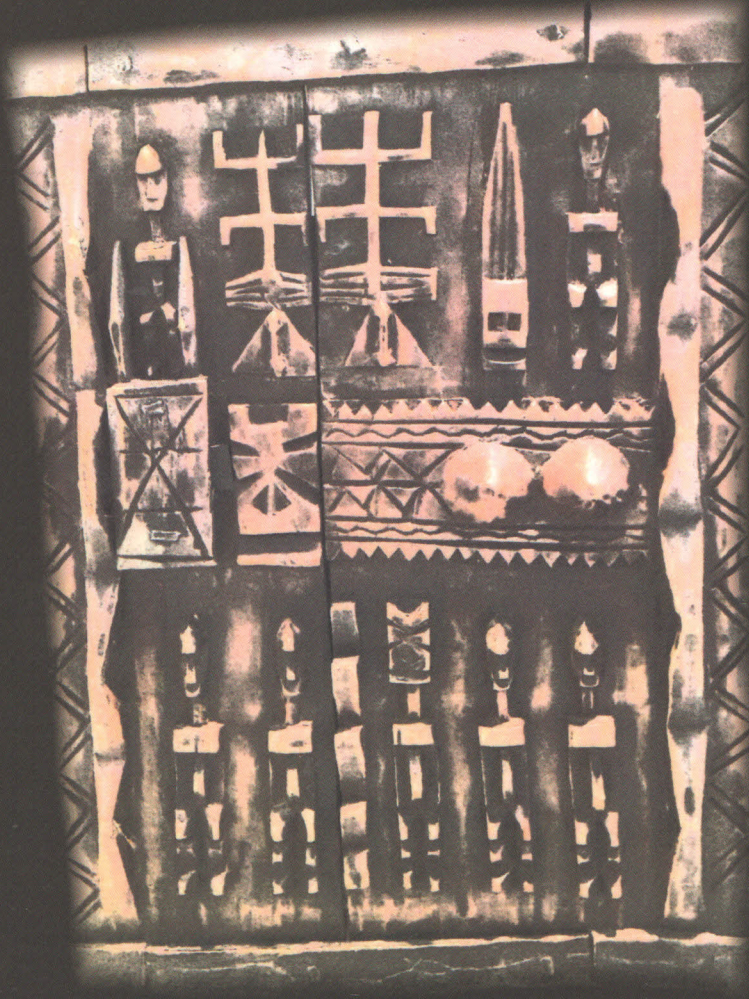


The African Conundrum

*Rethinking the Trajectories of Historical, Cultural,
Philosophical and Developmental Experiences of Africa*



Edited by

**Munyaradzi Mawere, Tapuwa R.
Mubaya and Jowere Mukusha**

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The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade from the 15th -19th Centuries: A Major Setback to the Development of the Indigenous Economy of the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria

Odeigah, Theresa Nfam

Introduction

The Trans-Atlantic slave trade began in the 15th century during the period of the Portuguese exploration of the coast of West Africa. This illicit trade became lucrative such that it spread to the other parts of Africa including Nigeria. The Slave trade was a popular business among the Portuguese, because it was the Portuguese who were first granted the opportunity to have a licence by their king to purchase other human beings - slaves. The other major slave trading countries, ordered by trade volume, were Britain, France, Spain and the Dutch. In the 16th century, the demand for labour increased as a result of the establishment of more plantations, and also the discovery of America by the Spanish explorers like Christopher Columbus and Leif Eriksson, during their four voyages to the region between 1492 and 1502. This paved the way for massive influx of the Western Europeans in to the region (Enochs, 2016). That was how it was discovered that the “new” land was fertile and could be profitable for European agricultural pursuits (The Niger Delta, 2016).

