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ISSUES:

THE EFFECTS OF THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE ON WEST AFRICA:
A REJOINDER*

by

Adu Boahen

The impact of the slave trade on West Africa has of late become a subject of bitter controversy among historians and economic historians. To some historians, such as Fage, it was on balance a blessing while to others such as Rodney and myself, it was an unmitigated disaster for Africans.

Let us take a good look at the views of Fage,¹ the leader of the school of thought that justifies the slave trade in some respects. Fage has contended first and foremost that "the broad effect of the Atlantic slave trade seems to have been to create the conditions for a commercial revolution in Guinea comparable to the earlier commercial growth which had taken place in the Western Sudan following the stimulus afforded by trans-Saharan trade." He argues that in return for the slaves, Africans received many kinds of goods: textiles, all kinds of fire-arms, gunpowder and shot, knives and cutlasses, many kinds of European-made iron-mongery and hardware, iron, copper, brass and lead in bar form; beads and trinkets, spirit and many kinds of provisions and that these imports clearly had value to the West Africans, for otherwise they would not have been willing to exchange slaves for them. He is of the opinion that the slave trade contributed substantially to the growth of the trade of West Africa, that it greatly stimulated trade generally by, for instance, stimulating the production and sale of food for slaves and for those engaged in raiding and fighting for slaves and other professional men hence West Africa became a land renowned for its markets, creating demand for her gold, ivory, guns, woods, palm oil, etc. He concludes that "taking exports and imports together, the new internal trade of West Africa by sea that had been engendered principally by the demand for slave in the Americas may have increased from not far short of £2 million (\$8 million) a year at the beginning of the eighteenth century to something like £4 million (\$6 m) at the end and that this "must have been a very considerable stimulus to the internal economic development of Guinea, and one more than comparable

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to the earlier stimulus of the Trans Saharan Trade in the Sudan." Indeed he talks in terms of "the commercial revolution initiated in Guinea by the Atlantic Slave Trade." Hopkins also doubts that the export of slaves had any ill effects on the economic development of West Africa. "For the external slave trade to have been an economic disaster," he argues, "it is necessary to postulate that West Africa would have achieved a major economic breakthrough before the nineteenth century if the supply of manpower had not been diminished by the amount specified. The evidence available does not support this hypothesis, and it is hard to see how the retention of those slaves sent abroad would have caused the economy to develop along significantly different lines."²

Fage also vigorously denies that the slave trade did bring about any depopulation in West Africa. Accepting Curtin's recent figures, he contends that over the period of 400 years, the total number of slaves landed in the Americas was only about 9.3 million of whom only 6 million came from West Africa. While admitting that this was 'a crime and disaster of major proportion', he doubts whether it did have any serious effect on the population of West Africa. He maintains that in about 1500 and 1700, the rate of loss was much smaller than the natural growth rate while in the eighteenth century when the trade reached its greatest volume, the loss was more or less equivalent to the natural increase of population, and that at worst the total population remained static. He then argues that "if the losses caused by the Atlantic Slave Trade did have a very damaging effect on the population of West Africa, one might expect that this would be most noticeable in the lands adjacent to the 1000 miles of coast from the Gold Coast to the Cameroons. But today the territories of modern Ghana, Togo, Dahomey and Nigeria stand out as one of the most densely populated blocs of West Africa." Indeed, he has gone so far as to suggest that the slave trade was even a blessing in disguise since it saved West Africa from overpopulation. In his own words, "It is even conceivable that it may even have been more profitable for some parts of this area to have exported the equivalent of its natural growth of population rather than to have kept it at home!!!"

On the question of the social effects of the slave trade, Basil Davidson has also contended rather surprisingly, that not only did Africa not suffer far-reaching depopulation but the slave trade "may even have done something to alleviate the problem of overpopulation."

Most of these views above are highly objectionable, totally unacceptable and indeed some of them are simply regrettable. To take the question of population first. In the first place, it should be borne in mind that the figure of 9.3 or 9.5

million arrived at by these European writers does not include the number of Africans who were killed during the raids for slaves or those who died during their transportation to the coast and while they waited for ships in the dungeons and holds in the castles. This would make the total loss suffered by West Africa well over 10 million and even if this figure is spread over a period of 400 years it is a huge figure. 474,000 Ghanaians are said to have been landed in the Americas in the eighteenth century by the English and the French alone.⁴ It should also be borne in mind that a majority of these people were those in their prime and mostly men — In March 1722, the Directors of the African Company in London instructed their agents in Cape Coast Castle that they should get ready cargoes of 600 slaves each, who should "all be good merchantable Negroes viz, two-thirds male, one-third female, six-sevenths of each cargo to be about 16-30 years of age and upon no account to exceed 30, one-seventh boys and girls of which none should be under 10 years of age" — and both of these factors could not have had serious effects on the demographic situation. As Gleave and Rothero have argued: "It must be recognized that slave raiding was probably to a degree selective, and by removing people from the productive age groups impaired the capacity of the population as a whole to maintain itself. Further there is cumulative effect of slave raiding, involving not only the removal of population, but also causing disruption and devastation which, by creating food shortages might lead to famine conditions, disease and consequent loss of population."⁵

