

## **SLAVE TRADE, COLONIALISM AND NEO-COLONIALISM: REVISITING CRITICAL ISSUES IN AFRICAN UNDERDEVELOPMENT**

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### **Abstract**

*The imposition of colonialism on Africa altered her history forever. African's modes of thought, patterns of cultural development, and general ways of life were forever altered by the change in political structure brought about by slave trade and colonialism. The African economy was also significantly changed by the Atlantic slave trade through the process of imperialism and the economic policies that accompanied colonization. Years after slave trade and colonialism were abolished, Africans became free only in the paper as the European neo-colonial project keeps disrupting the developmental efforts made by Africans. It is against this backdrop that this paper tries to enquire into the basic African issues such as slave trade, colonialism and neo-colonial projects as they influence Africa's growth and development. Using the critical assessment method, this paper explores the long time effect of these basic African issues with view to bringing out a positively lasting change which will further necessitate socio-economic, political, cultural and religious growth and development.*

**Keywords:** Slave trade, Colonialism, Neo-colonial, Africa, Underdevelopment.

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### **Introduction**

The imposition of colonialism on Africa altered her history forever. African's modes of thought, patterns of cultural development, and general ways of life were forever altered by the change in political structure brought about by slave trade and colonialism. The African economy was also significantly changed by the Atlantic slave trade through the process of imperialism and the economic policies that accompanied colonization and other neo-colonial movements. Years after slave trade and colonialism were abolished; Africans became free only in

the paper as the European neo-colonial project keeps disrupting the developmental efforts made by Africans.

Settle (1996) says that the reason for the colonization of Africa was for economic and human exploitation:

The aim of colonialism is to exploit the physical, human, and economic resources of an area to benefit the colonizing nation. European powers pursued this goal by encouraging the development of a commodity based trading system, a cash crop agricultural system, and by building a trade network linking the total economic output of a region to the demands of the colonizing state. (p. 2)

This assertion by Settle can be said to be plausible because the Europeans took control of major economic states in Africa, transporting her resources to European states and importing the finished goods at a higher price. The development of colonialism and slave trade and the partition of Africa by the European colonial powers arrested the natural development of the African economic system. Africa prior to colonialism was not economically isolated from the rest of the world. Indeed, African states had engaged in international trade from the time of the pharaohs of ancient Egypt, and West Africa specifically had developed extensive international trading systems during the eras of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai, (Settle, 1996, p. 3).

Also, The Atlantic slave trade existed in Africa for over three hundred years and introduced to the continent sophisticated systems of credit and exchange. Africans were sold and transported to European countries to work in their plantations thereby, improving the economy of these European states at the expense of African economic growth and development. As these slaves were taken, so were the peace, unity and love that has held Africans from time immemorial taken. Years after African states got their independence, European government has decided to rule Africa from their homes, influence political, religious and economic decisions taken in African countries. This is the main reason that has left the African growth and development stagnant without any improvement.

This paper is therefore, an attempt to revisit these basic African issues that has continued to wage war against African growth and development. It will also go further to ascertain the level of damage done on Africa as a result of this awful experience and suggest possible ways of ensuring African's total emancipation.

### **Slave Trade in Africa**

Different expressions exist within the oral tradition of the people in Nigeria, Ghana and Benin for describing the word "slave". Among the Yoruba of Nigeria, it is called Eru. Their Igbo counterparts call it Oru, or Ohu as it is known among the Aro. Among the Fon of Abomey and the Egun of Porto Novo, both in the Republic of Benin, it is referred to as Mehiho and Mesisa respectively. The Ashanti of Ghana, call it Akwaa, while the Ewe of the same area refer to it as Kluvi. To the Fanti on the other hand, it is referred to as Donkor.

