The Economic, Political, and Social Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on Africa

Babacar M'Baye

This paper is copyrighted and was later published with the following bibliographic reference:

Mbaye, Babacar. "The Economic, Political, and Social impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on Africa." *The European Legacy: Toward New Paradigms*. 11.6 (2006): 607-622.

Abstract

The Transatlantic slave trade radically impaired Africa's potential to develop economically and maintain its social and political stability. The arrival of Europeans on the West African Coast and their establishment of slave ports in various parts of the continent triggered a continuous process of exploitation of Africa's human resources, labor, and commodities. This exploitative commerce influenced major segments of the African political and religious aristocracies, the warrior classes, and the biracial elite, who were making small gains from the slave trade, to participate in the oppression of their own people. Yet Europeans benefited from the Atlantic trade the most, since the commerce allowed them to amass the raw materials that fed their Industrial Revolution at the detriment of African societies whose peace and capacity to transform their modes of production into a viable entrepreneurial economy was severely halted.

Between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries, millions of Africans were forcefully sold and transported to Europe and the Americas as slaves. Known as the Atlantic slave trade (hereafter "the Atlantic trade" or "the Atlantic commerce"), the forced auction and relocation of Africans into Europe and the Americas was part of a global economic enterprise that lasted from the 1440s to the 1860s. This commerce spread from the Western coast of Africa to the rest of the continent, winding its course from the islands of Gorée and Saint-Louis, in current Senegal, to Quelimane, in present Mozambique.[1]

The Atlantic trade affected the lives of millions of Africans who came from such diverse regions such as Senegambia, Sierra Leone, West-Central Africa, South-East Africa, the Bight of Benin, the Gold Coast, and the Bight of Biafra. While the effects of the Atlantic trade on the enslaved Africans have been partly documented, those on the non-enslaved Africans remain largely unknown.[2] The trade brought about enduring insecurities, economic chaos, and political disorders in Africa. It arrested its development by exploiting its technological, agricultural, and cultural skills for the development of the West only. It hampered Africa's mercantilist economy by halting its capacity to be transformed into a capitalist economy. Moreover, it started the systemic and continuous process of economic exploitation and social and political fragmentation that Europeans later institutionalized through colonization and neocolonization.

Furthermore, the Atlantic trade led to the formation of semi-feudal classes in Africa that collaborated with Europeans to sanction the oppression of their own people. These classes came from the African aristocracy and middlemen who facilitated the capture and sale of Africans and made substantial gains from the trade. Yet, despite these gains, Europeans, not Africans, benefited from the trade the most. Europeans received from the trade unprecedented human labor and economic capital that allowed them to develop their societies at the expense of Africa.

Historical Background

The Atlantic slave trade was initially a small commercial system based on the exchange of African material or human capital, such as gold or slaves, with few European material goods, such as guns and silk. By the end of the sixteenth century, this trade became a large market that promoted the barbaric capture and transportation of millions of Africans to the Americas. The commerce started in 1441 when ten Africans were taken from the Mauritanian coast and shipped to Lisbon. Three years later, 240 Africans from the same coast were brought to Lisbon.[3]

It is often said that Europeans did not begin the Atlantic trade and that they simply tapped into a human trade that already existed in Africa. While domestic forms of slavery and the trans-Saharan slave trade existed in Africa prior to the arrival of Europeans in the 1400s, these had a lesser impact on the continent than did the Atlantic trade. The latter surpassed the earlier trade in terms of the immeasurable loss of lives and resources it brought about in Africa and the Black Diaspora.[4] The three forms of slavery relegated Africans to an inferior social status and deprived them, partly or wholly, of their freedom. They legitimized the removal of Africans from their homeland and their relocation in foreign territories. Yet, the Atlantic trade differed from African slavery and Arab slavery because it was founded on a unique and rigid concept of bondage.[5] Unlike the Arabs and Africans, Europeans had a theory of slavery in which conversion to the religion of the master or marriage with the master did not prevent a person and his/her descendants from inheriting the status of a slave.[6]

Despite this fundamental difference, these forms of slavery complemented each other, because the slave markets Europeans established in Africa developed out of the earlier Arab and African trades. The Portuguese, whose navigation system was better than those of any European empire of the 1400s, traded in African gold, ivory, gum, hide, wax, and slaves, which the Arabs had dominated for centuries. By the end of the fifteenth century, the Portuguese had total control over this commerce. As Basil Davidson documents: “By about 1506, Duarte Pacheco Pereira is writing that the goods exchanged at Arguim and elsewhere consist of gold, black slaves, oryx leather for shields, and other items, against Portuguese red and blue stuffs and various textiles, both poor and good quality, as well as horses.”[7] This anticipates Philip D. Curtin’s argument that the Africans received from European traders more than “worthless goods such as cheap gewgaws, beads, rums and firearms.” According to Curtin, African importation of European textile increased from 28.2 % in 1730 to 58.9% in 1830 before plummeting to 4% in 1860, casting doubt on the role Africa played in the development of European export products before the nineteenth century.[8] Joseph Inikori, however, questions the credibility of the Inspector General’s Ledgers of Imports and Exports of Great Britain, on which Curtin based his study of the yearly value of commodity exports from Britain to the African coast from 1797 to 1808:

