

# **The impacts of black and white slavery and the legacies of imperialism and colonialism on the African continent**

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*"The slave is an instrument of instruments. If every instrument could accomplish its own work, obeying or anticipating the will of others...if...the shuttle would weave and the plectrum touch the lyre; chief workmen would not want servants, nor masters slaves." - Aristotle*

From the time the initial tectonic plates were laid down billions of years ago to serve as the birthplace of man and as the cradle of human civilization, Mother Africa, as the continent is popularly known, has had its equal share of natural and human hazards.

The most monstrous illustration of opportunistic utilization of the African continent by European powers has been the wanton advancement of slavery, imperialism, and colonialism that lasted several centuries until the 19th century. Slavery has been used by the European powers driven by the urge of industrial development and self-gratification as an excuse to civilize the "Dark Continent." Despite slavery being in existence since the time of the Greeks and even beyond, the kind of slavery imposed on the African continent is, in reality, the worst human injustices ever recorded in history. The use of powerful African chieftains to subdue weak and unarmed Africans spearheaded the spread of slavery to African hinterlands leaving no stone unturned such that at least every periphery of the continent was in one way or the other touched by Europe's materialist ambitions. In his book, *Africa: a Biography of the Continent* (1998), John Reader, a photojournalist and writer born in London and who spent considerable time covering events in Africa, wrote that "in western imagery slaves are commodities that may be bought and sold and disposed of at will. Slaves have no control over their destiny, no choice of occupation or employer, no rights to property or marriage, and no control over the fate of their children. They may be inherited, given away, or sold without regard to

their wishes, and may be ill-treated, sometimes even killed, with impunity. Furthermore, their progeny inherit their status.”

The above striking description of slavery by John Reader exactly epitomizes the horrendous and barbaric ill-treatment of African slaves, colonial subjects, and imperialist servants. Millions of Africans destined for European, Caribbean, and North American destinations through the infamous Trans-Atlantic slave trade suffered pain and anguish beyond human comprehension as the proportion of slaves that perished at sea and those who arrived famished equally displayed appalling images of disheveled faces, fatigue, and afflictions. European slavery of Africa bore the hallmarks of religious justification as heads of churches and revered kings and queens blessed explicitly in the name of God. It was a tall religious order hatched with unanimous continental declaration within European cities with religious fraternities assuming the roles of civilizing and evangelizing the uncivilized, demon-worshipping, and pagan tribes of black Africa.

The demand for material goods accelerated the proliferation of slavery and the slave trade. The Arabs had long discovered the importance of sugar which was novel to Europe and other parts of the world. Squeezing sugar out of sugarcane required intensive labor. Creating massive plantations for the newly discovered sugarcane plant could only be possible with the sweat and free labor of the ‘redundant’ Black man. This led to the exploitation of the seas and the creation of dockyards for the construction of bulk freighters needed for the transportation of slaves and for the movement of raw and finished materials.

On the other hand, Europeans arriving Africa for the first time stumbled upon West African gold in Ghana where it had been used for centuries by flourishing African empires ruled by ruthless chiefs. According to Iranian scholar Ibn-al-Faqih who compiled for *encyclopedia of the Muslim world* in c. 900 wrote that “it is said that beyond the source of the Nile is darkness and beyond the darkness are waters which make the gold grow...to the town of Ghana is a three month’s journey through deserts. In the country of Ghana gold grows in the sand as carrots do, and is plucked at sunrise.” Arab chroniclers reported Ghanaian kings adorned in gold and that some had exhibition areas that were surrounded by horses prettified in gold. The town of Koumbi Saleh, identified by archeologists in present day Mauritania reveals wonderful excavations that they believe consisted of stone houses, mosques, cemeteries and narrow streets. This town flourished between the sixth and eighteenth centuries AD. Pieces of pottery with Koranic inscriptions have been unearthed from the same site. The king who ruled over Koumbi Saleh was well respected by his subjects and visitors alike and that he was extremely generous.

Africans mined copper, brass, bronze, and gold before European intrusion of Africa-credible evidence that civilization had taken root centuries before foreign exploitation of the continent’s resources and manpower. The kingdom of Mali demonstrates the existence of a well organized urbanized society ruled over by a succession of kings who traveled to as far as Arabia often through the Sahara desert with a retinue of caravans loaded with gold, ivory, and knitted materials in exchange for other valuable products not

available in their domains. Even in the Horn of Africa, the Axumite kingdom of ancient Abyssinia paralleled Greco-Roman civilizations as the ruling Negus dynasties stretched their areas of influences to as far as present-day Yemen. Many a flotilla of ships crossed the Red Sea headed for Egyptian ports in search of valuable merchandise. European writers often perceive Arab manuscripts with suspicion and regard them as controversial and unreliable simply because they chronicled advanced African civilizations which to Europeans were either mere exaggerations or outrightly non-existent because it was in the interest of the Europeans to demonize Africans and Africa.

