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***Unfinished Business:  
Confronting the Legacies of  
Slavery and Colonialism in Africa***

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# Contents

Introduction	5
The Uniqueness of the Atlantic Slave Trade	6
The Anti-slavery Movement and Domestic Slavery	8
All Were Victims, Not Beneficiaries	9
From Anti-slavery to Racist Colonialism	11
Decolonisation: Unfinished Business	13
Neo-colonialism	14
Conclusion: the Meaning of Apartheid	17



# UNFINISHED BUSINESS: CONFRONTING THE LEGACIES OF SLAVERY AND COLONIALISM IN AFRICA\*

## INTRODUCTION

The summary of my argument is that development remains elusive in Africa, not merely because of the misrule and warped personalities of many African leaders, but because Africa had been damaged severely, first by the slave trade, then by the colonialism which grew out of the slave trade. Further, that Africa cannot rejoin the development train in the world until the damage is repaired as much as possible. When that is done, it will be of immense benefit not only to Africa, but also to the whole world.

A lot has been written about the trans-Atlantic slave trade, mostly about the economic benefits it conferred on Europe and North America, and the injustice of the lives of the slaves in America. Little attention has so far been given to the devastating effect of the damage done to African peoples. African historians have themselves been reluctant to focus much attention on this period of African history. The attitude generally has been that slavery is a universal phenomenon. Other peoples have transcended their periods of slavery and oppression. Why can't Africans forget about theirs, turn their faces forward and get on with their lives? Because of this refusal to confront the slave trade and come to terms with it, both Africans and non-Africans surround the subject with various myths. The story is told of a Harvard Professor of African descent who was visiting Africa and confronted an Asante lady with the accusation that her ancestors had sold his ancestors into slavery. The issue of possible guilt feeling has only compounded the African malaise. There is a Yoruba saying that "my child is dead is better than my child is missing". When dead, the child is buried; an account is given to the ancestors, and the living can get on with their lives. Consider how many such bodies are unaccounted for in every single

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\* This paper was delivered as a Keynote Address at a conference at the Africa Centre, Covent Gardens, London on 4 December 2000.

community in Africa. Collective amnesia and deafening silence in the oral traditions have not enabled Africans to forget. A Nigerian writer has suggested the need for rituals to release the ghosts of the missing presumed dead. This conference may make its own contribution towards that ritual of purification.

#### THE UNIQUENESS OF THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE

There are university courses on slavery as a universal phenomenon. Usually, such courses stress that there was slavery in Africa before the coming of the Portuguese. There was slavery, but not slaves as a commercial commodity. Then came the trans-Saharan slave trade which introduced a commercial element into African slavery. But the scale of the trade was such that the slaves were able to continue to be treated as human beings. Under strict Islamic law, a converted slave became a free fellow Muslim. The children of a slave concubine or wife were free members of the household. Various features of the trans-Atlantic trade made it very different from any other type of slave trade or slavery in history. It was capital intensive and competitive among several European nations. The factor of international competition perhaps did more than anything else to reduce the slaves from fellow human beings to purely commercial cargo. Laws were passed to deny the humanity of the slaves. Their eye-witness accounts were not admissible in court as evidence. They could not own any property. Their children belonged to their masters and not to themselves. On the Middle Passage, they were packed like lifeless cargo in ways in which dogs and horses would not be packed today.

There were two further consequences of this. One was that, in all that period, from the late fifteenth to the late nineteenth centuries, the trans-Atlantic slave trade was inflicted on such a large scale on black Africans alone, with the result that by the 18th century, slave had become synonymous with black, and black with slavery. No one remembered that the Romans had Greek slaves or that the Turks and Arabs had enslaved many Europeans. Because of the kind of slavery they endured, black slaves were no