> Any calculations of British slave exports based on these figures of commodity exports will, of necessity, understate, the quantity of slaves exported because, in the first place, a large proportion of the goods employed in the purchase of slaves on the African coast by British citizens were taken from ports outside Britain and were therefore not included in the Inspector General’s accounts; in the second place, the latter accounts have been found seriously to understate both the volume

> and value of goods exported from Britain to Africa and elsewhere.[9]

Inikori suggests that Britain's economy made substantial profit from the Atlantic trade and, specifically, from the importation of African slaves. Anticipating Inikori's thesis, Eric Williams pointed out that England was devastated when the thirteen American colonies announced in 1783 their withdrawal from its control, fearing that independence would lead to the collapse of its economy by removing its manufactures from American markets. Therefore, in July 1783, the British Order in Council decreed a Treaty with the colonies that allowed England to import slaves from its former U.S. colonies. The effect was a catastrophic 50% increase in British imports from North America between 1784 and 1790.[10] Meanwhile, the English had secured their ongoing importation of slaves from Africa at unbeatable prices. Between 1680 and the 1730s, the price of a slave on the African Slave Coast rose from £3 to £10, and between 1700 and 1790, England imported 10 billion cowry shells for use on the Coast and spent only £1 for 2000 shells.[11] Consequently, the African population taken to the British colonies in the West Indies grew drastically, as Williams notes:

> With free trade and the increasing demands of the sugar plantations, the volume of the British slave trade rose enormously. The Royal African Company, between 1680 and 1686, transported an annual average of 5,000 slaves. In the first nine years of free trade Bristol alone shipped 160,950 Negroes to the sugar plantations. In 1760, 146 ships sailed from British ports for Africa, with a capacity for 36,000 slaves; in 1771, the number of ships had increased to 190 and the number of slaves to 47,000. The importation into Jamaica from 1700 to 1786 was 610,000,

> and it has been estimated that the total import of slaves into all the British colonies between 1680 and 1786 was over two million.[12]

These statistics are among the most quoted estimates of the number of slaves that were brought to the United States and to the Caribbean from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. The disparity between the number of slaves who embarked from Africa and of those who disembarked in the Caribbean, the United States, and Brazil between 1580 and 1840 is shown in the following:

Caribbean

Slaves embarked from Africa: 4,084,565

Slaves disembarked in the Caribbean: 3,446,600

United States

Slaves embarked from Africa: 317,748

Slaves disembarked in the United States: 270,976

Brazil

Slaves embarked from Africa: 1,308,479

Slaves disembarked in Brazil: 1,165,366[13]

These numbers derive from Curtin, who argues that nearly 9.4 million Africans were enslaved in the Americas while about 175,000 were brought to Europe and the African Atlantic islands.[14] Corroborating Curtin's assessment, Postma adds that, "allowing for an estimated 12 to 15 percent mortality rate during the Atlantic crossing, approximately eleven million must have been shipped from Africa. Some scholars believed that Curtin's figures were too low, but more and more data were collected, new estimations deviated only slightly."[15] Inikori, one of Curtin's critics, argues "that they resulted from some unspecified bias on Curtin's part and that a more accurate count would be just over 15 million."[16] While he recognizes that scholars have contested the global figure of 15.4 million, Inikori admits that "the ultimate figure is unlikely to be less than 12 million or more than 20 million captives exported from Africa in the transatlantic slave trade."[17]

The divergence between Curtin's and Inikori's estimations epitomizes the differences in the interpretation of the history of the Atlantic trade. For example, according to David Henige, Louise-Marie Diop-MAËS argues that the population of Africa, on the eve of the slave trade, was as great as 270 million and that "such a dense population must have been predicated on agrotechnological capabilities on a par with those of Europe at the time." Diop believes that "the slave trade involved a loss on the order of 100,000,000 persons," double Inikori's estimate. She rejects the theory that disease and famine took the lives of more Africans than the slave trade did.[18] Disproving this theory, Diop argues that:

1) The evidence of the exported number of slaves and that of the multiple kidnappings, raids, contradict the notion that there were 4 or 5 inhabitants in Africa in every km^2.
2) The population density of Africa during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was at least 15 to 20 inhabitants per km^2 for a total population of 300 to 400 million people.

3) The idea of under-population must be abandoned, because even the population density of Europe was about 10 inhabitants per km^2 from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries.

4) In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, better climate and sophisticated pre-industrial economy supported the lives of 600 to 800 million Africans with an average population density of 30 to 40 inhabitants per km^2.[19]

Diop's thesis suggests that Africa was not undeveloped at the beginning of the Atlantic trade; its populations had demographical, climatological, and agricultural conditions that allowed them to develop in their own contexts. Recognizing this fact requires us to remove the notion of development from the capitalist framework in which it is commonly understood. Walter Rodney describes this capitalistic framework as the correlation of "economic development" with "factors of production" such as "land, population, capital, technology, specialization, and large-scale production." For Rodney, these factors are limited, because they do not mention "the exploitation of the majority which underlay all development prior to socialism," "the way that factors and relations of production combine to form a distinctive system or mode of production, varying from one historical epoch to another," and the manner in which imperialism is "a logical phase of capitalism."[20] Thus, assessing the level of Africa's development at the time of the trade requires us to subtract the inestimable consequences of slavery, imperialism, and colonization on its economic, social, and political development.