African kings trading in slaves destabilized many permanent African settlements along the coast and in the hinterlands. This led to the decimation of many permanent healthy settlements and the subsequent magnification of trade in humans and the depletion of material resources that exclusively benefited the African and European conquerors. Arab merchants had their share of the evil human loot though it is evidently clear those African slaves taken to Arabia lived exceptionally better than their compatriots shipped to European lands and dominions. Children born as a result of Arab men cohabiting with African women slaves were classified as free unlike those raped and molested by the Europeans. These children and their mothers enjoyed a degree of freedom and higher social statuses and that they were considered as part and parcel of the free community of that time.

The legacy of slavery led to colonialism and imperial domination with industrialization paving the way for the creation of protectorates and dominions in almost every society with the exception of the Abyssinian empire that escaped the brunt of European hatch up because it was a kingdom that practiced Christian values that stretched to the time of Solomon. King Leopold II of Belgium, a brutal man who was prepared to sacrifice everything in his possession instigated what became known as the “scramble for Africa” in 1884 in Brussels attended by powers including France, Austria-Hungary, the United States, Britain, Denmark, Turkey, Germany, and other European powers. The demand for copper, tin, tea, rubber, and other products including cotton that were desperately needed in Europe proliferated the scramble for the African continent and Asia. The legacies of imperialism in the former Belgian-Congo illustrate horrifying pictures of torture and collective punishment such that a missionary, John Harris, who was stationed in Baringa in Congo had this to report to King Leopold II of Belgium: “ *I was so moved, Your Excellency, by the people's stories that I took the liberty of promising them that in future you will only kill them for crimes they commit.*”

The evil deeds of the European powers saw Africa undergo a newly concocted way of humiliating Africans until 1957 when the first republics proclaimed independence through bitter struggle and bloodshed. The Algerian War of independence in the 60s claimed the lives of a million people. It was a war between Algerians and former colonial power, France. English settlers who set up permanent settlements in Kenya's lush green Rift Valley named the area surrounding Mount Kenya, the "White Highlands" not because of the snow on the mountain, but because they felt the land was exclusively to be owned by white people and also the climate was the right one for whites given the cool and temperate nature of the soil that was perfect for agriculture and for raising families.

From there on, white families migrated from Britain en masse which led to the establishment of tea, coffee, sisal, and pineapple plantations on a wide scale. One of the greatest entrepreneurs in Kenya's Rift Valley was Lord Delamere, a man whose roots still shine in Kenya's farming industry.

Libyan struggle equally took considerable lives and property. Kenya's Mau Mau uprising led to the detention of Jomo Kenyatta in a remote prison in northern Kenya. Somalia's blood spilling struggle spearheaded by Seyyid Muhammad Abdille Hassan, lasted for well over twenty years. Coinciding with the struggles of the Mahdi of Sudan, Somalia's war of independence came to an abrupt halt when squadrons of jets of the Royal Air force of Britain returning from World War I missions catapulted from their bases in Yemen and inflicted heavy losses on Somalia's poorly-armed dervishes. Thus, Somalia's liberation movement went down in history as the first movement to be bombarded by military aircraft.

Thus, the legacies of slavery and slave trade, colonialism and imperial domination of Africa did not end there. To this day, former colonial powers continue to suppress African nations through the formation of blocs, dominions, and commonwealth meant to pull together former colonies to form rigid blocks to advance their selfish and materialist ideologies. For now, Africa is divided between Anglophone and Francophone nations. The use of colonial languages as medium of instructions in schools and for administrative purposes by Africans may be attributed to the extinction of many African vernacular languages. The massive migration of African professionals and doctors has left a great vacuum in African social institutions and created what is often referred to as "brain drain." Colonial trained African leaders have opened a path for embezzlement of state coffers, institutional corruption, maladministration, and dictatorships. Such deceptive modes of administrative styles and dependence on colonial material and moral guidance have left the African continent absolutely bankrupt. Massive reliance on expertise provided by former colonial powers is cause for the economical hardships found in almost every African state.