The Dutch and the English found their way to the Caribbean and the West Indies and started the development of huge plantations, which required a lot of extra labour to cultivate and make profits for themselves. The local Red Indians were perceived inadequate for the labour required in their plantations, because they were few. Besides, they could not muster the physical strength and stamina required for the job. Because of these factors, the Europeans intensified their efforts in the slave trade business, mainly from Africa. For Britain

and France, the settlements in North America by migrants from Europe made them demand for more slaves to assist in the cultivation and maintenance of the sugar plantations among several other plantations (Wrigley, 1971). Most of the slaves that were forcibly taken from Nigeria were from the Niger Delta Region (Paul and Toyin, 2003).

The Trans-Atlantic slave trade has been described as the greatest human deportation in the history of the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria and indeed in Africa as a whole. From time immemorial, the Niger Delta Region with its abundant natural resources and great economic potentials had sustained the indigenous peoples even before the arrival of the Europeans (Naana and Paul, 2008). With the advent of slave trade, the region was seen as a cheap source of slaves to the Europeans, firstly, because of the region's early contact with the Portuguese, and secondly, because of the enormous economic potentials of the region. In 1481 emissaries from the king of Portugal visited the court of the Oba of Benin in exchanging correspondences and after which in 1504 and 1550 the Portuguese established a diplomatic and trade relations with Oba Esigie of Benin. From thence, the Portuguese maintained a cordial relationship with the Oba of Benin. It became imperative for a cordial relationship because of their economic motive. It was from the Niger Delta Region that the Portuguese seamen found a sea-route to India. This was an easy route for the European Merchants to convey slaves from the Niger Delta Region to Europe (Paul and Toyin 2003).

The negative effects of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade in Nigeria included among others, the collapse of the thriving Niger Delta indigenous economy. As already highlighted, the Niger Delta Region was known for its enormous agricultural productivity that attracted traders from far and near (Boahen, 1992). Historical and ethnographic evidence abound that show that there was intensive and massive production of several agricultural products in the Niger Delta Region even before the coming contact of Africa with European (Onwubiko, 1967). The indigenous economy flourished at that time and the people were involved in palm oil production, fishing, trading, and hunting. Some indigenous technologies like gold smiting and salt production also flourished. The Trans-Atlantic slave

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trade was considered by the indigenous people as a major setback to the economy and development of the area, as it caused enormous depopulation of the region as well as massive economic loss that affected negatively, the livelihood of the indigenous people. It is this factor among others that truncated the indigenous Niger Delta economy (Akpofure, 1962).

The indigenous economy was not a mono-economy as we are generally made to believe, but colonial exploitation and several other inhuman activities shattered the blooming that would have enabled the full realisation of the great economic potentials of the Niger Delta Region.

That said, this chapter examines the extent of the damage to the indigenous economy of the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria by the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. The chapter adopts a historic-structural and multi-disciplinary approaches to this problem (Tidy and Leeming, 1981).

Sources of Slaves in the Niger Delta Region

Before the advent of the Portuguese, the Niger Delta Chiefs were into what was called indigenous slavery. Indigenous slavery is a situation whereby the chiefs or the rich people in the communities "purchased" individuals who worked for them and also ran errands for them. It should be noted that a personality like King Jaja of Opobo, who later became a merchant prince and the founder of Opobo city in the present Rivers state of Nigeria was also a slave that was sold in Bonny at the age of twelve (Cookey, 1974). This entails that slave trade was not a new business to the people of the Niger Delta Region. It became a new business, however, when the slaves were taken outside the African continent. The Europeans that infiltrated the Niger Delta Region for the purpose of buying slaves were received by the Oba of Benin and other. Initially the Europeans were also friendly with the influential Chiefs in the region as the trading relationship developed within the region (Obong, 2016). The Portuguese soldiers helped the people of the Benin kingdom to fight wars with their neighbours using guns, guns power and other sophisticated weapons against their neighbours. The Oba of Benin

was impressed with such assistance and this was the main reason for offering Portuguese, slaves and ivory among other things as gifts. The discovery of the West Indies and America by Spaniards in 1492 increased the demand for more slaves to assist in working at the various sugar plantations that were established during the time. The increased demand for labour as a result of the new sugar plantations was met by the increase in the number of slaves acquired by the European slave merchants (Hakeemm, 2001).