Economic Impacts

Africa did not play a secondary role in the Atlantic trade system. Africans dominated the local commerce of resin, orchil, gold, spices, cattle and people before the Europeans arrived, proving that Europe's political and commercial powers on the Atlantic coast were far less important than historians assume. Thornton comments on the high purchasing power of West Africans in 1650 when, in search of fancy and variety, 1.5 million Senegambians imported 1200 tons of iron for 300,000 households, and, in 1680, needed 300 tons of iron a year just for their households. Since the Portuguese brought little iron to Africa, where else but in Africa could they get it? In other words, Africans were economically self-sufficient and socially stable when Europeans came to trade with them. Thornton points out that "the Atlantic trade of Africa was not simply motivated by the filling of basic needs, and the propensity to import on the part of Africans was not simply a measure of their need or inefficiency, but instead, it was a measure of the extent of their domestic market."[21] Yet, within less than a century of commerce with the Western world, Africa lost both its economic autonomy and social peace, becoming a land where local states, chiefs, and warlords allied with insatiable European traders to oppress the vulnerable populations they captured, as Inikori argues:

> The European demand for more and more captives soon gave rise to the formation of groups of bandits all over western Africa. In places where the foundations already laid had not yet given rise to firmly established large political organization, the process was hijacked by these bandits. . . . Overall, the conditions created by the large-scale European demand for captives over a period of more than three hundred years severely retarded the long term process of socio-

economic development in western Africa.[22]

The disruption of Africa's political structures and socio-economic potentials was part of the stagnation of Africa' technological progress caused by the slave trade. As Rodney has shown, the trade affected Africa's economy by bringing about a loss of industry, skills, technological invention and production of Africans. On the one hand, Rodney argues that "what Africa experienced in the early centuries of the trade was precisely a loss of development *opportunity*," that is, the ability to achieve the self-sustaining growth and progress that its enslaved young population could have secured. On the other hand, he contends that the trade took away *opportunity* by disorienting the purpose of African traders: "In Africa, the trading groups could make no contribution to technological improvement because their role and preoccupation took their minds and energies away from production."[23] By contrast, the trade benefited the West by developing its technology with the importation of skilled Africans of all ages. This importation marked the beginning of Africa's brain drain that continues to hamper development in the continent.

The economic impact of the Atlantic slave trade on Africa varied according to time and geographic context. The Senegambia (including the Senegal and the Gambia rivers) was the first sub-Saharan region the Portuguese encountered in the 1460s. Here, the Portuguese settled in the Cabo Verde island and the James Island and intermarried with neighboring Africans who later became invaluable suppliers of local goods. For most of the fifteenth century, the Portuguese traded <u>in</u> gold from the Banbuk goldfields of the Gambia-Senegal hinterlands, hides from the savanna cattle herders, and other local products along with slaves who came both from the coast and from the savannas of the Upper Niger interior. Africans from the interior traded in Europeans products such as iron, cotton, mats, and textiles. In return, the Africans received products such as guns, liquor, beads, mirrors and some slaves. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Atlantic commerce started to have profound effects on the size of the African population that was rapidly decreasing. Between 1450 and 1850, in rough terms, over 11.5 million people were exported from the Atlantic coast of Africa, nearly 10 million of whom arrived in the New World.[24] The trade, according to Inikori, had substantial economic impact on the local African economies:

> It is generally accepted that the export centers on the African coast benefited economically and demographically from the trade. Where they succeeded in insulating themselves from the socio-political upheavals provoked by the trade in their hinterlands, these port towns (or city states) realized short-term benefits that have been equated with private gains. Market production of agricultural commodities to meet the limited needs of the slave ships for foodstuffs was stimulated, their populations expanded as the coastal traders retained some of the captives for their business needs and for the production of their subsistence products, and so on. These port towns or city-states typically grew as enclave economies.[25]

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Europeans brought retail goods to local African markets such as those in the Gorée Island (in Senegal), El Mina (in Ghana), and Alladah and Whydah (in the former Kingdom of Dahomey, today called Benin) and further inland. The Dutch created the Gorée slave house in 1776, many years after the English first built the James Fort in James Island in The Gambia in 1661. The El Mina Castle was a major commercial base established by the Portuguese in El Mina, Ghana, in 1482. The Dutch constructed the slave fort in Alladah early in the seventeenth century, while the French built the fort in Whydah in 1671. European goods--silks, linen handkerchiefs, Indian cloths, and china--became available not only to African dignitaries but also to the population at large, as long as they could afford the price. These goods became more abundant as the trade progressed and cheaper.[26] In this respect, Africa was not a passive participant in the Atlantic slave trade. Thornton criticizes French annalistes, such as Fernand Braudel and Pierre and Hugette Chaunu, who claimed that Africa did not make substantial contributions to the development of the Atlantic World. Refuting this Eurocentric assumption, Thornton shows that Africa's long-held maritime and international commercial culture along the Egyptian Nile, the Nile of Sudan, the Niger, and the Senegal River had given the continent autonomy, experience, and economic power that predated the Atlantic commerce and which later dictated its rules and regulations.[27] Klein confirms Thornton's argument:

> Long-term contact with the Islamic states in North Africa and the Near East, and even long-distance trade between Asia and East Africa prior to the arrival of the Europeans, meant that Africans could negotiate from a reasonable knowledge of international markets what items of European or even Asian production most appealed to them.