Another dangerous instance that left many African states bow down to pressure happened during the Cold War that saw African nation's pledge allegiance to the opposing forces of that time: Warsaw Pact and NATO respectively. Nations like Somalia and Ethiopia suffered quagmires of political uncertainties with the former U.S.S.R playing host to both nations by providing dangerous weapons with little room for agricultural advancement. In exchange, the Soviets pilfered the natural resources of these two poor nations until the collapse of the central governments in Addis Ababa and Mogadishu simultaneously in the early nineties. What is worth noting is that Africa's colonial trained leaders killed combined millions of Africans either through deliberate imprisonment, executions, food deprivation, collectivization, poisoning, and other forms of torturous applications and inhuman practices. As the descendants of former slaves suffer the agonies of discrimination and other forms of social disparities, their brethren in African suffer similar, if not worse.

Africa's giant, Nigeria, reeled under the devastating Biafra War followed by a succession

of coups orchestrated by callous military dictators until the arrival of Olusegun Obasanjo as President-a rule that lasted from 1999 to 2007. Obasanjo was once a military ruler while holding the rank of General. This was between the years 1976 and 1979. A Yoruba from Ogun state, Obasanjo took over power after the death of President Murtala Mohammed. He handed over power to the first civilian elected government of President Shehu Shagari despite the army seizing power again in 1983.

Africans have either been victims of military dictatorships or prolonged misrule by civilian governments that suppressed multi-party democracy most notably Kenya where Jomo Kenyatta ruled 15 uninterrupted years and then succeeded by Daniel Arap Moi who clung to power for another 24 torturous years. Others have been victims of kingship rule like in Morocco and in the tiny landlocked southern African nation of Swaziland. Some lost the long cherished ambitions of nationhood after their heinous power hungry dictators resorted to using foreign mercenaries to topple existing legitimate administrations as happened in the Comoros and elsewhere.

The ancient kingdom of Ethiopia is unable to come to grips with misrule since the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie who was deposed and killed mercilessly by Colonel Mengistu Haile Miriam who is currently hiding in Zimbabwe at the invitation of Dictator Robert Mugabe. The Horn of African nation of Somalia remains without a central government since 1991 after the overthrow of the Junta that ruled with iron fist for 21 years. The last Somali dictator, Colonel Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed, who was elected interim-President in 2004, resigned on the 29th of December, 2008 leaving a big power vacuum and internal clan fighting that could destabilize the entire region. The latest coup happened in the tiny western African nation of Guinea when a low ranking army officer, Captain Moussa Camara, seized power after the death of President-for-life Lansana Conte.

Several African countries are still in the midst of guerilla activities. The expansive People's Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire) has not seen peace since the overthrow of Dictator Mobutu Sese Seko in 1997 by the forces of Laurent Kabila. Kabila himself succumbed to an assassination in 2001 and was succeeded by his son Joseph Kabila. Massive humanitarian crisis in the Darfur region of Sudan is causing international outcry which leaves the regime of President Hassan Al-Bashir in the balance. After almost three decades of guerilla war, southern Sudan has seen some semblance of peace and inclusion in to the government in Khartoum. The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) is wrecking havoc in Uganda with resistance leader Joseph Koni waging devastating skirmishes which often include the torching of villages, abduction of school children, and calculated murders on a wide scale. The West African nation of Ivory Coast has not been immune from gross human miscalculations either. After decades of civil war, the West African state of Liberia has now the first democratically elected female President. Liberia has been at the mercy of the likes of Samuel Doe, Prince Johnson, and the heinous dictator Charles Taylor who is now in the hands of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) awaiting trial for crimes against humanity. The 1994 genocide in Rwanda remains one of the most appalling mass killings in modern history. With President and General Paul Kagame in the helm, Rwanda has for now a strongman who has the interests of his

people at heart. The only troubling political tension for President Kagame could come from General Nkunda, a Tutsi general who is waging war in some parts of the PDRC. General Nkunda's war ambition is raising eyebrows in the West.

The most stable and most democratic nation in Africa is the southern African state of Botswana. Abundance of diamonds coupled with democracy, Botswana has become the envy of many African nations. Despite the wealth and stability of Botswana, the scourge from HIV/AIDS is reducing the life expectancy rate to mere 37 years. The bulk of teachers have drastically diminished with the HIV/AIDS menace. Even mighty South Africa has not been immune from misrule. Thabo Mbeki recently handed over power to a less familiar face after years of corruption and massive unemployment. Despite the abundance of natural resources, industries, and manpower, South Africa has along way to go before the majority black population can obtain some degree of economic stability and educational enrichment. Whites still remain majority stake holders in industries and services, real estate and farmlands; whites also dominate the tourist industry and have a big stake in the fields of education, health, and import and export of goods. Perhaps, South Africa's newly elected 100% Zulu blood president, Jacob Gedleyihlekisa Zuma, will serve better than his Xhosa predecessors.