

Africa Made Europe What It Is Today: Slave Trade and Its Impacts on European Economy

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Abstract: *It is widely believed that Europe is highly developed in all ambits of life, be it politically, militarily, economically, or socio-culturally. It is also widely held that slave trade (Atlantic slave trade mainly) was one of the most lucrative businesses of all times. During the time the trade was fashionable, Europe played a key role. Thus being a key player in the close-to-four-century trade, one might be tempted to ask: Did the trade benefit Europe? Was European economy bettered at all by the trade? Was or is there a link between European economic development and the trade? Would Europe-controlled gold mines and plantations of the New World had been a success, or flourished, without the [forceful] importation of Africans there? In a bid to objectively answer the above questions, however, data was sought or generated from the writings of both African and non-African historians.*

Keywords: Africa, Europe, slave trade, impacts, economy.

INTRODUCTION

Europe was and remains the first continent to start extensive exploration of the world. European voyagers journeyed where most of their counterparts in other parts of the globe couldn't probably as a result of the unprecedented and unparalleled strength of their [European] sea conveyances or watercraft. Walter Rodney (1973) confirmed this by noting that neither Asian, particularly Chinese, boats nor African canoes reached Europe or the Americas. Thus for the nature, or the inferiority, of the conveyances in possession of Africans and Asians their movement or navigation was limited mainly to their immediate continent. However, Europe on the other hand made maximum use of the superiority of their ships [together with their cannon] to navigate through major international waterways, starting with the western Mediterranean, and the Atlantic coast of North Africa, and the Americas.

It is in one of such voyage that a Portuguese professional navigator under the service of Prince Henry by name Antonio Gonslaves in 1441 landed and anchored his ship at Cape Bajador. The boisterous captain, on his way back to where he came from, carted ten Africans away. Shortly after, other white [European] seamen began to do the same; hence, they gradually sowed the seed of Atlantic slave trade (Eluwa et al., 1996:37).

Around August 1492 also Christopher Columbus, an Italian knowledgeable explorer, with the support of King Ferdinand of Aragon and Queen Isabella of Castile, set out on an exploration that led to the discovery of the New World, the Americas. On arrival Europeans saw the need to embark on immediate exploitation of resources within that part of the world. But before this, the wise Europeans converted the New World into their colonies and subsequently began planting business, using the indigenous Indians as labourers. Nevertheless considering the fragility of the Indians, Bishop Las Casas of Spain, in 1517, protested and proposed for the immediate importation of well-built and more robust Africans into the New World to take up the work of cultivation in their plantations (see Williams, 1944; and Eluwa et al., 1996).

Upon the importation of Africans in substantial number of thousands, the overall produce from the plantations augmented; the raw materials [basically farm produce] going back to European continent likewise supersonically increased and European economy automatically took a new shape.

SLAVE TRADE: AFRICA AS THE LOSER, THE GREATEST LOSER

The greatest theft in history is Atlantic slave trade, the theft of Africans by the Europeans. The theft in particular is the one that run constantly for five centuries – about 500 years. During this period, the Europeans made away with more than ten million Africans across the Atlantic, with good number of thousands of them annually. For the purpose of precision, Africa lost up to 13,000 vibrant men and women annually in the sixteenth century; 27,000 a year in the seventeenth century; 70,000 a year in the eighteenth century; and 100,000 a year in the nineteenth century as a result of the Europeans’ quest to increase labour in their plantations and mines (Eluwa et al., 1996; and Onwubiko,1977). Put differently, about 230,516 Africans were forced out of the continent by their European counterparts between 1400 and 1599; 861,936 between 1600 and 1699; 5,687,051 between 1700 and 1799; and 3,528,694 between 1800 and 1900 [i.e. for Atlantic slave trade] (Nunn, 2006:18).

Now to partially break down the data above, Angola, between 1400 and 1900, lost a total of 3, 616,027 men and women who were still in their prime to Atlantic slave trade. For other nations, below lies the data in tabular form.

Country	Atlantic Trade
Nigeria	1,411,758
Ghana	1,603,335
Ethiopia	0
Mali	524,102
Sudan	615
Dem. Rep. of Congo	752,828
Mozambique	382,337
Chad	823
Tanzania	10,834
Rep. of Benin	461,782
Senegal	222,359
Togo	280,842
Guinea	242,691

(See Nunn, 2006)

NB: All these did not include the statistics of millions of Africans that lost their lives in rural slave raids and battles and wars orchestrated, or rather instigated, by the European slave merchants between and among African communities/kingdoms who were trying to increase the number of slaves supplied to the white merchants.

Aside from slave trade witnessing the greatest theft in human history, it also witnessed one of the greatest duplicity and shenanigans of all times. In the trade Europeans proved or showed their subtle nature, which also made them the highest swindlers and business hoodwinkers. The premise upon which this argument is based is the manner or method employed by European slave merchants which of course was to the hyper-detriment of Africa and Africans. The merchants themselves presented gullible and naïve African chiefs and rulers with items such as ‘ammunition (guns, gun-powder and shots), cheap spirits (rum, whisky, brandy, gin, etc.), textile, mirrors, fancy beads of various sorts, ox horns used as drinking cups, and pewter tankards’ for full-blown humans.