The African slave trade is widely seen as one of the most important events in African history and its consequences on African development are enormous. This is in agreement with Nunn's (2008) belief that the "slave trades may have been at least as important as colonial rule for Africa's development" (139). In existence are large amount of evidence regarding the flow of slaves during the slave trade. There are many accounts describing how slaves were captured and transported to the African coastlands and how people from inland communities were sold into slavery by their family members to slave merchant on the coast in the hope of protecting themselves. Along the Gold coast (modern day Ghana), people sold as slaves across the Atlantic were often captured from as far inland as the Sahel region (modern day Burkina faso). In central Africa, where nearly half of the transatlantic captives originated, those forced into the ships in Launda or along the Congo River came from increasingly distant part of the interior. There were also the existence of slave trade in Nigeria where people were captured and transported into the southern part of the Niger.

Slave trade started in Africa when the European traders arrived on the shores of the African countries with trade intentions that enlarged within a short period of time beyond the initial trade by batter of consumable goods that existed between them and the Africans. Starting from the middle of the 17th century, Africa was the scene of a socio-economic phenomenon, the likes of which the world had never seen before and will surely never see again. Large parts of the continent, from the Senegal river to the high plateau of Angola, became specialized in the

capture, distribution, and selling of slaves. The Trans Atlantic slave trade merchants were largely claimed to have come into the business through the exchange of trade items for the local produce of the people. Oral narrations showed that the items introduced to the Africans by these merchants included those things that were appealing to the people. Prominent among these were mirror, sugar, guns and gunpowder, fabrics and beautifully decorated bottles of drinks with alcoholic contents. Even the empty bottles of these drinks were according to some, a point of attraction for the people. Negotiations were said to have started in the form of an almost silent exchange pattern that was initially loaded with fear from the Africans. It was claimed that the Europeans would put down their goods and move back, and the Africans, who were claimed to be the traditional chieftains, will put their own goods close to that of the Europeans and move back also. After certifying the balance of interest, each party would then pick their exchanged commodity and depart. Fear was soon eliminated and the Africans were more comfortable by the day, with their trading partners. This initial trade relationship later graduated in a gradual manner, to the exchange of Africans for the purchase of the same European sales items. During the time of the slave trade practice, increased wealth was said to have been associated with the traditional slave dealers who by now have come to enjoy the supply of improved standards of slave catching equipment that were provided by their European partners. It is at this point that many African families sold out their children and brothers to the Europeans. Slaves were kept in these buildings until there were buyers or agents to take them away, otherwise, if other slaves were purchased while they were still kept within, these old slave stock would have to be moved to a larger holding, one of which has been converted to the Nigerian Prison in Badagry.

The Aro sub- culture group of Nigeria no doubt played important role in pre-colonial period as oracular agents woven in slave trade. According to Nwankwo (2013)

They were mainly slave merchants whose oracle played the role of a spiritual conduit through which its unsuspecting client were sold into slavery. In other words, this dreaded oracle, Ibinu-Ukpabi, also known as the long juju, which is situated at Arochukwu played the dastardly role of sending

those who appeared before it but could not pay themselves through for freedom into slavery (p.1).

Arochukwu of the eastern part of Nigeria play a great role in propagating slave trade in Nigeria. During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, incalculable numbers of people were subjected to enslavement through kidnapping, religious determination, debt, and organized military campaigns. Enslaved victims figured prominently in trade in the interior of the Bight of Biafra from at least the early eighteenth century and probably earlier still. The scale of enslavement was massive, accounting for the 1.6 million people who were forced to embark on slave ships for the Americas. Slave trading and slave production became the most important economic activities for many African states (Klein, 2003, p. 504). The slaves performed a variety of menial tasks in the households of the wealthy, rendered services in commerce and public administration, served in the army, and worked as raw labour in the mines and in large plantations and this made Africa a land where the possibility of enslavement was pervasive. Europeans were in need of labour for their highly profitable sugar plantations. African slaves became the solution for Europe's labour needs in the Americas for simple yet irresistible economic reasons: they were about two times cheaper than European indentured labour (which was in quite limited supply anyway) and at least four times cheaper than what European free labour would have cost. Indian textiles formed a very large component of the goods that Europeans exchanged in Africa against slaves (Inikori, 1992, p. 175). To further buttress this claim, Paul (1983) reiterates:

