

Abolition of the Slave Trade: Repercussions in Africa

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The legal abolition and actual decline of trans-Atlantic slave trading resulted from complex global processes. The relationships between Europe, Africa and the Americas were shifting in the nineteenth century: American colonies were gaining their independence from European rule, while Africa was looking more and more like fertile ground for new European colonies to replace those lost in the Americas. The history of Africa in the nineteenth century was shaped by these broad international patterns of change as well as local initiatives and challenges pertaining to particular African societies.¹

The three primary consequences of the abolition of the slave trade for Africa can be summarized as follows: 1) the development of new economic systems, 2) the expansion of slavery in Africa, and 3) the onset of European imperialism in Africa.

It is important to note that the trans-Atlantic slave trade ended at different times in the various regions of Africa.² Britain abolished the trade in slaves from Africa in

1807, but the trade continued in illegal and semi-legal forms for many decades. In West-Central Africa (the Congos, Gabon and Angola) in particular, slave exports continued at the same rate for fifty years after abolition as they had been before.³ South-Eastern Africa (Mozambique, Malawi and Tanzania) became a significant source of slaves for the trans-Atlantic slave trade only after 1815.⁴

The effects of the Abolition Act were felt much sooner on the West African coast (from Senegal to Nigeria) because British squadrons patrolled those waters and seized slaving ships of any nationality. Therefore, the effects of abolition did not occur in West-Central and South-Eastern Africa until half a century or more following the 1807 British Abolition Act. Overall, almost 3.2 million enslaved Africans crossed the Atlantic after the Abolition Act was passed. Most of these slaves went to the sugar and coffee plantations of Cuba and Brazil. In total numbers, then, the slave trade remained unchanged for four decades after the Abolition Act. The con-

sequences of abolition described below must be seen in light of the uneven chronology of the effective ending of the slave trade in different parts of Africa

The end of the trans-Atlantic slave trade ushered in an era of commercial transition in many parts of Africa, particularly those areas where the trade in enslaved people had been an important source of wealth for the local African elite. Some African merchants and kings, such as the Asante King Osei Bonsu, were frustrated by the loss of what had been a lucrative trade:

“The white men...do not understand my country, or they would not say the slave trade was bad. But if they think it bad now, why did they think it good before...? If the great king [of England] would like to restore this trade, it would be good for the white men and for me too...”⁵

In spite of the initial shock to some at the end of the Atlantic slave trade, African societies quickly adapted to new commercial opportunities. Most of these new opportunities were presented by traders from Europe.

Investors in Britain and other European nations sought to develop new trading relationships with Africa in the nineteenth century. The so-called “legitimate” trade goods that were in increasing demand in Europe included ivory, peanuts, palm oil, gold, rubber, cloves, animal hides, ostrich feathers, beeswax and gum Arabic. In response to European market demand for these goods, many West African societies began to produce and export large quantities of tropical vegetable products, especially palm oil and peanuts.

Some historians consider the economic changes that followed the abolition of the slave trade the beginning of West Africa’s development of a “modern economy.”⁶ This new economy was marked by the widespread

practice of large-scale agricultural production on plantations. To a certain extent, the production and export of tropical vegetable products also enabled a greater number of commoners and small-scale producers to become involved in Africa’s export trade than ever before. This was particularly true among cocoa farmers in Ghana (formerly the Gold Coast). However, the trend was for influential chiefs and merchants—likely from the same families who had profited from the Atlantic slave trade—to dominate “legitimate trade” as well. The trade in kola nuts and gold from Asante, for instance, was monopolized by the Asante king.⁷

West Africa’s commercial transition, however modern, came with significant drawbacks. Like the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the profitability of “legitimate commerce” depended on foreign markets. The growth of the new economy therefore occurred in spurts and experienced setbacks when international market prices for export goods fell.⁸ In addition, the influx of manufactured goods produced abroad effectively stifled local industry within Africa. Dependence on foreign markets for economic growth put some African societies in a precarious position in the nineteenth century, when European imperialism was on the rise.