The methods that the Niger Delta chiefs used in acquiring slaves even before the advent of the Europeans were the same methods and logistics the Portuguese used to acquire slaves that were eventually taken to Europe, but the Portuguese slave merchants were more aggressive and business-like in getting the slaves. It was recorded that an Englishman by the name John Lock kidnapped five West Africans in 1554 (Stride and Ifeka, 1971). The slave trade business was lucrative in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria, which was the reason the Gwatto depot became a major and also an important depot in the area. This depot was a centre where slaves were kept for their final departure to Europe. The exportation of slaves and other important items like cowries and shells which were used as currencies were all taken away through this depot from the Niger Delta Region. In the process of the Portuguese trading with the Niger delta people, their economic monopoly was broken in the sixteen century by other European countries coming into the slave business (Olikeze, 2016). Other European countries saw the Niger Delta and indeed Africa as major suppliers of slaves and cheap labour, which was the main reason France, the Dutch and many others countries came into the business. The European slave merchants set up trading posts along the coast of West Africa for easy evacuation of slaves. Some of these slaves were however, captured and taken through the Sahara Desert to the Mediterranean (Anene and Brown, 1966).

Kidnapping

In the Niger Delta Region, one of the sources and methods of acquiring slaves included kidnapping. In places like Calabar, the European merchants were fond of kidnapping people and taking

them into slavery. Kidnapping occurred through the lonely bush paths to the farms and even on the lonely paths to the streams. People who could not walk in groups were most times fall prey in the hands of the European slave merchants or even the indigenous slave's traders (Akin, 1975). It should be noted that the Europeans did not force the slave trade business on the indigenous people, but the local Chiefs gave the Europeans the opportunity and support to trade with them, because of the various valued gifts they received from the Europeans (Cosmas, 2016). Another method of acquiring slaves in the Niger Delta Region was directly through the chiefs, who were already into domestic slave trade business before the coming of the Europeans. Initially, the chiefs were the only people with the power to buy slaves. The slaves that were sold to the chiefs were labelled as criminals or murderers or those who had committed various atrocities in the land (Domingo, 2016). Warri Town was another big centre that responded to the stimulus of slave trade with a sea port. This sea port was believed to have been founded and financed by Ginuwa, the son of the King (*Oba*) of Benin. Because of the sea port in Warri, Warri became a powerful kingdom because of slave trade. Ginuwa was recorded to have exported slaves in exchange of a wide range of goods to Europe (Lolomari, 2016).

Inter-Tribal Wars

Inter-tribal wars were another major source of acquiring slaves. In the Niger Delta Region, during the pre-colonial and colonial periods, there were always communal conflicts and wars with neighbouring towns and villages. Those conflicts and wars were seen as part of the struggle for the survival of the people and their territories. The wars that were fought and the various conflicts during the era of the slave trade aided the destruction of property and lives in the Niger Delta Region. The wars and conflicts were aided and orchestrated by the Europeans who then used their guns and higher fire power to capture slaves (Umukoro, 2016). This group of slaves were of individuals who were captured during the conflicts and wars. Some other people who were captured as slaves were those who were missing because they could no longer locate their towns and

communities in the confusion following the conflicts. The local chiefs used this opportunity too in capturing innocent people as slaves because slave trade was a lucrative business among the chiefs. The Europeans provided guns and other dangerous weapons, which gave the people more impetus and capacity to fight with their neighbours and this process therefore offered the slave merchants the opportunity to kidnap and capture more of the people. This was a dangerous vicious cycle of events orchestrated by the Europeans that yielded their desired result of having a lot more slaves from the Niger Delta Region (Ekpen, 2016).

The European merchants were only interested in people who were strong able-bodied, marketable and not the weak or sick ones. Slaves were gotten from the interior parts of the Niger Delta Region to the coastal areas where the European merchants took them across Europe. No compensation was given to families of the victims of the kidnapped slaves, that is why till today the issue of lack of reparations to Africa remains vexatious to Africans. Places like Calabar, Okrika, Bonny and Benin were all major markets for slaves. The Europeans only compensated the chiefs with alcoholic drinks, guns, gun powers, textiles and calico among others. These were all finished goods brought from Europe (Ekaette, 2016). The relationship between the Niger Delta Region with the Portuguese merchants was purely economic and exploitation.