Secondly, it is simply nonsensical to talk of overpopulation in West Africa even today let alone two hundred years ago, and in any case, given a choice between dying in Africa of hunger and being reduced to chattel or a beast of burden and flogged or worked to death in the Americas, I, as an African, would have chosen the former. Only a capitalist-minded historian and one looking at the question from a European and a non-African view point would have arrived at so nauseating and regrettable a conclusion.

Thirdly the fact that the area of Ghana, Togo, Dahomey and Nigeria are the most populated blocs in West Africa today does not mean that they were so in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Surely a great deal of this tremendous growth in population did take place, as is evident from various census figures, only during this very century. The population of Ghana, for example, increased from 4 million in 1948 to 6 million in 1960 and 8.5 in 1970, i.e. it more than doubled in a matter of 22 years! The question of the high density of the population of Lower Guinea within easy reach of the coast and hence its high contribution to the slave trade is a myth. Moreover, it is obvious from a careful analysis of the languages of the fores

belt in both Nigeria and Ghana⁶ that most of the eighteenth century slaves came from the interior and not from the so called thickly populated areas 'within easy reach of the coast'. This is certainly true of Ghana where most of the eighteenth century slaves were known as 'Duncoos' i.e. people from the north.

Nor are most of the economic arguments and conclusions convincing in any way. Firstly, Fage's view that the Atlantic Slave Trade "initiated commercial revolution" in Guinea should be rejected. It is clearly based on the false assumption that all was at a standstill before the whitemen came and before the commencement of the Atlantic Slave Trade. In Ghana the Atlantic Slave Trade did not become important until from the second half of the seventeenth onwards and not until the eighteenth century did it completely eclipse the trade in gold. Surely the so-called revolutionary changes - the exchange of local goods for imports, the production of provisions for sale, the use of currencies and above all the existence of markets - are all evident from the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries' records. And Fage's view of the new kinds of professional men - people regulating trade in every state, soldiers and armies capturing slaves, etc. who had no time to grow food themselves and therefore had to buy food from others who stuck to farming is for most parts of West Africa and certainly for Ghana a myth. Nowhere in West Africa with the sole exception of Dahomey was there any such dichotomy between soldiers, artisans, officials and other professionals on one hand and farmers on the other. Even to this day the wing chiefs and courtiers do combine farming with their functions.

Even more untenable is the view that the slave trade promoted internal economic development. Fage, as we have seen, quotes in support of his contention the fact that the value of exports and imports to West Africa "may have increased from not far short of £2 million (\$8 m) a year at the beginning of the eighteenth century to something over £4 million or \$16 m." But this contention is wholly unconvincing and the figures totally misleading. In the first place, mere increase in volume of trade is no indication of economic development but rather of economic growth; it shows a quantitative and not a qualitative or structural change. Secondly, the lion's-share of the profit of this trade went to the Europeans and not to the other Africans as is evident from the difference between the cost and selling prices of their imports. Thirdly, a great deal of the Africans' share of this profit came from the sale of their kith and kin which could not simply have brought about any economic development.

Fourthly, and what is even more crucial, unlike Europe which received raw materials such as gold, silver, cotton, gum, sugar and coffee whose processing could not but have provided

or given impetus to such industries as the refineries of Liverpool, London, Bristol, Nantes and Orleans, the textile industries of Manchester and Nantes, the gum processing works of Nantes and Paris and to such service industries as shipping and banking.⁷ West Africa received, as is evident from Fage's own list, only manufactured goods and consumables, or as Rodney calls them, baubles, bangles, beads, barrels of guns and barrels of liquor. These goods being consumables could not and did not generate economic development nor did they, as Davidson has emphasized, even promote capital accumulation in Africa "that could have led to a more advanced economy."