In the eyes of African chiefs, all these were valuable but to the Europeans [and to the present African scholars], they hold no value compared to what were to be taken in exchange by the white slave merchants. In fact, Dr. Kenneth O. Dike, the foremost Nigerian historian, called the items ‘meretricious’ goods. He said so because for each slave taken, the white [European] merchants paid only a token of £25 (presently 11,800 Nigerian naira, 187 Ghanaian cedi, 55,000 Congolese franc, and 2100 Mozambican metical) using its equivalent in goods [i.e. with any of the items listed above], and made a profit of £5000 to £10,000 (presently 2.360 – 4.720 million naira, 38,000 – 76,000 cedi, 11 – 22 million franc, and 410,000 – 820,000 metical) on each trip (see Ade Ajayi, 2002; and Onwubiko, 1977). In support of Dike, Eric Williams – the author of the famous 1944 book titled *Capitalism & Slavery*, noted that all the items given by the European in exchange for slaves were worthless things such as “old sheets, cast-off uniforms, technologically outdated firearms, and lots of odds”.

A Portuguese merchant during the Atlantic slave era, in describing how they traded with the ancient Wolof people of old Senegambia, unconsciously revealed how they duped African chiefs in the name of trade. He said categorically: *We sell them red, blue and green cloth of cheap manufacture, linen and coloured silk, brass rings, hats and beads and other goods while in return the people of Wolof sold to them good quality gold, ivory and, of course, slaves* (see Buah, 1982).

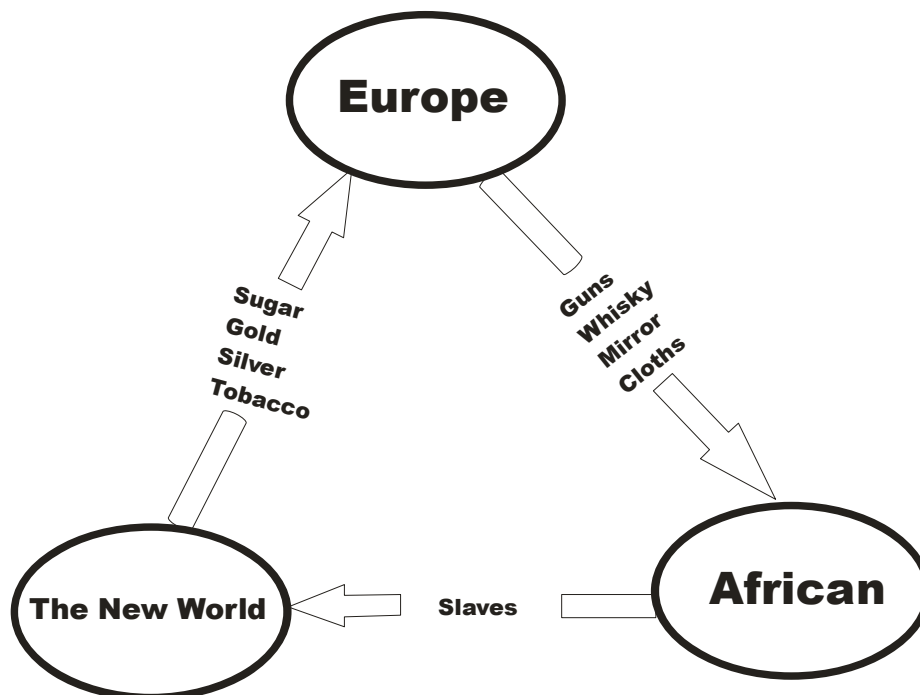
THE IMPACTS OF SLAVE TRADE ON EUROPEAN ECONOMY

If the slave in trade was profitable at all, it was to the Europeans. The wealth amassed by major slave trade European nations like Portugal, Britain and Spain was so ultra-colossal that its description in words is near impossible. The wealth in question is the one that came through the “Triangular Trade”. Prior to the discovery of the New World, slaves were imported into Europe mainly by Portuguese mariners and then used as ordinary servants and gardeners. However shortly after the discovery of the New World or the Americas, and after the area had been quickly turned to colonies, other European nations mainly Holland, and Sweden, Denmark and Brandenburg at later time all ventured into the trade, directly or indirectly, as they saw the need to increase labour in their gold and silver mines and plantations of the same New World.