The Impact of Slave Trade on the Economy of the Niger Delta Region

The Trans-Atlantic slave trade had far reaching consequences on the economy of the Niger Delta Region. The slaves that were sold had profound economic prospect in the region and the Europeans merchants undermine the region development. The region lost lots of its young and able-bodied population. Walter Rodney in his book *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* emphasised the subjugation, oppression and oppression of the Europe over Africans. The trans-Atlantic slave trade increased, encouraged and developed the capacity for inter-tribal wars and conflicts (Akpofure, 1962). Lives were lost during the conflicts and people were displaced and some were also

conflicts. The local innocent people as well as the chiefs. Dangerous weapons, which they used to fight with their slaves, the slave merchants took from the people. This was encouraged by the Europeans who wanted more slaves from the

interested in people who were weak or sick ones. In the Niger Delta Region, slave merchants took them across the villages of the victims of the lack of reparations. Places like Calabar, Okrika, and others were used for slaves. The Europeans brought guns, gun powers, and other finished goods. The relationship between the slave merchants was purely

Economy of the Niger Delta

reaching consequences on the region. The slaves that were sold in the region and the Europeans benefited. The region lost lots. Walter Rodney in his book emphasised the subjugation of the region over Africans. The trans-Atlantic slave trade developed the capacity of the region (Rodney, 1962). Lives were lost and some were also

taken away as slaves. These inter-tribal wars were frequent because most of the times the communities were assisted in very subtle ways by the slave merchants who kidnapped people from neighbouring communities during the resulting confusion (Effiong, 2016). This brought a setback to the economic activities of the indigenous people. Most of the local chiefs got slaves through inter-tribal wars and this encouraged more raids against their neighbours. Some of the slaves that were taken across to Europe were already into advanced canoe building, rare crafts and dearth of these skills and services negatively affected the indigenous economy. Some of those slaves left their crops and businesses unceremoniously, terminating all these economic plans and their potentials (Hakeem, 2001).

Other spheres of life that were seriously affected by slave trade were the political, social and cultural as of the life of the Niger Delta people. The Ijaws in the Niger Delta Region were friendly and open to the Europeans. They gave the Europeans land to establish trading posts and these trading posts eventually became centre points for European penetration into the interior. The Trans-Atlantic slave trade destroyed the communal life and co-operation that had hitherto existed among the communities. Suspicion, distrust and acrimony became the characteristic of the politics and social life of the people of the Niger Delta Region (Obong, 2016). The devastation of the villages through kidnapping of people affected farms, livestock and other economic activities in the Niger Delta Region. It can be reasonably argued that the criminality and banditry that are very rampant in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria today have their roots in the negative experiences of the people during the slave trade era in the region (Etuk, 2016).

Economic diversification

The Niger Delta Region has always been recognised as a region endowed with immense economic and natural resources even before the coming of the Europeans. The diversification of the indigenous economy had long existed and the economy flourished in spite of the pre-colonial slave trade carried out by a few greedy local Chiefs from the Niger Delta. Domestic slave trade was a lucrative business among

the people of the Niger Delta Region. Even at that, it did not affect the economy negatively or cause displacement of the people of the Niger Delta Region, because it was a recognised institution at that time. It was only the chiefs and the wealthy men at that time who could afford to acquire slaves (Isichie, 2016). The slaves, also known as *Osu* in the local indigenous language, were over worked and poorly fed but this cannot be compared to the maltreatment the European merchants meted out to the slaves that were taken across the Atlantic. The advent of the Europeans definitely disrupted the commercial transactions between communities since most men and women that were enterprising in nature were taken as slaves to Europe. It also resulted in a diversified local economy for the reason that, the farm and agricultural produce were different as long as it was mainly the women who were into agriculture after the men were taken into slavery. The indigenous people were into farming, fishing, smiting, canoe, building, palm oil production and trading among others (Mafiana, 2016).