Slavery was one form of exploitation. Its special characteristics included the idea that slaves were property; that they were outsiders who were aliens by origin or who had been denied their heritage through judicial or other sanction; that coercion could be used at will; that their labour power was at the complete disposal of a master; that they did not have the right to their own sexuality and, by extension, to their own reproductive capacities; and that the slave status was inherited unless provision was made to ameliorate that status. (p. 1)

In European societies, and the colonies they controlled, slaves were employed to carry out duties which no hired labourer or tenant could be found willing to

undertake under the condition that the land owners wished. Consequently, slaves typically had difficult, degrading and demanding works to do, and were also mistreated by their exploitative masters who were anxious of maximizing profits. With nearly insatiable demand for labourers that grew with European conquest of Africa, a large number of slaves emerged from African countries. These slaves had few rights and were generally at the mercies of their land owners, (Partick, 1990, p. 37).

### **Colonialism in Africa**

Colonization of Africa by European countries was a monumental milestone in the development of Africa. The Africans consider the impact of colonization on them to be perhaps the most important factor in understanding the present condition of the African continent and of the African people. Therefore, a close scrutiny of the phenomenon of colonialism is necessary to appreciate the degree to which it influenced not only the economic and political development of Africa but also how Africans see themselves. The two largest colonial powers in Africa were France and Britain, both of which controlled two-thirds of Africa before World War I.

Ali Mazrui's three broad reasons for European exploration of the African continent, which later led to colonization, provide a good starting point. According to Thomas (1973), the first reason has to do with the need to gather scientific knowledge about the unknown. Africa, then referred to as the "Dark Continent," provided just the right kind of challenge. It held a lot of mystery for European explorers, who travelled and observed and recorded what they saw. Many of the early explorers of Africa were geographers and scientists who were beckoned by the mysteries and exotic qualities of this new land. Expeditions of people like Samuel Baker, Joseph Thompson, Richard Burton, John Speke, and others in the nineteenth century, conducted in the name of science and knowledge, served to attract Europeans to Africa. They "discovered" rivers, lakes, and mountains. They studied the African people and wrote about them. Of Prince Henry's exploratory expeditions, including those to Africa, a historian has written, "While Henry directed exploratory activities, he placed high value on the collection of geographical knowledge and rewarded his captains' in proportion to the efforts they had made to carry the boundaries of knowledge farther,' thus keeping them intent on the work of exploration. To Ali (1969), Without revisiting the debate as to what the Europeans meant by claiming to

have “discovered” Africa’s rivers and lakes, which the Africans had known and sailed and fished from all along, and without belabouring the often extremely racist and distorted descriptions of African societies that they purveyed, it will suffice to say that the writings of some of these foreign travellers increased knowledge of Africa in their own countries and ultimately helped Africans to know their continent better.

Another reason for the colonization of Africa was for religious penetration. Implicit in the Christian doctrine (as well as in Islam) is the requirement that followers of the faith spread the gospel (or the Koran) to others and win converts. Since much of Africa followed their own traditional religious beliefs, Europeans felt that there was a definite need to proselytize and convert Africans to Christianity. In the early years of both Christianity and Islam, evangelical work was often carried out with military campaigns. Later, other methods of persuasion were applied. Missionaries were dispatched to Africa. They set up health clinics, schools, and social service centres. They treated the sick and taught people how to stay healthy. They taught European languages to Africans, who in turn assisted missionaries in translating the Bible into African languages to help disseminate Christian doctrines. Individuals like Dr. David Livingstone were able to combine missionary activities with extensive scientific research and geographic investigations. When missionaries or other explorers encountered hostility or when their lives were in danger (as happened, for instance, to Bishop Hannington, who encountered religious resistance in Uganda and was eventually murdered on orders of a local king), foreign troops were dispatched promptly either to punish the groups involved or to protect other foreign nationals. When foreign troops came in, they invariably stayed and, on short order, colonization expeditions arrived. The third reason was based on imperialism, the desire by European patriots to contribute to their country’s grandeur by laying claim to other countries in distant lands. Incidence such as this was also experienced by the eastern people of Nigeria as recounted in *“Things Fall Apart”* by Chinua Achebe. Okonkwo had killed messenger of the whites in a bid to resist western dominance and was invariably sentenced to death and this had led Okonkwo into taking his own life.