While it shows the sophisticated level of the African commercial system at the beginning of the trade, Klein's statement, like Thornton's, conjures up the troubling, yet inevitable, notion that some Africans used their genius to profit from a trade in human beings. The controversial idea that the African economy profited from the slave trade often centers on Klein's logical question: "If Africans were definitely not passive economic actors, what about the price they received for their slaves?"[28] Klein's query introduces the economic dimensions of the trade, which, when considered, show how the trade was ultimately detrimental to Africa no matter what pittance local African merchants received from it. It was Europeans, not Africans, who eventually benefited from the trade. Donald Wright provides astounding statistics on the financial gains made from African slaves in the pound sterling currency:

> In the 1680s one healthy adult slave cost an English buyer on average 5.47 [£], but that price rose gradually to 9.43 [£] in the 1720s, 10.05 [£] in the 1740s, 14.10 [£] in the 1760s, and 20.95 [£] in the 1780s. Profit is evident in prices for slaves in the American market. A healthy adult slave in Virginia in 1690 brought 15 [£], in 1760, 45 [£].[29]

Another factor that suggests that the Atlantic trade had negative impacts on Africa's economy was the prevalence of European and African raiding, capture, and torture of Africans from the coasts and the hinterlands. These disruptions prevented Africans who were not involved in the trade from doing business in peace and security without the threat of being kidnapped and sold to Europeans, as Inikori indicates: "It is difficult for many studying the slave trade to imagine any kind of economic growth under the conditions of violence and insecurity that the trade promoted."[30] It is equally impossible to presume that Africa's economy could have remained developed during a brutal period when it was increasingly based solely on the sale of slaves, as Davidson explains:

> After about 1650, with diminishing exceptions, African production-for-export became a monoculture in human beings. This can be seen to have suffocated economic growth in coastal and near-coastal Africa as surely as the extension of European production-for-export of consumer goods gave the maritime nations of Europe, at the same time, their long lead in economic development.[31]

The metaphor of "suffocation" is appropriate: the trade stifled the continent's technological and commercial potentials, preventing Africans from being on the same economic level—the playing field--where they would have been had the Europeans not exploited them so viciously and for so long. Had history unfolded differently, Africans would have realized that the trade was going to benefit Europeans only; they would have collectively and radically opposed the trade in all its forms.

The Political Impact

The political impact of the Atlantic trade is visible in the changes it wrought in African societies. It subverted the existing political balance in traditional African societies. Since slavery became a dominant source of revenue in the continent, personal wealth was thought to derive from one's ability to help capture and sell one's neighbors or criminals to strangers. As a consequence, the scenario Europeans created became a Darwinian universe in which the African turned into a wolf preying on other Africans. James Searing argues that in the 1770s, the King of the Geej Dynasty organized several grand pillages in the Kajoor and Bawol Kingdoms in north-western and central Senegal, kidnapping slaves who were later sold to the Europeans on the Gorée Island.[32] Likewise, the territories of the Coniagui and the Bassari, in eastern Senegal, were "preserves for slave-hunt" before they became the main suppliers of slaves for Europeans to the detriment of the Dioula, Mandjaque and other populations who settled by the rivers of the South.[33] These raids resulted from clashes among Africans, spurred by growing European competition in the continent. Martin Klein sees the increase in raids in Senegambia as the effect of the newly introduced cultivation of peanuts in the 1830s, and cites an Englishman's account: "As soon as each [Senegambian] has been able to purchase a horse and a gun, he considers himself a warrior, lives by plunder and works his field by the slaves he captures in his expeditions, and thinks it beneath his dignity to perform any work whatsoever, which is left to women and slaves."[34] This suggests the violence, chauvinism and classism that resulted from the new forms of social and economic relationships, centered on the combination of slave ownership and peanut production. Unlike slave ownership, peanut production was new to the continent. The Portuguese had introduced groundnuts to Africa in the sixteenth century in the Upper Guinea Coast. They probably learned to cultivate the vegetable from the South American Indians, since, as George Brooks argues, the plant existed there before Columbus traveled to this hemisphere. Yet it was from Africa that peanuts were later introduced into North America, by way of the West Indies, during the Atlantic trade.[35]

Before 1830, the cultivation of peanuts in Africa was minimal and mainly served to feed horses. Yet, as Brook suggests, “peanuts came to be grown in the drier areas of the Senegambia as a safeguard against failure of the millet harvest, and along the coast to the southwards as a subsidiary food crop of marginal, though increasing, consequence.” Between 1830 and 1840, the production of peanuts increased dramatically as the British, French, Portuguese and African chiefs competed in a lucrative market in which slaves and peasants paid the highest price for its cultivation and sale: “Spurred by European and Eurafrican coastal traders, African agriculturalists opportunistically responded to the new market opportunities with remarkable swiftness. Wherever peanut production spread, it occasioned far-reaching economic and social changes for the African societies concerned.”[36] A major impact of the introduction of this crop was the drop in millet production, formerly a staple food and commercial product. Focusing on the upper basin of the Senegal River, where the Galam Kingdom used to be, the Senegalese historian and political leader Abdoulaye Bathily argues that millet was a primary foodstuff for the inhabitants of the empire and a major part of the economic history of the region during the eighteenth century. In 1720, 1731, 1737, 1744, 1753, and 1754, both the inhabitants of Galam and those of the French ports in the territory suffered from millet shortages due to a series of raids from the Moors and from the Xaaso and the Bambuxu kingdoms that were rivaling Galam.[37] Part of this crisis derived from a climate change that resulted in poor agricultural yields and famine. While Bathily believes that it would be vain and false to claim that “natural calamities” such as drought, inundations, locust invasions, and epidemics are the determining factors that led to famine and food shortage in Senegambia during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Charles Becker argues that some natural factors affected the living conditions in that region. Yet, as Becker suggests, raids, wars, and migrations created more food crises and death in Senegambia than did climate factors,[38] arising primarily from the raids that the peanut rush encouraged among the Wolof states, which was so detrimental for the more reliable and nourishing cultivation of millet. As a result, the Wolof states became dependent on a staple that was mainly designed for western consumption. According to Brooks, Allan McPhee described the trade in peanuts and palm oil before the mid-nineteenth century as "a reflex action of the Industrial Revolution" and a consequence of the growing demand in industrializing countries for oils and fats of all kinds."[39]