The great irony of the abolition era is that the practice of slavery in Africa actually increased at the same time that slavery was becoming illegal and unpopular in most of the rest of the world. Increasingly during the nineteenth century, slaves did the work of producing and transporting export crops such as palm oil and peanuts. As urban centers grew along the African coast during the same period, slave labor increasingly produced food for the large number of city-dwellers. The increased use of slave labor in Africa occurred partly because the loss of an

Atlantic export market caused the prices of slaves in Africa to decline.⁹ Slave ownership became more affordable; therefore more landowners and merchants invested in slaves to expand production and distribution.

In the Western Sudan (Mali, Mauritania, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Niger, northern Nigeria), the expansion of slavery in the nineteenth century was fueled by wars and Islamic reform movements as much as by the ending of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The largest of these movements resulted in the creation of the Sokoto Caliphate, an Islamic state that was located in the area stretching from eastern Burkina Faso to northern Cameroon. The jihads that occurred as part of the creation of Sokoto produced as many as 500,000 slaves. These enslaved people were most likely to be sold into Islamic societies in North Africa and the Middle East.¹⁰ It has been estimated that, by 1900, as many as 50% of the people living in the Western Sudan were slaves.¹¹

The clove-producing plantations of Zanzibar (and of the small islands surrounding that island) present another important example of the rapid expansion of slavery in this period. Zanzibar became the world's largest producer of cloves in the nineteenth century. Clove trees were produced on large, Arab-owned plantations that imported as many as 70,000 slaves from East Africa each year during the height of the clove industry.¹²

The third fundamental repercussion of the abolition of the slave trade was the introduction of a new wave of European travelers into Africa. These men (and a few women) came to Africa after the abolition of the slave trade as missionaries or explorers with specifically religious or scientific goals. Their activities in Africa, and the knowledge with which they returned, nevertheless helped to ignite an imperialistic desire

among European government and business leaders.

The abolitionist movement stirred up an unprecedented desire among Christians in Europe to spread their religion in sub-Saharan Africa. Many European missionaries who traveled to Africa in the nineteenth century believed it was their duty to spread Christianity in Africa as compensation for the abuses Africans suffered at the hands of white slave traders. These missionary endeavors were also tainted with a sense of racial superiority, as many of the missionaries believed that Africans were inferior spiritually and otherwise due to their race. A famous quote from David Livingstone—who has been noted for having an unusually high respect for African culture—conveys the attitude of the day: “We come among them as members of a superior race and servants of a Government that desires to elevate the more degraded portions of the human family.”¹³

The second type of European likely to take a renewed interest in Africa in the nineteenth century was the geographic explorer. Organizations such as the Royal Geographical Society of London sponsored numerous research journeys to Africa during this period. Their goal was to create more detailed maps of the continent's interior of the continent and to catalog unknown species and geological features. The interior of Africa remained terra incognita to nineteenth-century Europeans, and the scientific community was fascinated to discover the unknown origins of Africa's great rivers like the Nile, Niger, Congo and Zambezi. Equally important, medical advances in the nineteenth century produced anti-malarial drugs that enabled Europeans to travel in tropical Africa for the first time without high risk of death from the disease that had previ-

ously made tropical Africa “the white man’s grave.”

Both missionaries and explorers returned to Europe with a wealth of information that piqued the interests of European investors and imperialists. With maps, drawings and ethnographic data in hand, European governments finally had the knowledge they would need to govern African territory and people beyond the coastland. Combined with new technologies of the nineteenth century –including the steam ship, railroad and machine gun– this information gave Europeans the upper hand in the impending wars of conquest.

The Atlantic slave trade caused immeasurable human suffering in Africa for more than three centuries, and its ending was therefore a welcome change to millions who lived in fear of enslavement and banishment to the Middle Passage. Ironically, slavery and slave trading within Africa increased in the decades following the abolition of the slave trade. Making matters worse, the threat of outright conquest by European armies quickly replaced the Atlantic slave trade as a threat to individual and collective security throughout Africa. Just as one of the most gruesome chapters in Africa’s history was closed, another chapter with the similar theme of exploitation was opened. This time the exploitation would occur on African soil.

Notes and Bibliography

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