The cultural reason for colonization was deeply rooted in the ethnocentrism and cultural arrogance of the European people, who regarded anyone different as being culturally inferior. In the case of the Africans, because they were not

technologically advanced or their achievements were not written and therefore not known to the rest of the world, the Europeans felt that it was their duty to “civilize” and “uplift” the African people. In a language that was used by those who sought to cast colonization in the most favourable light, Perham asserts that this role “saw the interests of the ruled as equal, if not indeed superior, to those of the rulers African people began to acquiesce to colonial rule and to surrender the elements of their culture and traditions.” (Margery, 1962, p.127).

Between the 1870s and 1900, Africa faced European imperialist aggression, diplomatic pressures, military invasions, and eventual conquest and colonization. At the same time, African societies put up various forms of resistance against the attempt to colonize their countries and impose foreign domination. By the early twentieth century, however, much of Africa, except Ethiopia and Liberia, had been colonized by European powers. Colonialism developed in the nineteenth century following the collapse of the profitability of the slave trade, its abolition and suppression, as well as the expansion of the European capitalist Industrial Revolution. Apart from the political, economic and social factors that gave rise to the colonization of African states, the introduction of western religion, and the fact that Africa is has a rich cultural heritage that can be explored also triggered colonization.

Colonial rule disrupted the traditional political and social institutions that had developed in Africa over centuries. As Europeans carved out empires, they destroyed existing kingdoms and split up or combined many ethnic groups. In time, the colonies they created became African nations consisting of diverse groups with little in common with their fellow citizens. Furthermore, European powers destroyed much of the political and social control of traditional African chiefs and rulers. They failed, however, to establish lasting replacements for these authorities. Finally, European colonialism introduced Africans to various aspects of Western culture. African schools and universities today are based on European systems of education and religion. Because of European colonial contact with the African, our lives have been westernized and African heritage and culture has been displaced.

### **Neo-Colonia Project in Africa**

After the Second World War, the imperialist trends of the eighteenth and nineteenth century started fading away. Through collective struggles, the



Africans gained independence from the Europeans. But though they attained freedom, they could not imagine the fact that it was just a treacherous exchange of power between the out-going masters and a few of their faithful heirs. In the colonial period, the European rulers concluded that as the Africans had no culture and history of their own, it was their duty to civilize the native Africans. They regarded themselves superior to Africans whose culture they considered inferior, uncivilized, and savage. In the name of spreading civilization, they dominated, oppressed, tyrannized and persecuted the native Africans not only economically and politically, but also culturally. When the Europeans eventually left, the Africans got political freedom, but the foul practice of imperialism persevered. It rather appeared in a new form branded neo-colonialism which scholars have regarded as the worst form of imperialism. This camouflaged imperialist practice is turning Africa into a museum of acute poverty, hunger, corruption, famine and enemies of themselves (Shafiqur, Rawshan & Rashed, 2017, p. 9). Shafiqur, Rawshan and Rashed (2017) reiterates that:

The influence of neo-imperialist countries such as USSR and the USA led to the decolonization of Africa which began in the 1960s. But the colonial traditions and the dirty games of the former and present imperialist power kept Africa within the iron curtain of neo-colonialism (p. 9).