Another predicament arising from peanut cultivation in Senegambia was the formation of a feudal class that depended on a lower class that produced or collected peanuts and Arabic gums. The French, who had promoted this systemic oppression in Senegambia, later sought to fight it by giving slaves who had escaped from the African empires the opportunity to declare their freedom once they reached their forts. The irony was that the planter-slave relationship that the French had promoted among the African chiefs was so solid that it became integrated even in societies that were fighting for the spread of Islam. Klein gives the example of Ma Ba Jaxoo (or Maba Diakhou Ba), the King of Saloum, in West-Central Senegal, who tried to convert the Serer people of Sine and encouraged the enslavement and execution of "pagans" or their exploitation as peanut farmers. When Maba died in 1867, his lieutenants "were primarily slave-raiders."[40] The continuous raids in Africa, after the abolition of slavery in the West, was due to the feudal and anarchic class relationships that the Atlantic trade had promoted. In this sense, as Searing points out, slavery among Wolof states was "linked to the rise of aristocratic power, but also contributed to a process of peasantization and thereby reinforced the social groups who came to oppose the aristocracy. The attempt of the aristocracy to create a regime based on slavery was never entirely successful, and slavery was only one form of dependency in a regime that also exhibited seigniorial features."[41]

In Senegambia too slave ownership had a political function that added to the African kings' dominance of the peasantry. It allowed kings to impose their hegemony on surrounding kings and provided them with ways to procure individuals to sell to Europeans. Discussing slave raiding in Kajoor, Senegal, in the 1770s, Searing writes:

> State violence served the interests of the monarchy in several ways. Slave sales paid for military expeditions by providing revenues to purchase guns and horses, which were needed to defend dynastic interests, to intimidate villagers enough to ensure tribute payments, and to keep foreign military predators at bay. If slave raids eliminated or weakened independent populations who refused to pay tribute, they also contributed to the state's broader effort to tax the population. . . . In spite of its brutality, the state was weak and used naked force to support its authority.[42]

This suggests that slave raiding did not evolve out of the Kajoor chiefs' reckless use of force, but from their calculated strategy to resist domination and strengthen their position in a highly unstable and economically competitive region. Thus, it resulted from new traumatic human and economic relations imposed by the slave trade as much as from differentiations between Africans on grounds of caste, class, or creed.

Another negative impact the Atlantic trade had on the political life of Africans was the formation of a pseudo-feudal class which Europeans created in major slave islands after their intermarriage with some Africans. In the four Senegalese regions, then called "les quatres communes," including Gorée, Dakar, Rufisque and Saint-Louis, a new Afro-French class, the "métisses" or "mulâtres" emerged at the top of a local political hierarchy that included local mayors, subordinates and slave soldiers. This hierarchy of corrupt individuals facilitated the slave and economic policy of the French in the country.[43] The stratum was maintained by an Afro-French upper class that organized the capture, stockage and sale of slaves. According to Inikori, historians such as Claude Meillassoux, Martin Klein, and Paul Lovejoy have argued that such small-sized geographic areas, dominated by corrupt political and military aristocracies, led to the creations of African societies that were inimical to capitalist development. Inikori also notes the emergence, during the nineteenth century, of a slave warrior class in Senegal, the "Ceddo," which brought about such widespread insecurity and exploitation that even the Muslim leadership in West and East Africa could not subdue: "This Islamic alternative, intended to contain the disruptive effects of the Atlantic trade, was soon caught up in the vicious circle of the forces it sought to control and ended up depending on slaving for survival."[44] This allows us to introduce Lovejoy's transformation thesis, which holds that warfare, political fragmentation, and dependency became endemic in Africa as a result of the massive scale of the slave trade, forced upon Africans by commercial and military pressures:

> The external demand for slaves and the rivalry between African states directly affected the spread of slavery, for both caused tensions that led to the enslavement of people. The economy became dependent upon exports to satisfy the personal

> desires of merchants and rulers and to provide many parts of Africa with a money supply, textiles, firearms, and other goods that were essential to the economy and political rule. The fragmented political structure, reinforced by military purchases and the need to acquire slaves to finance imports, was related to a general state of insecurity that facilitated enslavement. These two conditions, the slave market and institutionalized enslavement, set the stage for the extension of slavery in Africa.[45]