longer accepted as normal human beings. The whole of Christendom, with all the religious fervour unleashed by the Protestant revolution of the 16th-17th centuries, clung to the argument that slavery is not condemned in the Bible as a sin. Because of the Apostle Paul's letter to ask the master of Onesimus to forgive him and his plea that slaves should be loyal to their masters, it was concluded that the Bible condoned the heinous crimes of the Middle Passage and the gross injustice of the life of slaves on the American plantations. Some writers even tried to justify the Atlantic trade with the argument that it took black slaves from heathen lands into Christendom, thus opening up the possibility of converting them and saving their souls. All the teachings of Jesus that we should regard others as our neighbours, especially the weak and the oppressed, and do unto others as we would want them to do unto us, were glossed over. When eventually the Evangelical re-awakening of the 18th and early 19th centuries triggered off the anti-slavery movement, it stopped short of declaring the Atlantic slave trade as a sin and a heinous crime against humanity. The anti-slavery movement was the first to perfect the organisation of mass rallies to force a change of policy on government and it did a marvellous job. But because of this failure to accept that the Atlantic slave trade was not compatible with the Biblical notion of neighbourly love, it was able to come to a compromise with the powerful West Indian planters in Parliament. Parliament voted 23 million pounds in 1834, now worth at least 23 billion to compensate the slave owners, but not one penny to compensate the slaves. Yet, slave owner and former slave were then to become fellow citizens competing in the same market place. Obviously, the anti-slavery movement left the task of emancipation as unfinished business. It has even been said that, what with apprenticeship schemes and all that, the slaves were not emancipated but ransomed. The passing of the Emancipation Act did not involve any change of heart in Europe or America about the evils of the Atlantic trade or the human qualities and capabilities of the black peoples involved. The Oxford Professor of Classics who examined Samuel Ajayi Crowther as he was being tested for ordination said he would like

to show his papers to his colleagues who maintained that black people were not capable of logical thought.

#### THE ANTI-SLAVERY MOVEMENT AND DOMESTIC SLAVERY

The anti-slavery movement focused its attention on stopping the trans-Atlantic slave trade. It was not designed as such to repair the ravages done to Africa by the slave trade. We could say that the missionary movement that grew out of the anti-slavery movement did attempt some reparation in its policy of combining Christianity, Commerce and Civilisation. But the effectiveness of the missionary movement was greatly compromised by its failure to accept the slave trade as a sin incompatible with the teachings of the Bible. The missionaries were, therefore, willing to compromise with slave owners once again. When they discovered that they needed to promote internal slavery and slave trade in order to promote agricultural production for European industries, they did not hesitate to make the compromise. From the 1840s to the 1880s, they promoted what they called legitimate trade by encouraging a wide expansion of the use of so-called domestic slaves for the production and transportation of palm produce and other commodities to exchange for imported ammunition to continue the wars that continued to yield the slaves. To legitimise this compromise, the missionaries argued that slavery was not the sin, but the custom of plurality of wives which had no doubt been heightened by the years of the slave trade which usually removed more men than women. The Church Missionary Society (CMS) authorities ruled that in the Bible, slave owning was a social evil that could be tolerated until changes in the economic situation led to its amelioration, but that polygamy was explicitly rebuked in the New Testament in spite of its widespread practice by the patriarchs in the Old Testament. The argument of Bishop Crowther that monogamy should be treated the way Paul treated circumcision as not an essential qualification for salvation, was firmly rejected. You may wish to contrast how some people in the same Anglican Church are today, in the name of showing love, trying to find a way round the explicit statements in the Bible condemning

homosexuality, the sin of Sodom, as unnatural and not acceptable. Archdeacon Crowther, the Bishop's son, took the argument against polygamy to its logical conclusion when he said that he was not worried about the fate of the wives of polygamists who were divorced so that their husbands could become monogamists and acceptable for baptism. The archdeacon said that he regarded the status of such 'wives' as comparable with slavery. Even when Lagos became a British colony, slavery continued to be tolerated. The majority of the congregations in the CMS churches of the Niger Delta were slaves. The missions on the Niger River could not have been established without the support of the commerce in palm produce, shea butter and other slave-produced and slave-transported commodities in exchange for ammunition. For most of the 1870s Bishop Crowther established a formal alliance with the rulers of the Nupe kingdom as the southern outpost of the Sokoto Caliphate which was ostensibly being erected on the basis of a slave economy. Yet, the abolition of slavery was used at the Berlin and Brussels conferences as the defining mark of civilisation, on the basis of which African states were excluded from the comity of nations who congregated to share African territories without the participation of the Africans. Abolition of slavery was to be the major definition of the civilisation that the Partition Powers were to confer on Africans as soon as they could make good the claims that they were in control. The armies they used consisted largely of freed slaves. Slave raiding was the commonest *casus belli* declared against African rulers they marked out for attack.

