would be non-existent, as well as 90% of the income gap between developing countries and Africa.<sup>5</sup> In fact, Africa would have been in a much more developed state similar to that of Asia or Latin America. Instead, it is revealed that the continent loses more money than what it receives in aid, investment and remittances. Over three times the value of the aid given to Africa is taken by predominantly multinational companies who intentionally misreport the value of their imports and exports for the purpose of reducing tax.<sup>6</sup> These illicit activities all contribute to Africa becoming a huge net debtor to the world. Therefore, the significance of the slave trade is reflected in its contribution to the severe economic impairment that continues to influence Africa's economy.

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<sup>2</sup> B M'Baye, The Economic, Political, and Social Impact of the Atlantic Slave trade on Africa, *The European Legacy: Toward New Paradigms.*, 2006, p. 9-10

<sup>3</sup> W Hardy, Riches & Misery: The Consequences of the Atlantic Slave Trade, *OpenLearn*, 2020

<sup>4</sup> N Nunn, Understanding the long-run effects of Africa's slave trades, *Voeux*, 2017

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> E Anyangwe, Why is Africa so poor? You asked Google- here's the answer, *The Guardian*, 2017

Slavery was a destructive force for African society responsible for the removal of millions of Africans from their homes, generating a culture of mistrust prevalent today. This loss of culture had profound consequences, leading to the destruction of centuries old social systems that African communities relied on for so long. During this period, individuals turned against one another as they tricked, kidnapped, or sold each other into slavery, breaking the social bonds that trust was established on. A main source of conflict arose from different ethnic groups sacrificing others to save their own kin.<sup>7</sup> This led to the creation of suspicion of other Africans due to the insecure environment established. This deprivation of tradition and trust transmitted to future generations, driving the ethnic fractalization and a culture of mistrust that is still evident in the present day, normalised over the past centuries.

This lack of trust can be seen in the present day through the Afrobarometer data which explores public attitudes on areas of democracy, society and markets in Africa.

Interpersonal trust of Africans is observed to decline in a step-by-step manner from a high level for one's relatives, to progressively lower trust for neighbours, then members of one's ethnic groups and citizens of other ethnic groups.<sup>8</sup> If we examine two countries, Ghana and Nigeria, they display particularised trust in relation to closeness to a person. It was reported in 2008 that 44% of Nigerians and 65% of Ghanaians were said to trust their relatives to a great extent. In contrast only 11% of Nigerians and 10% of Ghanaians trust members of other ethnic groups.<sup>9</sup> The data above highlights the cultural change generated by the past events of the slave trade. This cultural effect represents how the slave trade altered the state of a continent during the time it occurred and centuries later.

The perspective in which Africans are seen worldwide was influenced by the slave trade, contributing to the racist ideals against Africans that are still evident today. This form of chattel slavery, involving the total ownership of a person, stimulated the stereotypical views

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<sup>7</sup>N Nunn, L Wantechekon, The Slave Trade and the Origins of Mistrust in Africa, *American Economic Review*, 2011, Vol. 101 no. 7, p. 3223,

<sup>8</sup> M Kuenzi, Social Capital and Political Trust In West Africa, *Afrobarometer*, 2008, p. 10

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

of Africans as savages. The resulting belief of inferiority became internalized by African communities and is still a relevant issue nowadays. These views were further rationalized by European slave traders who believed Africans served no purpose other than labour. This racist ideology evolved over time into the racism that formed class, social status and respect based on skin colour. For instance, the apartheid regime in South Africa, was a system of legislation that enforced segregationist policies against non-white citizens, which only ended within the last 25 years. Racist ideology was shaped by the historical events of the slave trade, and by understanding this history we can see how racism influenced Africa in the modern era.

The slave trade resulted in the decimation of political structures and systems, forced to change due to enslavement becoming Africa's main export. During this period, the relationship between different kingdoms and ethnic groups were negatively impacted as social hierarchies were forced to become more rigid to protect their citizens from the slave trade, with this problem taking precedence over other matters of state. This led to changes in political authority with Africa experiencing more indirect colonial rule dependent on sub-national absolutism. Econometric evidence suggested that the Atlantic slave trade, reduced democracy, and liberalism in pre-colonial West Africa. Moreover, absolutism increased by around 17-35%.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, European intervention in the political process of African communities prevented the rise of African centralized states as this would have hindered their operations regarding the slave trade and instead encouraged political instability and conflict. Therefore, by the time of abolition of the slave trade, Africa was left undeveloped, vulnerable and disorganised with poor political systems and institutions remaining.