Depopulation

No one can dispute the danger and harm that was brought to bear on the people of the Niger Delta Region by the Europeans during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade period. It will not be easy to estimate the total number of people taken away from the Niger Delta Region as slaves to the "new world" This demographic evacuation of the population of the people was significant and it greatly endangered the society (Olikeze, 2016). Some scholars have claimed that almost over 20,000 people were taken from Bonny alone. Others like Dike and Fage had conservatively estimated figures that are said not to be correct. This is because many slaves died in transit and, many others were abandoned that could have also died (Anene, 1966). It is therefore difficult to really estimate the number of slave taken to Europe from the Niger Delta Region, the net result of all this could not but be catastrophic (Njoku, 2001). The Niger Delta region as a coastal area suffered greatly the impact of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade more than any other region of Nigeria because of its closeness to the coast and it was the first area to come in contact with the

Europeans. The choice of slaves was only naturally restricted to the strong able-bodied women and men, the physically defected people were rejected by the slave merchants. Places like Nembe, Calabar, Kalabari and Brass suffered greatly in the hands of the slave merchants as a result of the adoption of the "House Rule" in the slave trading communities. The "House rule" was a place where slaves from different parts of the Niger Delta were brought and kept with other slaves before being evacuated (Abu, 1964).

Dehumanisation

Another negative impact of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade on the indigenous people was the dehumanising effects of slavery on the slave families. Slaves were taken forcefully by the slave "masters" against their will and slaves were separated from their families. Most of the men were bread winners of their families. According to Bisong slaves were also seen as inferior to the Europeans and were treated as domestic slaves. Slaves were also humiliated, maltreated and over-worked in the European plantations (Bisong, 20016). Slaves were thrown overboard on the high seas from the ships in the process of ferrying them across the Trans-Atlantic and a lot of them drowned in the process (Basil, 1965). The women who were also captured in slavery were most times sexually molested by the male officers specially the captains and the male crew of the ships and some of the female slaves were raped by their male captors. Slaves that were weak and sick were dumped and abandoned in unknown destinations. The slaves were kept under very harsh conditions and their complaints were not addressed by the slave masters (Stride and Ifeka, 1971). This made life very difficult for the slaves both physically and psychologically. Slaves were mismanaged, shackled with chains and some were short by the slave masters. It is also pertinent to note that the dehumanisation of slaves went as far as in the West Indies where these slaves were sold to the European farmers who disfigured them and gave them terrible marks of identification on the body (Clepperton, 1966).

Insecurity

Insecurity in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade was the order of the day. Armed robbery, kidnapping and other forms of attacks created fear in the hearts of the indigenous people and it also truncated the economy of the Niger Delta people. The people could no longer go to farm or engage in fishing and other businesses because of fear of being kidnapped. People were afraid to move on their own to transact business with their neighbours and this hindered the process of development in the region. Insecurity was not restricted to certain areas alone, virtually every part of the region that was involved in slave trade. All these factors affected very negatively the economy of the region and caused a serious setback to the development of the region (Abu, 1964).

The Abolition of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade

In 1807 the British abolished the trans-Atlantic slave trade, this was not really based on humanitarian grounds, but it was mainly because of the economic necessity at that time in Europe. The parliament in London passed a legislation prohibiting the British and its loyalists from trading in slaves. The Trans-Atlantic slave trade would not have lasted the duration it did, without the co-operation and connivance of the coastal chiefs and some of the indigenous Niger Delta slave traders who were making large sums of profit from the trade. It was also the quest of the indigenous people for the European goods in exchange for slaves that kept long the trade. The Europeans did not offer any form of development in the region rather, they took away slaves and brought in dangerous weapons and intoxicating drinks into the Niger Delta Region. Despite the evils in the Trans-Atlantic trade, in the 18th century, a combination of factors necessitated the sudden change of attitude in Europe calling for the abolition of the slave trade. The abolition of slave trade was facilitated by the British government and Great Britain was one of the most powerful countries at that time even though other countries like Portugal and France resisted the abolition vehemently, the British

influence and diplomatic pressure saw the abolition through (Basil, 1965).