#### ALL WERE VICTIMS, NOT BENEFICIARIES

Inter-ethnic relations in Africa will for long continue to be affected by perceptions as to who collaborated with the slavers and who suffered most. This is largely a futile argument because in the end all Africans and peoples of African descent were victims, not beneficiaries of the slave trade. The technology, capital and competition that characterised the European participation in the Atlantic trade meant that no African peoples could

afford to stay aloof from it. Those who could, obtained whatever ammunition was available, so as to protect themselves. The chiefs who participated in the trade were victims at least of unequal exchange. They exported man and woman productive and re-productive power in return for ammunition, cheap gin, textiles, mirrors and others which the late Dr Dike called 'meretricious' goods. No black African could escape from the racist burden of being black. Consider also the opportunity cost of the trade that of necessity compelled you to be perpetually at war with your neighbours instead of trading with them. Consider the specific case of Benin. It is reckoned that in terms of what may be called the civilised arts and perhaps even technology over a wide range of issues, life in Benin was comparable with life in Portugal when the Portuguese arrived to trade at the end of the 15th century, and there was some mutual exchange to start with. When the Portuguese showed that their interest was thenceforth to consist solely in slaves, the Benin monarch expelled the traders and missionaries from his court. The Portuguese just moved down the river to Itshekiriland. Benin could of course not keep away from the trade for too long. They had to trade, if not with the Portuguese, then with the Dutch and the French. Imagine what Benin could have become by the 19th century if they had enjoyed an export trade in commodities other than slaves. Consider also the Yoruba. The Old Oyo empire, with a cavalry force, built up some hegemonic power in the southern Sudan belt in the 17-18th centuries. The Oyo ruled over Nupe, Bussa and others. They opened a corridor to the coast so as to participate in the Atlantic slave trade through Badagri, Porto Novo and Dahomey. Can we say the Oyo were collaborators and beneficiaries of the trade? See what happened to them in the 19th century. The old centre of the Oyo empire is today a forest reserve. The domino effect of the refugee problem involved triggered off the Yoruba Wars, which went on unabated till the British were able to impose peace in 1893. The wars continue to echo in Yoruba politics even today. Notice how in the Yoruba wars, the Oyo of Ibadan destroyed the Oyo of Ijaye in the struggle to survive. Notice from the account of many rescued slaves in Freetown how some Egba villages

joined Ibadan and Ife warlords to destroy other Egba settlements. Crowther, an Oyo, was enslaved in 1821 by Oyo Muslim warlords. Who, then, were the beneficiaries and collaborators? All were victims of the Atlantic slave trade.

#### FROM ANTI-SLAVERY TO RACIST COLONIALISM

In promoting Christianity, Commerce and Civilisation as anti-slave trade measures and not for the reparation of the damage done to Africa, not only was the task of emancipation left unfinished. The anti-slavery movement also unwittingly laid the foundations of colonial rule. It was as if the missionaries saw the legacy of the Atlantic trade on Africa, felt that they could not tackle it alone, and invited the colonial powers after them. At the time, they regarded colonial conquest and colonial rule as essential for African development.