In Ghana, for example, only the continuation of the gold trade could have led to economic development. It would inevitably have brought about improvements in methods of gold extraction and possibly in the infrastructure. But this was precisely the activity that was undermined by the slave trade. Not only did slave raiding and the wars make peaceful activities such as gold mining virtually impossible but the more profitable slave trade drew attention from gold mining to hunting for slaves. One Dutch trader confessed, "As one fortunate maruading makes a native rich in a day, they therefore exert themselves rather in war, robbery and plunder than in their business of digging and collecting gold." Indeed, so sharp was the drop in gold production that in the eighteenth century, most Ghanaians refused to give gold in payments for imported goods and were rather receiving gold from the Portuguese and the Brazilians. Thus even in Ghana, the hideous trade in slaves exceeded that in gold from the first decade of eighteenth century onwards and with it went all opportunities of genuine internal economic development.

Indeed, Hopkins has admitted that "the economy of West Africa was not transformed at least in a way conducive to further development" and he has advanced four main reasons for this.⁸ The first was that the export trade was confined to staples "which required little diversification of existing methods of production and no significant additional commercialization of factors in West Africa." Secondly, the import trade consisted of consumer goods which needed hardly any further processing and so provided few opportunities for productive investment in the domestic economy. Thirdly the distribution of incomes was highly restricted and therefore inhibited the emergence of a mass market or substantial wage-earning group which could have supported local manufacturing activities. Finally, the size of export proceeds was too small to stimulate either a wide range or a large number of new enterprises. All this should put paid to Fage's misleading ideas about a commercial or an economic revolution in West Africa generated by the slave trade.

But while Hopkins admits that the Atlantic slave trade did not promote economic development, he denies that it was a

serious setback for the economy of West Africa or that it led to the decline of local industries. On the latter, he claimed that many indigenous manufactures such as cloth and pottery remained important and "it seems more likely that the market was enlarged (in terms of the volume and range of goods) than that foreign imports replaced domestic craft products."⁹

This is not true. In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the Portuguese certainly brought cloth from Benin and Ivory Coast to Ghana for sale but this came to an end in the eighteenth century as a result of increased European textile imports to the disgust of the Obas of Benin who lost revenue through the killing of their cloth industry. In any case, one has to see what happened during the heyday of colonialism and the development of indigenous arts and manufacturers since independence to become convinced that the astronomical increase in imports of cheap cloth from India, Europe and Asia and cheap copies of beads from Europe could not but have disastrously affected local manufacturers including especially textiles and therefore technological development in Africa.

As to whether the Atlantic Slave Trade was a serious economic set-back or not, Hopkins argues first that since the population remained at least static rather than declined as a result of the trade and since "it seems probable that the majority of enslaved Africans were ordinary farmers", but not those who possessed scarce technical or entrepreneurial skills, their loss could not be an economic disaster. It has already been contended that the view that the slave trade did not lead to loss of population should be ignored. Secondly, since a majority of the slaves exported were obtained from slave raids and wars, how did Hopkins come to know that they were ordinary farmers? And in any case, in traditional African society, there was no such distinction between ordinary farmers and the so called people with scarce technical or entrepreneurial skills.

One cannot help but conclude that since a majority of the people exported were people in their prime of manhood and since some of them were farmers as well as skilled craftsmen, artisans, weavers, carvers, their removal could not but have retarded economic development. What is more, surely the insecurity and instability generated by the raid for slaves and by the wars could not but have impeded normal economic activities and with it loss of productivity.

No, I have no reason to alter the views expressed seven years ago¹⁰ that the slave trade was an unmitigated disaster - a crime unredeemed by one extenuating circumstance. The slave trade did lead to unpardonable destruction of population even if not 30 or 40 million at least 10 to 15, that the raids for

slaves did cause a great deal of misery, bloodshed, destruction and an atmosphere of insecurity and anarchy which could not be conducive to orderly economic development, that it did eliminate some traditional industries such as cloth-weaving, bead making, gold and iron smithery and discouraged or impeded the development of trade in legitimate products such as cotton, tobacco and sugar since it was inconsistent with European economic interests and the mercantilist theories of the day. Thus, in 1751 for instance, the British Board of Trade peremptorily ordered Thomas Melvil, Governor of the Cape Coast Castle to stop the development of cotton cultivation among the Fante on the good mercantilist grounds that "The introduction of culture and industry among the Negroes is contrary to the known established policy of this country, there is no saying where this might stop, and that it might extend to tobacco, sugar and every other commodity which we now take from our colonies and thereby the Africans who now support themselves by wars would become planters and their slaves be employed in the culture of these articles in Africa, which they are employed in America."