In doing the above, however, they brought out their ships in mass (example of which was Great Britain which brought out 146 ships of 36,000 slave capacity each, though in 1760, and 190 ships of 47,000 slave capacity each in 1771) and sailed from Europe to the Guinea coast, carrying fancy and meretricious goods – mirror, spirits, etc. From there, after exchanging the goods for slaves, they sailed to the New World with the slaves. Once they entered the Americas after a long voyage, they again exchanged the slaves for raw sugar, tobacco, gold and silver [gotten mainly from today’s South America], cotton and coffer after which they sailed back to Europe with the goods. In Europe, the goods entered the hands of manufacturers who then processed them for consumption. This cycle is known or referred to as the Triangular Trade, because the voyage from Europe to Africa, from Africa to the New World or the Americas and then back again to Europe was in a triangular form (Onwubiko, 1977; Williams, 1944; Buah, 1982; and Findley, 1990).

Figure 1

A Pictograph of Triangular Trade



Regardless of the “worthless goods such as cheap gewgaws, beads, rums and firearms”, as Professor Philip D. Curtin – a popular historian of American descent puts it, with which vivacious, young African men and women were exchanged [and their sufferings to the New World, a completely strange environment], they were forced in the mines and plantations to work from dawn to dusk in order to meet with constant demand for sugar, tobacco, cotton, etc. in Europe, with little food for their belly and *snappy*, terrible sleep for their eyes.

Considering the vital role the slaves played in creating a more vibrant European economy, Malachy Postlethwayte (1707-67), a British merchant and one of the remarkable workers at Royal African Company – which dealt in slave trade along the West African coast, unambiguously and objectively notes that the growth and development of European economy that was apace in kind was greatly as a result of the efforts of forcefully traded Africans and that Europe (Britain particularly) should forever acknowledge that. He writes:

...is it not notorious to the whole world, that the Business of planting in our British Colonies, as well as in the French, is carried on by the Labour of Negroes, imported thither from Africa? Are we not indebted to those valuable People, the Africans for our Sugars, Tobaccos, Rice, Rum, and all other Plantation Produce? (see Findlay, 1990).

Again, slave trade created massive employment in Europe and for Europeans, which added greatly to their GNP as well as GDP. In Britain, there were three major slaving ports namely: Liverpool, London and Bristol. These ports recorded 5300, 3100 and 2200 voyages respectively, with 2.7 million slaves successfully conveyed to the British colonies in the Caribbean, North and South America between 1640 and 1807. These voyages in essence accounted for 90% of the British trade within that era.

In France also we had four major slaving ports namely Nantes, Bordeaux, La Rochelle and Le Havre while in Portugal we had Lisbon. Very importantly, all these ports had workers, and for every ship/vessel engaged in the trade, the services of captains and crew members were needed. And as a matter of fact, all of these persons were paid from profit generated from the trade. No wonder at the abolition of slave trade in Britain in 1807 and later in other parts of Europe many people automatically became jobless, for it became illegal for anyone to engage in the trade or for any vessel to be seen on the Atlantic carrying slaves to the Americas.

Lastly, the success of Industrial Revolution in Great Britain has a lot to do with slave trade, or better still, the triangular trade. Although Europe had partially started “industrial” activities before the proliferation of slave trade, the goods produced were however not in great quantity and were also not attractive until the Industrial Revolution. Reflecting on the significant roles Africans played to aid the revolution, Eric Williams notes that the necessary capital needed to finance James Watt and the steam engine was accumulated from the proceeds of the works done by the slaves in the West Indies. Writing partially based on William’s work, Onwubiko notes:

...Great Britain owes its industrial prosperity today to the Atlantic slave trade. In the 18th century, British economists reckoned that the wealth of the West Indies was one of the main supports of the British Empire at the time. Evidently, this wealth was the product of African labour. It is now an established fact that the “Great Triangle” trade provided one of the main sources of the capital that financed the Industrial Revolution (p.189).

In terms of development and growth of banks also, the Atlantic slave trade contributed a lot. Majority of banks, notes Williams, established in the 18th century in Liverpool and Manchester were directly associated with the Triangular Trade. It was as a result of the increase in commercial activities in those areas [caused mainly by slave trade] that Europeans saw the need to set up banks using the fund raised from the trade. Heywood Bank was an example of such banks. In fact, those who established the Heywood Bank in 1773 were all “successful merchants” who at one time or the other engaged in the trade. For Hanly’s Bank, the founder – Captain Richard Hanly was also a slave trader and a member of “Liverpool Fireside” – an organization for captains of vessels, slavers and privateers (Williams, 1944).

CONCLUSION

It’s true that Atlantic slave trade has come and gone. It is also true that virtually everyone that witnessed the trade or the involuntary exodus of Africans to the Americas has passed away. But the fortune Europe made out of the trade

still lives on. In the mines and plantations of the New World, the African man laboured day and night under unpalatable, forbidden, exasperating condition to keep European vessels constantly busy on the Atlantic Ocean and European industrialists, or better still, European factories on for about 500 solid years. Thus European economy benefitted a lot from slave trade. To rephrase this a bit, Europe became what it is today by the blood and sweat of Africans.

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D. Ellora : Atlantic Slavery’s Impact on European and British Economic Development

T. Walsh : Slavery’s Legacy and Intra-African Trade Flows