It is important to emphasise that colonialism in Africa arose out of the unique features of the slave trade that we referred to above, and it was therefore unlike colonialism in other places. It is what may be called racist colonialism in which a people set out to rule and civilise other people whose humanity continued to be questioned in so many ways. Whatever may now be said about the motives of the colonial powers, they did not have normal human regard for the Africans they ruled. Nowhere else in history was colonial rule characterised by the use of so much violence to control the lives of the subjects on a day to day basis. They came to Africa so that they could continue to exploit African labour which stopped flowing to the Americas at the end of the Atlantic slave trade. It was not always clear whether African land or African labour was the priority. We have examples in which people were evicted from their land specifically to create a landless people who would have no choice but to work for cheap wages on European farms or mines. Remember Leopold's Congo in which the punishment for failure to produce enough rubber was to cut off the hands. How that was meant to stimulate productivity still beats the imagination. There were examples of policies of extermination as in the German Herero War, such that it seemed

some of the colonial powers would have been happy to see the Africans die off like the American Indians. Every teacher would know that you cannot train a student with whom you do not communicate and to whom you do not concede even a fellow human feeling. The idea of a Dual Mandate in colonialism was an afterthought and meant largely for propaganda. The clear evidence suggests that colonial powers had no enduring commitment to the development of Africa. Compare the legacy of Roman rule in Britain: Hadrian's wall, the road system, the baths and water resources, and administrative centres. The Romans stimulated productivity and exchange. Compare even the British legacy in India: the railways, the universities, the Indian Civil Service, and such monuments as the Victoria Railway Terminal in Bombay said to have been based on St Pancras in London which itself was based on the Salisbury Cathedral. The British went to India to trade and they had to stimulate existing trade. They may not have liked aspects of Hindu culture, but they did not harbour against the Indians the kind of contempt they showed for the Africans. The colonial powers in Africa did not hesitate to destroy existing trade, if only to divert attention to the production and export of crops for European industries and the importation of European manufactures. Dr William Baikie as Consul at Lokoja was impressed by the textiles he found in neighbouring markets, and which were said to have been widely distributed, as far as Kano. He sent samples of the textiles home to the British Museum. It is said that productivity declined when the producers found it more lucrative to turn to slave trading even before British manufacturers copied the designs and brought cheap imitations from India or Manchester to compete.

Those who are busy trying to rewrite the history of colonial rule in Africa, so as to paint a more attractive picture of colonialism rarely mention the enforced contribution of African colonies in manpower during the two World Wars. The number of French Africans involved in World War I was over half a million. This is another example of colonialism being an extension of the slave trade because many of those who went perished in the trenches, and suffered almost as much inhuman treatment. That

was besides the contribution of money and the production of commodities.

#### DECOLONISATION: UNFINISHED BUSINESS

Eventually, as in the case of slavery, the international community woke up to the evils of racist colonialism as practised in Africa. The Germans were relieved of their colonies in 1918, and these were shared out between Britain, France and Belgium to some extent. The anti-colonial movements, at the Pan-African level and at the level of individual countries began to be noticed, especially after World War II. Within a more conducive international environment, Britain and France agreed to move towards negotiating conditions for political independence, except in areas of European settlements. The decade 1950-1960 has thus been called the decade of decolonisation.

Notice that there was no possibility or intention to restore independence to the pre-colonial states. The Partition boundaries which had been criticised as often arbitrary became the title deeds of the new countries that began to emerge in the 1960s as independent states. These were colonial states, colonial creations. It was during the decade 1950s-1960s that the rudiments of state institutions in terms of the executive, legislative and judicial patterned after the metropolitan institutions and suitably adapted began to be hurriedly put in place so that the outgoing colonial rulers could have new political elites to whom to hand over power. University institutions as campuses or colleges of metropolitan universities also began to be established. Thus, far from trying to decolonise, colonial powers deliberately created colonial states which were soon conferred with political autonomy. France had ruled two enormous territories of AOF and AEF in West and Equatorial Africa, but chose to decolonise them into 11 independent territories, some of which are not really viable, and with boundaries cutting across lines frequented by migrants. The French suggested to the British to follow their example and break up Nigeria, but the British rejected the idea. Boundaries fixed at the whims and caprices of colonial powers

has produced the phenomenon in which the founding President of Zambia, lost election after ruling for 12 years and suddenly found his right to Zambian citizenship being questioned. There is the similar case in Cote d'Ivoire where it was the leader of Opposition who was denied the right to contest for the Presidency on the grounds that he did not qualify as a citizen.