The Danish physician, Isert, who was greatly interested in plantations also asked in the 1780's: "Why did our ancestors not have the common sense to start plantations for the production of these commodities in Africa, where we can obtain plenty of labour at lower wages?" He added that if this had been done, there would have been no need to ship Africans on the risky voyage across the Atlantic. "Willingly," he continued, "would the blacks allow us to take possession of the largest and best districts, which have been lying in waste for thousands of years. And for moderate wages they would even help to cultivate them, if we came to them bearing in our hands the olive branch instead of the murderous steel."¹¹ This passage should be sufficient answer to people like Hopkins who argue that "For the external slave trade to have been an economic disaster, it is necessary to postulate that West Africa would have achieved a major economic breakthrough before the 19th century if the supply of manpower had not been diminished by the amount specified."

Had the production of sugar, cotton, rice, tobacco, ginger, not even to mention the mining of gold, tin, etc. in the 17th or 18th century been encouraged which it could well have been since all these products are now being produced in West Africa, a major economic breakthrough could certainly have been achieved by the 19th and not 20th century. But the Atlantic Slave Trade ruled this out, and it was not until after its abolition that the production of these very commodities was encouraged though once again, Africa was forbidden to produce manufactured goods which she was to continue to receive from Europe.

Furthermore, the slave trade did brutalize all those who took part in it, black and white alike, subject and master as well. The kings and traditional rulers in their anxiety to obtain people for sale, abused customary law and practice, impose the brutal punishment of slavery instead of fines even for the simplest of offences such as petty thefts, and fabricated charges of adultery, theft or treason against their subjects as the kings of Akwamu in the eighteenth century did. As Laing commented when on his travels in Sierra Leone in 1822 he noticed that nobody had been convicted after an interrogation into the death of a young girl, "Had the slave trade existed, some unfortunate individual might have been accused and sold into captivity."¹² Religious leaders also abused their office by turning it into an instrument of enslavement. The Aro of Igboland for instance used their famous oracle *Chukwu* to enslave thousands of Igbo from the inland regions while the Fante must have used *Nanaanom* for the same purpose. Undoubtedly, the slave trade brought about the moral degeneration of some of the members of the ruling aristocracy and distorted African legal, political and religious institutions and it was this degeneration that partly accounts for the collapse of some of the kingdoms, such as Akwamu in Ghana.¹³

The final regrettable effect of the slave trade was the change it caused in the attitude of Europeans towards Africans or the Black race. Once the Europeans or White men began to buy and use Africans or Blacks as chattel and beasts of burden they naturally began to develop an attitude of contempt for and superiority over them. As Rodney has put it in his usual perceptive way: "The simple fact is that no people can enslave another for centuries without coming out with a notion of superiority, and when the colour and other physical traits of those people were quite different, it was inevitable that the prejudice should take a racist form."¹⁴ Thus the feeling of equality and mutual respect that characterised the relations between the two during the period before the eighteenth century steadily gave way to one of superiority of white over black. This change marked the beginnings of racism and racial prejudice and arrogance at one end and paternalism at the other which have both bedevilled relations between black and white to this day.

The impact of the slave trade on the Americas was enormous, too enormous to go into here. But it should be pointed out, as Curtin has done, that "for 300 years more Africans than Europeans crossed the Atlantic each year",¹⁵ and it was here that the feeling of superiority of white over black reached its xenophobic proportions and accounts for the explosive confrontation between Black and White to this very day.

In the first phase of the Euro-African confrontation which I date from 1415 to 1518, Africa and Europe faced each other as equals. The demand of the Europeans was for such natural products as pepper, gum, ivory and above all gold. The supply of these commodities was under the control of the African and mutual respect and equality marked the relationship between the two. When Prince Bemoy of Wolof went to Portugal in 1488, he was treated according to De Barros, "in every respect as a Sovereign Lord, accustomed to our civilization and not as a barbarous prince outside the law."¹⁶

In the letters exchanged between the King of the Congo and the King of Portugal between 1512 and 1540, the former referred to the latter as "most high and powerful prince and king my brother," while the King of Portugal addressed his Congolese counterpart as "most powerful and excellent king of Manikongo" and as his "friend and brother."¹⁷

Above all, the Africans were accorded every respect. Indeed, one English trader, Richard Eden advised his compatriots in the 1550s: "They are a very wary people in their bargaining and will not lose one sparkle of gold of any value. They use weight and measure, and are very circumspect in occupying the same. They that shall have to do with them must use them gently for they will not traffique or bring any wares, if they be evil used."¹⁸ Above all, the Africans were conscious of and did ask for western education and science and technology. In 1526, King Affonso of the Congo asked for "two physicians and two apothecaries and one surgeon so that they may come with their drug stores and all the necessary things to stay in our kingdoms." He also wrote again in the same year to the Portuguese King to ask him to send to his kingdom neither "merchants nor wares, only priests and people to teach in schools, and no other goods but wine and flour for the holy sacrament."¹⁹ Everywhere on the coast during this first phase of confrontation, missionaries and teachers were welcomed, and schools and churches were established here and there in Ghana, Benin and Congo.