Neo-colonialism' was first coined by Kwame Nkrumah. Neo-colonialism represents the final stage of imperialism which was evident in the African continent. Neo-colonialism is the worst form of Imperialism: for those who practice it, it means power without responsibility, and for those who suffer it, it is exploitation without redress (Northrop, 2012). Neo-colonialism is a situation when a less developed country is controlled by a developed country. To Kwame (1966), "the neo-colonialism of today represents imperialism in its final and perhaps its most dangerous stage" (Para. 1). Old-fashioned colonialism is by no means entirely abolished. It still constitutes an African problem. The essence of neo-colonialism is that the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside.

The result of neo-colonialism is that foreign capital is used for the exploitation rather than for the development of the less developed parts of the world. Investment under neo-colonialism increases rather than decreases the gap

between the rich and the poor countries of the world. The struggle against neo-colonialism is not aimed at excluding the capital of the developed world from operating in less developed countries. It is aimed at preventing the financial power of the developed countries being used in such a way as to impoverish the less developed.

Neo-colonialism, like colonialism, is an attempt to export the social conflicts of the capitalist countries. The temporary success of this policy can be seen in the ever widening gap between the richer and the poorer nations of the world. (Kwame, 1966)

Neo-colonialism was originally applied to European policies that were seen as schemes to maintain control of Africa and other dependencies. Predominantly neo-colonialism can be noticed in economics, although this economic exploitation is cloaked by the political and cultural exploitation. Scholars believe that after the Second World War, the colonies were acquiring independences politically but the imperialist countries didn't give those states economic independences, (Shafiqur, Rawshan & Rashed, 2017, p. 10). Though African states achieved independence in the 1960s, the former colonial powers are still controlling African countries from home. Africans and anti-colonialist scholars said that without economic liberty, political liberty is totally vain. Besides, economic unity makes political unity. Kwame Nkrumah said, "for economic unity to be effective must be accompanied by political unity. The two are inseparable, each necessary for the future greatness of our continent, and the full development of our resources."

### **Under-development in Africa**

Since the end of World War II, Africa has been experiencing a worldwide struggle for the improvement of living conditions in almost all her countries. At the beginning, there was little worry as to the causes of underdevelopment; the newly independent countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa as well as United Nations bodies and industrialized countries tried to promote development by applying measures like the introduction of know-how through the assignment of experts, the expansion of education, the development of infrastructure among others. In the course of time it became obvious that this was more or less a treatment of symptoms instead of causes, and the gap

gradually widened between the developed and less developed countries of this world.

In accessing the reason for underdevelopment in African countries, we consider internal factors in the countries, such as illiteracy, traditional agrarian structure, the traditional attitude of the population, the low division of labour, the lack of communication and infrastructure (Frithjof, 1987, p. 2). We also have cases of poor policymaking, corruption, political instability or other domestic failures. However, these “failing” political and institutional structures was heavily influenced and affected by the colonial historical context, the existing inexorable global market economy and its side effects. Furthermore, as the colonial rulers had favoured European firms over Africans, there was a lack of entrepreneurs, which could have shaped a post-colonial industrialization. Further, in the postcolonial cold war era many new absolute rulers were favoured and supported by the either USA or USSR in their attempts to gathers allies, leading to more suppression of entrepreneurs and a middleclass that is crucial for industrialization.

### **The Aftermath of Slave Trade and Colonialism in Africa**

The phenomenon of westernization in Africa can be traced to an observation made as early as the late nineteenth century by the great African cultural theorist Edward Wilmot Blyden and summed up in the late twentieth century by Ali Mazrui’s “*the triple heritage.*” Arowolo (2010), in his “*The Effects of Western Civilization and Culture on Africa*” mentioned some notable effects of colonialism and slave trade and even the current neo-colonial movement on African culture and development as follows:

Firstly, traditional African family values breaking down very rapidly. Extended family that was wonderful instrument like a social verve, social security in our community has given way to nuclear family. Little wonder that there is no more respect for age; no more respect for values that we held sacrosanct in Africa; younger ones now find it very difficult to greet elderly ones actions are carried out by people with no regard to what the cultural and family laws stipulates. To further heighten this breakdown of family unity and composition, we now have children of single parents, a phenomenon that is identifiable with America. People no longer communalize, nobody wants to be anybody’s brother’s keeper. Even our building pattern which depicted the African communal way of living

has been changed. The pre-colonial African nation featured people who built huts and these huts were built in clusters such that one can know what goes on in his neighbour's compound. But what we have today is people living individualistic lives. They build magnificent mansions away from villages and live alone.