The main point we are making is that political independence came without any real effort at decolonisation. Political scientists were at pains to whitewash autocratic rulers claiming that one-party states were democratic and in accordance with African traditions by which pre-colonial monarchies did not recognise opposition parties. Such political scientists have since been recanting and admitting that One Party states simply bred autocracy and misrule by refusing to tolerate criticism and dissent. We are still witnessing the outcome of such misrule in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Kenya and other places. An African nationalist, Amilcar Cabral of Cape Verde once said:

The colonialists have a habit of telling us that when they arrived, they put us into history. You are well aware that it is the opposite. When they arrived, they took us out of our own history. Liberation for us is to take back our destiny and our history.

Such liberation or decolonisation, enabling the people to regain control over their own destiny and history remains unfinished business. Without decolonisation, we moved from colonialism to neo-colonialism.

#### NEO-COLONIALISM

The concept of neo-colonialism is often treated as a joke because the word is used with such looseness as if it has no real meaning. We therefore need to clarify what we are talking about here. The slogan of Pan-African nationalists like Nkrumah was to "seek ye first the political kingdom and all else will be added unto thee". Neocolonialism is the situation of dependence created by colonial rule, in which you are granted political independence only to discover that you do not have control over your economy and

cannot implement your own policies but must consult various powerful outsiders who directly or indirectly control the policies. Therefore, following the attainment of the political kingdom, nothing else was forthcoming to add to it and, usually, the political kingdom began to fall apart as peoples' expectations were frustrated. The nationalist leaders tried to get the best terms they could. Zimbabwe rejected the deal the British wanted to do with Muzorewa and waited for Mugabe. Urged on by students and younger partisans, the Nigerian leaders were forced to repudiate the Anglo-Nigerian Defence Pact. But these were not enough. The economies of the different countries were already integrated into the economies of the metropolitan countries during the colonial period and under colonial exploitative terms, and the colonial powers were unwilling to surrender their advantageous positions. Agents of the World Bank and the IMF began to replace former Residents and District Commissioners as supervisors of the dependent economies in the former colonial territories. Globalisation meant that the World Bank and the IMF could impose drastic devaluation of the currency and other measures of Structural Adjustment Programmes that impoverished the people and brought no visible economic returns. In pursuit of such policies, countries were encouraged to amass huge debts, and managing the Debt then became another weapon of control to compel continued compliance with policies of the World Bank and IMF. But it needs to be emphasised here that the debt of African countries is only a pittance compared with what the international communities owe to Africa, and debt relief is only the beginning, and not the end of the Reparation we seek.

The most notable examples of neo-colonialism are to be seen in Cold War politics where because of neo-colonial dependence, the US found it so easy to control and manipulate the economies of most African countries against the interests of the peoples of those countries in the name of containing the spread of communism. Take the example of Ethiopia and Somaliland. Decolonisation exacerbated border dispute between the two countries over the control of Ogaden. The dispute was exacerbated as it facilitated control from outside. Under Emperor Haile

Sellaisie, Ethiopian development was based on US aid and Somaliland therefore turned to the Soviet Union for assistance. When the Emperor was overthrown, and the Derge chose to embrace a socialist programme, the Soviet Union stepped into American shoes and the US became the new power over Somali development plans. Both neo-colonial powers exploited their position to extort substantial rewards and each was more interested to sell arms and to encourage the futile border wars than to improve the capability of their dependent peoples to control their economic development. Consider also the Congo, and the blatant murder of Patrice Lumumba, and the secession of Moise Tshombe, followed by the setting up of Sgt., turned General Mobutu Sese Seko as the agent of the US and NATO . All the iniquities of Mobutu against the peoples of Zaire were aided and assisted by the US in the name of containing the spread of communism. It is said that the US was privy to the fall of Nkrumah. Take the case of Nigeria, The discovery of crude oil was a major factor in the Nigera/Biafra civil war. Because of its existing economic links, Nigeria had to resist the temptation during the war to turn to the Soviet Union for assistance. The Western powers then had the policy to recognise Nigeria and provide support, but never enough to bring the war to a quick end. Indeed, both Nigeria and Biafra continued for the 30 months to get military supplies from essentially the same markets.