Lovejoy illustrates this process with the examples of the Songhay, Borno and Kongo empires in which increasing interest in slave raids and trade and continuous political fragmentation led to collapse. Before the nineteenth century, Songhay was the largest state in Africa, yet in 1591, a Moroccan army crossed the Sahara and invaded it. The empire was so decentralized that it was unable to consolidate political power to resist the invasion. As a result of its vulnerability, the Songhay empire fell into a state of confusion and political instability. A similar downfall occurred in the state of Borno, in the sub-Saharan region, which was actively engaged in slave raiding to finance its trade with the Ottoman Empire in North Africa. Borno hoped that this alliance would grant it legitimate hegemony south of the Sahara. Borno's policy produced adverse effects such as increasing slave raiding and limiting conversion to Islam. Along the West Coast, rivalries between the Kongo, Oyo, the Gold Coast, and Guinea Shores brought about increasing political disintegration and small-scale states: "Between 1650 and 1750, two larger states emerged in the coastal zone: Oyo after 1650 and Asante after 1700, but they were never very large."[46] The root cause of the downfall of these states was the expansion of empire through war and slavery, instigated by the European Atlantic trade.

Social Impacts

The question of the social impact of the Atlantic trade on Africa is difficult to tackle because it is here that intense emotions and the weight of collective memory press most heavily. Contemporary Africans are constantly told that the present state of their societies derives from their "ugly" and "savage" participation in the slave trade. While some historians have approached the matter objectively, others have merely reiterated the myth of African savagery. Curtin explains the historical misconceptions that underlie the denigration of Africa:

> Some historians have been too willing to accept, and to interweave into their own specific research, some of the assumptions earlier Europeans had made about Africa--usually without research. Among these was the belief that African economies must have been static. It follows from the myth of a savage, and it led to the assumption of African weakness and perhaps inherent inferiority.[47]

These misconceptions are reinforced by stereotypes that go so far as to question the very humanity of Africans. Oliver Ransford develops the eugenicist theory that "the trade deprived the continent of its most valuable genes. As a result for generations Negro Africa lay dazed, helpless, and exhausted." He continues: "As a legacy to their descendants they [Africans] left no benefits or improvements but merely a traditional belief that it was cleverer to get rich quickly than to work hard; today easy money is still regarded with approval on the coast." But the greatest insult is in the following:

> The man-hunt which raged through Africa bred and sustained inter-tribal hostility, and so contributed to the present-day instability of the continent's internal relationships. The wars fomented by slavers also unmasked the demon of brutality which lurks in the background of the Negro soul no less than it haunts the white men's; for centuries it knew no moral censor and burst out of control. The Africans' dark obsession with death and evil spirits, their grotesque and awful superstitions, the macabre humour and relish with which they explore the depths of other people's fears and torments, were all now released and given full rein. Even today, one sometimes senses among Africans a feeling that they regard such evil passions as meritorious and healing, and in this context we may recall the screaming theme of the modern black militants whose flavours was so clearly projected by Franz Fanon when he preached that Violence is a cleansing force.[48]

Clearly, Ransford is misinformed; the present political and social problems that confront Africa have nothing to do with any biological, psychological, behavioral, or spiritual characteristics or values of Africans. The roots of the predicament facing Africa are in the structural, economic, and political disruptions that the continent inherited from the European slavers and colonizers. African societies have difficulty in advancing their economic development because the constitutions that they inherited from European powers do not reflect the structural realities of their societies. Instead of understanding Africa's problems in the context of its history, Ransford makes the fatal mistake of confusing colonization with precolonization. The militant theme of violence that Fanon preached was an intellectual commitment that sought to rid Africa of colonial exploitation, not to subject her to it. Fanon never celebrated violence of Africans against Africans.

However, there is no doubt that the slave trade created tremendous social problems in Africa, and that these problems have drastic effects on its current realities. Surely, the demography of Africa was greatly affected by the unprecedented transportation of African populations to foreign lands. As Klein points out:

> It is argued that the population of western Africa actually declined by 2 million between 1700 and 1850. The estimate is that the western African population declined from a projected 25 million to 23 million in this 150-year period. Had the population grown at a conservative 0.3 percent annum in the same period, it would have reached 39.3 million in 1850.[49]

In addition, as shown earlier, a dominant factor in the enslavement of Africans was the participation of some Africans in the trade. In their response to European demands, some Africans created social systems of production that proved to be beneficial to Whites and detrimental to Blacks. Claude Meillassoux shows that these systems were founded on a constant and permanent transfer of human beings within a four-dimensional organic and economic space:

> - the societies within which slaves were captured, which represent the milieu in which they were produced, demographically and economically;

- the aristocratic slave-owning societies which made use of a military apparatus to tear these human beings from the milieu in which they were produced and reproduced;
- the merchant societies which controlled the commercial apparatus necessary for the sale of captives;
- the merchant societies which were consumers of slaves.[50]

The irony is that these social networks, traditionally based on legality and respect toward the individual domestic slave, later became tyrannical systems of kidnapping vulnerable individuals during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By abducting and selling Africans to Europeans, the African social networks, supported by African political leaders, became agents of tyranny and social insecurity against Africans. This sense of insecurity finds expression in Olaudah Equiano's memory from his childhood in Benin (Nigeria):

> One day, when all our people were gone out to their works as usual, and only I and my dear sister were left to mind the house, two men and a woman got over our walls, and in a moment seized us both, and, without giving us time to cry out, or make resistance, they stopped our mouths, and ran off with us into the nearest wood.[51]