Also, colonialism led to rural exodus and the displacement of large segments of the population. As Africans kept embracing western civilization, there were rural-urban drift which led to the decongestion of the rural area and the over-population of the urban centres. As people keep trooping to the cities, many are jobless and others looking for better opportunities. An average African today can soil his hands to survive because the Europeans has though granted African countries independence, but the European domination still continues to persist. Western civilization has promoted corruption in Africa; leaders in Africa now look up to Europe and America as safe havens for looted funds. It is a consequence of Western civilization. Furthermore, Africa now suffer from level of mental enslavement; cultural imperialism hence, the need for decolonization of the mind.

Another factor that has led to underdevelopment in Africa as a result of slave trade, colonialism and neo-colonialism is that proficiency in African languages has declined because of the unending demands to embrace Western language such as English language and French. Western language has created a dichotomy between an elite and mass of our people who still cannot do business with foreign language. It causes alienation for people who cannot speak English or French. Language is a vehicle of culture and as such most African cultures and heritage has been lost.

More so, the impact of religion has also led to Africa's underdevelopment, for this has been the most important single factor in the process of Westernization in Africa. Western education, involving literacy and the mastery of a European language, became the condition for entry into the modern sector. For most of the colonial period, education was in the hands of the Christian missions for instance, who sought not only to convert Africans but also to inculcate Western values. Christianity and other western religions challenged traditional belief systems and promoted the diffusion of new ideas and modes of life; in particular, it sought to impose monogamy and the nuclear family as the norm. The cultural alteration provoked by the pressures of colonial rule and missionary in all

spheres of life are pervasive enough to qualify as the signs of a new cultural coup in Africa. This is more noticeable in the area of science and technology on African experience and consciousness. Modern medicine has largely taken precedence over traditional methods in matters of health. Mr. Dare also says that:

The trend of cultural westernization of Africa has become very pervasive and prevalent, such that Western civilization has taken precedence over African values and culture and the latter is regarded as inferior to the former. As with other societies and cultures in the so-called Third World, the impact of Western colonization on Africa has occasioned a discontinuity in forms of life throughout the continent. This has led to a cultural dualism that often presents itself as a real dilemma in concrete, real-life situations. In other words, the African experience of modernity is fraught with tensions at every level of the communal and social settings. The post independence Africa is confronted with how to have a true identity, a new culture that is African in nature. ("The Effects of Western Civilization") But from the perspective of recent cultural expansion of the west, the Africans, instead of harping on the guilt of the colonizers, should take positive and confident steps towards a new era by developing self respect and by increasing their productivity. (as cited in Shafiqur, Rawshan & Rashed, 2017, p. 13)

All the above elaborated factors which are masterminded by slave trade and African colonization had reduced the growth and developmental strength of Africa and Africans. To overcome this after effect, Africans must learn to take positive stands and determine to work patriotically. There is also the need for peaceful co-existence between African states and African countries must learn to trust and partner with each other.

## **Conclusion**

Slave trade, colonialism and neo-colonial movement have over the years from the basic reasons that has left African's economic, cultural and political growth a disheartening level. These experiences of Africa and Africans has continued to linger such that even when Africa has been declared a sovereign state, the effects

of slave trade, colonialism and neo-colonialism has persistently roared like a lion on African's national growth and development. To overcome this age-long threat, African countries must fight to unite and make effective use of their natural resources if they are to overcome underdevelopment and national peace.

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