It should, however, be noted that it was not easy for the British government, because between 1776 and 1805 almost eight attempts were made for the parliament to pass the legislation against trading in slaves. All these attempts failed because of the vast interest and profit in the trade. The abolitionists however, put all the modalities in place before the abolition was successful. In 1807, Great Britain won the battle when the British Parliament eventually passed the law making the Trans-Atlantic slave trade illegal for Britain and all British loyalists. In 1807 other countries like Denmark, America in 1808, Spain and Portugal in 1816, France in 1815 and many other countries actively joined the fight against human trafficking and slavery. The British also enforced the law banning slavery by its warships patrolling the Atlantic to ensure that no country conveyed slaves from Africa to Europe. The British government showed good example by paying the sum of \$20,000 USD as compensation to slave owners and this example was followed by some other European countries (Adiele, 2006).

As earlier mentioned, combinations of factors were responsible for the abolition of the slave trade. The Industrial revolution in Europe was one of the major reasons for the abolition of the slave trade. Some of the other factors were the revolt of the American colonies against Britain and the activities of the missionaries among others. The religious Organisations like the Catholics, Anglicans and Presbyterians were always preaching and condemning slave trade among the Europeans and the local chiefs. Prominent people like Pope Benedict XIV protested against slave trade and also prohibited it (Encyclopaedia).

The abolition of the slave trade ushered in a new trend in the relationship between Europe and Nigeria. One of the most important developments was the formation of colonies in Africa following the Industrial revolution in Europe. Because of the vast economic potentials in the Niger Delta Region and Nigeria as a whole, the European countries picked a lot of interest in the region. After the scramble in 1885, Nigeria became the territory of the British government. The British traders then began to explore the interior of

the Niger Delta Region with the view of creating and developing markets for their manufactured goods and also avenues of getting raw materials back to Europe. Britain, for example, needed palm oil, Cocoa, timber, rubber and tobacco for lubrication of their factory machines and for the production of other goods such as soap, candles and others. The above views therefore, helped in bringing to an end the Trans-Atlantic slave trade in the region and Nigeria as large (Odeigah, 2015).

Conclusion

The Trans-Atlantic slave trade was a major setback to the growth and development of the Indigenous Economy of the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria between the 15th and the 19th Centuries. This is mainly because the Trans-Atlantic slave trade took away able-bodied man and women who were the productive force of the indigenous economy in the Niger Delta Region. The indigenous people also abandoned their farming activities and trading in slaves became the dominant economic activity with no attention being paid to other sectors of the economy. Local cloth weaving, pottery, smiting, local crafts and hunting were all paid very little attention. Insecurity caused by the trading slave merchants arising from regular kidnapping and frequent devastation of villages, affected the farmers, livestock and other economic activities in the region. Indigenous people could no longer work in their farms freely for fear of being kidnapped unceremoniously by the European slave merchants. The industrial revolution in Europe and British powerful diplomacy eventually led to the abolition of Trans-Atlantic slave trade.

The introduction of legitimate trade did not stop European exploitation in the region and other parts of Africa because Nigeria and other African countries became colonies where cheap raw materials were sourced for their factories in Europe and finished expensive luxury goods were then shipped back to the colonies which served as markets for their finished products. The political, social and cultural life and internal security of the Niger Delta Region was also shattered by the activities of the slave merchants. It has been argued that some of the present day insurgency and criminality in the Niger

Delta Region of Nigeria have their roots in the insecurity characterised by the regular kidnappings, raids and violence perpetrated during the period of slavery. The lack of payment of reparations to Africa remains a very vexatious issue because this would have helped to address some of the economic challenges resulting from Trans-Atlantic slave trade in Africa.

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