Another social effect of the trade was the widening gap between social classes. Inikori has argued that the trade produced islands of growth and prosperity that contrasted sharply with the misery and poverty of the raided populations.[52] Once slave ownership became the basis of economic success, it became quite impossible for poor Africans to achieve success. Only the brave and corrupted individuals such as “the slave warriors” could profit from it. For example, “the dynastic factions in the principal African states of the agricultural regions south of the Senegal River--Kajoor, Bawol, Waalo--became dependent on slave warriors for the power they exercised.”[53]

The sexual demography of the continent also changed as a result of the trade. By comparing the percentage of male and female slaves landed in the West Indies between 1781 and 1798, Inikori found that “the number of females annually exported was of a magnitude that must have drastically reduced the region’s capacity.”[54] Strong evidence supports Inikori’s thesis. Claire C. Robertson and Martin A. Klein have shown that in Monbassa and in the Upper Zaire, female slaves used to do as much work as free women. They grew indigo, made dye and helped their mistresses with dyeing cloth.[55] When the trade took most of the men away, women slaves were asked to take their jobs. Thornton cites Lemos Coelho, a Portuguese traveler, on the roles of slave women on the Bissago Islands in the late seventeenth century: “They are the ones who work the fields, and plant the crops, and the houses in which they live, even though small, are clean and bright, and despite all this work they still go down to the sea each day to catch shellfish.” [56] Thornton explains that, “because of the established institution of polygamy, the almost undiminished numbers of women were able to counterbalance some of the losses to the slave trade by continued reproduction.”[57] Thornton points to the important role of keepers of their communities that African women played not just in the continent but also in the Western world, where many of them had been enslaved with African men and children whose full stories remain to be told.

Conclusion

The Atlantic slave trade had drastic impacts on African societies. Initially conceived by both Europeans and Africans as a small-scale enterprise for the exchange of goods and a few slaves, it later became a ruthless and demonic machine that drained Africa's human and economic resources. By massively responding to Europe's growing demand for slaves, African societies started up a commercial process that progressively hampered their economic, political and social developments. The trade inflated Africa's economy by reducing it to a monoculture based on the sale of human beings. As a result, the once strong and developed African states lost their stability and became fragmented by internal and external conflicts that still affect the continent today. Surely, the current economic and social problems that plague contemporary Africa have their roots in the Atlantic trade. The unprecedented violence among African societies, ethnic groups and states, and the subversion of social and gender roles which resulted from such anarchy would never have taken place had the Atlantic trade, followed by imperialism and colonialism, not taken root in Africa. What therefore needs to be taken into account in the study of the Atlantic slave trade is the force of these historical circumstances and not the so-called "evil" nature of the African.

Kent State University, Kent, OH 44242

Email: bmbaye@kent.edu

Notes

[1] Samir Amin, “Underdevelopment and Dependence in Black Africa: Origins and Contemporary Forms,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 10.4 (December 1972): 505.

[2] Ivan Van Sertima, “Black History: African Civilization Is a Shattered Diamond,” *USA Today*, 23 February 1989, 09A.

[3] Johannes Postma, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: Greenwood Guides to Historic Events, 1500-1900* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003), 5.

[4] Stephen Behrendt, “The Transatlantic Slave Trade,” *Microsoft® Encarta® Africana* CD ROM. Microsoft Corporation, 1999.

[5] For a discussion of the differences between European and African concepts of slavery, see Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff, “African ‘Slavery’ as an Institution of Marginality,” in *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977), 3-81; and Wyatt MacGaffey, “Economic and Social Dimensions of Kongo Slavery,” in *Slavery in Africa*, 235-57.

[6] For a discussion of instances of flexibility within Arab forms of slavery, see J. O. Hunwick, “African Slaves in the Mediterranean World: A Neglected Aspect of the African Diaspora,” in *Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora* (Washington D.C.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 289-323; Pekka Masonen, “Trans-Saharan Trade and the West African Discovery of the Mediterranean,” in *Ethnic Encounter and Culture Change*, ed. M’hammed Sabour and Knut S. Vikør (London: C. Hurst & Co Ltd, 1997), 116-42.

[7] Basil Davidson, *The African Slave Trade: Pre-colonial History, 1450-1850* (Boston: Brown and Company, 1961), 39.

[8] Philip D. Curtin, *Economic Change in Precolonial Africa: Senegambia in the Era of the Slave Trade* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1975), 309. See also J. Suret-Canale, "La Sénégambie a l'ère de la traite," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 11.1 (1977): 126.

[9] Joseph E. Inikori, "Measuring the Atlantic Slave Trade: An Assessment of Curtin and Ansey," *Journal of African History* 17.2 (1976): 205-6.

[10] Eric Eustace Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944; New York: Capricorn Books, 1966), 124.

[11] In addition to these figures, Herbert Klein argues that between 1680 and 1760, the price of a slave in Africa increased from 1000 shells to 8000 shells. Herbert S. Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 110, 113, 114.

[12] Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, 32-33.

[13] *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-ROM* (1999).

[14] Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), 268.

[15] Postma, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 35.