The relationship between political disarray and the slave trade can be illustrated using slave export and anthropological data from Murdock's ethnographic atlas.<sup>11</sup> Places with higher slave export intensity correlate with more fragmental political structures found in towns. Prior the slave trades, Africa consisted of complex state systems which were evolving. However, this evolution experienced recession after the Portuguese's arrival in the 15<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> W Warren, The transatlantic slave trade and the evolution of political authority in West Africa, *University of Michigan*, 2012, p. 1

<sup>11</sup> N Obikilli, The trans-Atlantic slave trade and local political fragmentation in Africa, *AEHN*, 2016

century. Many examples support this idea such as the disintegration of the Joloff Confederation into much smaller kingdoms, the same pattern evident in Southern Senegambia.<sup>12</sup> Bairoch, an economic historian, wrote “Slavery was corruption... thus may be seen as one source of precolonial origins for modern corruption.”<sup>13</sup> In fact, the 10<sup>th</sup> edition of the Global Corruption Barometer (GCB) which represents over 47000 citizens from 35 countries, reveals that in current times African citizens experience corruption daily. Around 50% of citizens believe corruption is worsening in their country, with their government not effectively tackling the problem. Instead, Africans have to pay bribes to officials for basic services with 1 in 4 African citizens forced to pay bribes for services like medicine and health care.<sup>14</sup> The events of the slave trade were instrumental in the destruction of political structures, leading to the substandard systems and corruption that remain in its place.

Political volatility in Africa gave rise to increased warfare, the continent still suffering from the effects of this heightened period of conflict. This political instability was created by the mass introduction of firearms, one of the most detrimentally impactful technological innovation introduced to West Africa by Europeans. Kings and warlords were eager to trade to acquire guns, exchanging them for slaves, with twenty million guns imported in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>15</sup> These firearms encouraged competition between kingdoms which increased the incentive to capture and sell Africans from other kingdoms. The mass importation of firearms changed warfare in the continent and altered the balance of power. This change in power can be seen by a variety of documented examples which include states like Dahomey and Assante which became powerful and wealthy from the trade while others were decimated and even sold their own kin into slavery like the Kabre of Northern Togo.<sup>16</sup> This high prevalence of conflict persists nowadays with statistics presenting that the conflict is worsening. The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, monitoring conflict worldwide, recorded around 21600 incidents of armed conflict in the continent in 2019. There were 15874 incidents in 2018, representing a 36%

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<sup>12</sup> N Nunn, *The Long-Term Effects of Africa’s Slave Trades*, Harvard University and National Bureau of Economic Research, 2006, p. 5

<sup>13</sup> N Nunn, *The Long-Term Effects of Africa’s Slave Trades*, Harvard University and National Bureau of Economic Research, 2006, p. 5

<sup>14</sup> Global Corruption Barometer- Africa 2019, *Transparency International*, 2019

<sup>15</sup> Implications of the slave trade for African societies, *BBC*

<sup>16</sup> N Nunn, *The Long-Term Effects of Africa’s Slave Trades*, op. cit

increase.<sup>17</sup> These dynamics epitomise the disruptive outcome of slavery, contributing to centuries long destabilisation and violence that continues into modern Africa.

The history of the slave trade is an important series of events that matters so we can recognise the factors and complications influencing the condition of contemporary Africa. Thereby, Africa's experience with the slave trade reinforces the modern relevance of historical events. The enslavement of millions of Africans resulted in a significant loss of human capital which can be linked to the chronic economic underdevelopment that exists in Africa in the present day. The treatment of Africans also caused traumatic effects on communities, generating suffering and a culture of mistrust that undercut social cohesion. Furthermore, the negative effect on political institutions and systems contributed to the political insecurity and increased conflict prevalent nowadays. The slave trade is a complex, multi-faceted topic with many different perspectives and influences. However, it can be seen to show how an understanding of the history of the slave trade is paramount to understanding modern Africa.

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<sup>17</sup> S Allison, Conflict is still Africa's biggest challenge in 2020, *reliefweb*, 2020

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M'Baye, B., 2006. *The Economic, Political, and Social Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on Africa*. [pdf] pp.9-10. Available at: <[http://indexfoundation.se/files/the\\_economic\\_political\\_and\\_social\\_impac.pdf](http://indexfoundation.se/files/the_economic_political_and_social_impac.pdf)> [Accessed 7 August 2021].

This essay provided a detailed analysis of the political, economic, and social effects of the Atlantic Slave Trade on the African continent. The detailed ideas and concepts presented allowed me to see direct links between the slave trade and the current condition of Africa, making the significance of the slave trade clear. It specifically helped me see the relationship between the slave trade and Africa's economic state, in both a historical and modern context. It also allowed me to see the perspectives of multiples historians regarding their opinion on the effects of the slave trade.

Nunn, N., 2017. *Understanding the long-run effects of Africa's slave trades*. [online] Voxeu.org. Available at: <<https://voxeu.org/article/understanding-long-run-effects-africa-s-slave-trades>> [Accessed 31 July 2021].

This article allows me to see an overview of the impacts of the slave trade on Africa. It was very useful to my research as it covered a variety of impacts such as the economic, political and cultural effects. Additionally, the figures and statistics allowed me to further interpret this information. The site was also reliable and unbiased, allowing my essay to hold more historical integrity.

Transparency.org. 2019. *Global Corruption Barometer - Africa 2019*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.transparency.org/en/gcb/africa/africa-2019>> [Accessed 11 August 2021].

This site was very beneficial in my research as it provided an overview of corruption in Africa in a modern context. For example, it stated the basic forms of corruption in Africa and the feelings of citizens towards corruption in their country. This allowed me to see the effects of the slave trade in the modern day. Furthermore, the purpose of the site, Transparency International, is to strive for more transparency and integrity in the lives of public. Therefore, the site is very reliable and since it only presented facts, which were a crucial part of my research.

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