Finally, in the field of culture, art, dance and music, Africa was the equal if not even superior to Europe at the time. The amazing Benin and Ife bronze pieces alone provide clear and incontrovertible evidence. Had this relationship of mutual respect, of the development of the natural resources of Africa, and of the introduction of Christianity, Western education and technology continued, Africa would have witnessed a period of genuine development and progress. But it did not. The nature of the relationship underwent a revolutionary change in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Africans lost their position of respect and control; they lost their art; in place of schools and churches arose forests and castles with dungeons for slaves,

and instead of progress and development, retrogression and underdevelopment set in. And all this was because instead of developing his natural resources and commodities, the African became a commodity himself thanks to the slave trade which became the primary concern of the Europeans from the end of the sixteenth century onwards.

It should be emphasized that some African rulers on realizing the disastrous effects of that trade did try to stop it. The King of the Congo in a letter to his counterpart in Portugal as early as 1526 added:

We cannot reckon how great the damage is, since the mentioned merchants are taking everyday our natives, sons of the Land and the sons of our noblemen and vassals and our relatives, because the thieves and men of bad conscience grab them wishing to have the things and wares of this Kingdom which they are ambitious of; they grab them and get them sold; and so great, sir is the corruption and licentiousness that our country is being completely depopulated and Your Highness should not agree with this or accept it as in Your Service. It is our will that in these kingdoms there should not be any trade in slavery or outlet for them... 20*

But no heed was paid to this. The Kings of Benin were also noted for their "general indifference to the demands and opportunities of the European slave trade"²¹ in the early decades of the sixteenth century and until the close of the seventeenth century enforced an embargo on the export of male slaves. Finally the kings of Dahomey in the early decades of the eighteenth century did also try to stop the slave trade.²² But when all these attempts failed, the African rulers were compelled to join a devil they could not beat. The material and technological backwardness of Africa today as compared to that of Europe could be attributed to a number of factors but of these the most crucial and historically the first was undoubtedly the Atlantic slave trade and Europe should bear a lion's share of that crime and inhumanity against Africa.

*Emphasis in the original

Footnotes

1. Fage, J.D., *A History of West Africa*, 1969, pp. 81-96.
2. Hopkins, A.G., *An Economic History of West Africa*, 1973, pp. 121-23

3. Davidson, B., *Black Mother*. 1961.
4. Curtin, B., *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 1969.
5. See *Journal of African History*, Vol. 5, 1964, pp. 185-208, Vol. 10, 1969, pp. 551-564
6. Gleave, M.B. and Prothero, R.M., "Population Density and 'Slave Raiding' - A Comment," *Journal of African History*, Vol. 12, 1971, p. 322.
7. Hopkins, *op. cit.*, p. 118.
8. Quoted by Rodney, W., *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, Dar es Salaam, 1972, p. 107.
9. Hopkins, A.G., *op. cit.*, p. 119-120.
10. Boahen, A., *Topics in West African History*, 1966, pp. 108-113.
11. Quoted by G. Norregard, *Danish Settlers in West Africa, 1658-1850*, 1966, p. 173.
12. Quoted by Rodney, *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast*, 1970.
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14. Kwamenah-Polo, M.A. *Government and Politics in the Akuapem State, 1730-1850*, 1973, pp. 28-31.
15. Rodney, W., *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, Dar es Salaam 1972, p. 99.
16. Curtin, P., *The Atlantic Slave Trade, 1600-1800 in History of West Africa*, Vol. I, 1971, p. 240.
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18. Blake, J.W., *European Beginnings in West Africa 1454-1578* London, 1937, p. 177.
19. Davidson, Basil, *op. cit.*
20. *Ibid.*
21. Ryder, A.F.C., *Benin and the Europeans 1485-1897*, London 1969, p. 45.

22. Akinjogbu, I.A., *Dahomey and its Neighbors 1708-1818*, Cambridge, 1967, pp. 80-95.

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