[16] Inikori, "Measuring the Atlantic Slave Trade," 197-223; Joseph E. Inikori and Stanley Engerman, "Introduction: Gainers and Loosers," in *The Atlantic Slave Trade: Effects on Economies, Societies, and Peoples in Africa, the Americas, and Europe,* ed. Joseph E. Inikori and Stanley Engerman (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992): 5-6; Postma, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 35-36; Mohamed Mbodj and Charles Becker, "A Propos de l'histoire et des populations de l'Afrique Noire: Propositions Pour de Nouvelles Approches," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 23.1 (1989): 42-43.

[17] Inikori and Engerman, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 6.

[18] David Henige criticizes both Diop and Inikori for their estimates: "Conversely, taking advantage of the opportunity to base himself on actual evidence, [Joseph] Miller argues that, for West Central Africa at least, drought, famine, and disease were, in aggregate, more effective constraints on population growth than the slave trade. It does appear that from the sixteenth century West Africa became more humid, which should have (and maybe did) reduce the probability of frequent and severe droughts and famines. But any such blessing was not likely to have been unmixed since higher levels of humidity frequently bring with them a higher incidence of such diseases as malaria and plague." David Henige, "Measuring the Immeasurable: The Atlantic Slave Trade, West African Population and the Pyrrhonian Critic," *The Journal of African History* 27.2 (1986): 307-308.

[19] Louise Marie DIOP-MAES, *Afrique noire démographie, sol et histoire* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1996), 290-99, my translation.

[20] Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Washington, D.C: Howard University Press, 1982), 13.

[21] John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1680* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 47, 45.

[22] Joseph E. Inikori, "Africa and the Transatlantic Slave Trade," in *Volume I: African History before 1885*, ed. Toyin Falola (Durham, NC: North Carolina Academic Press, 2000), 393-94.

[23] Rodney, How Europe Underdeveloped Africa, 105-6.

[24] Herbert Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 58, 59.

[25] Inikori, The Atlantic Slave Trade, 2.

[26] Robin Law, *The Slave Coast of West Africa, 1550-1750: The Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on an African Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 220.

[27] Thornton, *Africa and Africans*, 7.

[28] Herbert Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 107.

[29] Donald R. Wright, *African Americans in the Colonial Era*: *From African Origins through the American Revolution* (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1990), 36-37.

[30] Inokori, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 39.

[31] Davidson, *The African Slave Trade*, 278.

[32] James F. Searing, *West African Slavery and Atlantic Commerce: The Senegal River Valley, 1700-1860* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 35.

[33] Boubacar Barry, *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 436.

[34] Martin A. Klein, *Slavery and Colonial Rule in French West Africa* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 68-69.

[35] Mary Tolford Wilson, "Peaceful Integration: The Owner's Adoption of His Slaves' Food," *The Journal of Negro History* 49.2 (April 1964): 121-22.

[36] George E. Brooks, "Peanuts and Colonialism: Consequences of the Commercialization of Peanuts in West Africa, 1830-70," *The Journal of African History* 16.1 (1975): 30, 32.

[37] Abdoulaye Bathily, "La Traite Atlantique des Esclaves et ses Effets Economiques et Sociaux en Afrique: La Cas du Galam, Royaume de l'Hinterland Sénégambien au Dix-huitième Siècle, Special Issue in Honour of J. D. Fage, *The Journal of African History* 27.2 (1986): 285.

[38] Charles Becker, "Conditions écologiques, crises de subsistance et histoire de la population à l'époque de la traite des esclaves en Sénégambie (17 e -18 e siècle)," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 20.3 ( ): 359-60; 368.

[39] Brooks, "Peanuts and Colonialism," 29.

[40] Martin Klein, *Slavery and Colonial Rule*, 68-69.

[41] James F. Searing, "Aristocrats, Slaves, and Peasants: Power and Dependency in the Wolof States, 1700-1850," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 21.3 (1988): 475.

[42] Searing, *West African Slavery*, 35.

[43] Curtin, *Economic Change in Precolonial Africa*, 115-16.

[44] Inikori, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 3, 4.

[45] Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 108-9; 66-67.

[46] *Ibid*., 67.

[47] Curtin, *Economic Change in Precolonial Africa*, 310.

[48] Oliver Ransford, *The Slave Trade: The Story of the Transatlantic Slavery* (London: Fakenham and Reading, 1971), 73, 74.

[49] Herbert Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 127.

[50] Claude Meillassoux, *The Anthropology of Slavery: The Womb of Iron and Gold* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 72.

[51] Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano,* ed. Robert J. Allison (New York: Bedford Press, 1995), 47.

[52] Inikori, "Africa in World History: The Export Slave Trade from Africa and the Emergence of the Atlantic Economic Order," in *General History of Africa. V: Africa from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century*, ed. B. A. Ogot (California: Heinemann, 1992), 40.

[53] Joseph C. Miller, review of *West African Slavery and Atlantic Commerce: The Senegal River Valley, 1700-1860*, by James Searing, *The American Historical Review* 100.1 (February 1995): 1

[54] Inikori, "Africa in World History," 104.

[55] Claire C. Robertson and Martin A. Klein, "Women's Importance in African Slave Systems," in *Women and Slavery in Africa*, ed. Claire C. Roberton and Martin A. Klein (Portsmouth, NH : Heinemann, 1997), 15-16.

[56] John Thornton, "Sexual Demography: The Impact of the Slave Trade on Family Structure," in *Women and Slavery in Africa*, ed. Claire C. Robertson and Martin A. Klein (Portsmouth, NH : Heinemann, 1997): 44.

[57] *Ibid*., 39-40.