Consider also the cases of Angola and Mozambique. Faced with the armies of the Portuguese Fascist dictator, Salazar, the nationalist movements in Angola and Mozambique received military assistance from Cuba, the Soviet Union and China at a price. This turned them into the enemies of the US and NATO. As a result of their resistance, the Fascist regime became bankrupt and was overthrown. Democracy was born in Portugal which became a more worthy member of NATO, but the countries that paid the price were not allowed to enjoy their liberation. Dissident groups and civil wars have continued to be encouraged in the name of containing the spread of communism. Even when the Cold War came to an end, and Mobutu and the apartheid regime of South Africa no longer had the US Mandate to foment war in the

beleaguered countries, Jonas Savimbi continues to control diamond resources enough to continue the civil war. The cost of these neo-colonial wars to the people concerned are unimaginable. Yet before independence, both Angola and Mozambique found that their economies were already so integrated with the Portuguese economy that they had to end the Wars of Liberation by sitting at the table to negotiate independence with their former masters.

#### CONCLUSION: THE MEANING OF APARTHEID

Because of the long and intense campaign that had to be waged, the international community is well aware of some of the features of that evil system, perhaps more than any other in colonial African history. It may be helpful therefore if, in conclusion, we use Apartheid and South Africa to highlight some of the points we have been trying to make. The crucial factor is that it illustrates well the kind of exploitation to which Africa has been subjected by the Atlantic trade followed by racist colonialism. Unique as was the Apartheid regime, there was no feature of that evil system that could not be duplicated in the experience of other parts of black Africa. It was the racist colonial system that we have been discussing in other parts that made it possible for a few settlers protected by the force of the colonial power to erect such a system and operate it under neo-colonialism for so long because the Western world chose to regard white South Africa as their bulwark against the spread of communism. Another point to note is that the evil system arose out of the contempt bred by the Atlantic slave trade. The theology of the Dutch Reformed Church used to justify and sustain apartheid arose from the Unfinished business of the anti-slavery movement, and the failure to declare the Atlantic trade and racist colonialism as a sin incompatible with the Biblical notion of neighbourly love.

Notice also that, in spite of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee, the eradication of Apartheid mentality remains an unfinished business. We have in the constitution affirmative clauses to allay the fears of the privileged minority fearful of the possible revenge of the majority, but few concrete programmes to

repair the damage done to the majority peoples by all the injustice and the unjust enrichment of not only the settlers but their capitalist supporters also. Without such a concrete plan to redress some of the wrongs that could be redressed, we have to wonder what would happen when the expectations of the people remain unfulfilled and the saintly figures of Mandela and Desmond Tutu may no longer be around.

We are sometimes asked how Reparation is to be distributed if received. It is, of course, bad strategy to start sharing what we have not yet received. But I need to give some preview of the kind of thing we have in mind. Africa needs a kind of Marshall Plan that enabled war-torn Europe and Japan to recover so quickly from the devastating effects of the war. Consider what adequate resources at the disposal of an All Africa Railway Authority to plan, construct and manage a railway system could do to provide necessary infrastructure for development. Consider what misery and waste of resources an adequate system of public transportation would remove from the lives of people in the municipality of Lagos. What about a telecommunication system that will make it possible to call Accra from Lagos without going through London? What about resources to develop and maintain a network of first class universities and research institutes that could provide facilities in Africa that will stem the current drain of high level manpower from Africa? What about a few specialist referral hospitals so that we do not need to send every senior government official abroad for treatment? Not all the damage of the Atlantic trade and racist colonialism can now be undone. But the world owes Africa the resources to build the infrastructure so as to level the ground somewhat to make competition within the global economy a little fairer.

My concluding point is that it is such Reparation, not charity and aid, that Africa needs to jump start its development effort. And such Reparation will benefit not only Africa and peoples of African descent, but the whole world. Let me add that if the world can firmly confront the evil of racism, it will remove a burden not only from the back of black peoples, but also from the head and heart of white peoples as well.