

An Examination of the Free Trade Era in African History

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Abstract. The strategic relevance of trade in influencing bilateral agreements among nations in contemporary African history predates the post-colonial period. International trade and other related forms of economic relations in recent history have played vital roles in influencing diplomatic relations among nations. This paper intends to examine the free trade era in African history and how circumstances in this period resulted to the enactment of treaties upon which political control were established thereafter. The paper revealed and attributed the roots of Africa's poor economic performance to unequal trading relationship characterized by colonial economic policies. It specifically examines the evils of human trafficking and dimensions of imperialism in trade.

Keywords: Examination, Free Trade, Imperialism

1. Introduction

To meaningfully understand contemporary African politics and economy, it is pertinent to take into detail account its historical past. This will put us in a position to assess the genesis of its poverty, underdevelopment and present day, post-colonial economic dependency T. Falola,[1]. Only few African countries have shown evidence of judicious use of its national wealth, namely Botswana, South Africa and of late Ghana.

The African continent has been a victim of the atrocities of the transatlantic slave trade in which millions of its productive population were exported to the new world. African countries were also subordinated through different stages and strategies to imperial powers T. Falola, [1]. By the end of the 19th Century, Europeans had the scientific, industrial and political revolution and also possessed unprecedented means to create material wealth and power in the history of mankind, with this power Europe was able to impose herself on Africa T. Obadina,[2]. European activities during the era of free trade imperialism facilitated the basis for the imperialist partition of Africa T. Obadina, [2].

This paper examines some definitions of imperialism, economic growth and development, transition from human traffic to commodity trade, the various roles played by European powers during the era of free trade imperialism in Africa, "transformation" of African economy and the birth of colonial states.

2. Transition from Human Traffic to Commodity Trade

Consequent to the industrial revolution in Europe and the need for alternative to slaves became necessary. Slaves were no longer needed in European farmlands therefore attempts were made to abolish it, although the two forms of trade were in the runs concurrently until the trade in slaves was finally terminated A. G. Hopkins,[3]. It was called free or "legitimate trade" in order to distinguish it from the former. Albeit, this new trade was still characterized by plunder and unequal exchange system, the abolition was only on paper than real intentions A. Alade, [4].

Many reasons were offered for the abolition of transatlantic trade namely humanitarianism, social and moral justice, a critical look at development in Europe in the 19th Century reveals the fact that economic factors explains best why the trade was replaced by 'legitimate commerce' T. Falola, [1]. There was surplus production of manufactured goods in Europe, thus the need for raw materials, markets and to some extent the need for re-investment' of surplus capital.

3. Imperialism in Trade

Imperialism is a political control by greater powers over less powerful territories or nationalities, its character is largely decid

elements. It is also associated with imposition of the culture of ‘advantaged’ or ‘superior’ powers on the colonized people G. John and R. Ronald, [5].

Similarly, there are theories associated with imperialism, namely: the accumulation theory adopted by Kautsky, J. A. Hobson and popularized by Lenin which centered on the accumulation of surplus capital during and after the industrial revolution. Emmanuel Wallenstein advanced the world system theory. He viewed imperialism as part of an extension of capital investment from the “core” of the industrial countries to a less developed “periphery” Therefore, trade contextualized in this situation cannot said to be “free” as the exchange system was unequal that contributed to the retardation of the African economy; as diversification in the economy was discouraged I. L. Bashir, [6].

4. Nature and Consequences of the Trade

The trade was between the industrial nations and Africa. Articles of the trade included, European manufactured goods; such as textiles, tobacco, liquor, gun, gum powder, soap, margarine, candies and many others. Most of these articles were of no relevance to the economy and society of Africa. Africa produce raw materials like timber, cotton, groundnuts, palm oil, coffee, rubber, iron, gold, tin, etc. Africa also served as market for European manufactured products E. Isichie, [7].

Economic theories do not cause change but they are applied in the explanation of change in Economic History. Economic growth simply means increase in the volume of goods and services, while economic development is broader; in that it is accompanied by structural and technological changes. A nation can grow economically while large sections of its societies remain poor J. S. Hogendorl, [8].

Capitalist and Marxist theories advanced explanations on the ‘contributions’ of legitimate trade to African economy. The capitalist on one hand supports the theory of international trade based on specialization and freedom of commerce M. P. Todaro, [9].

Myint in 1958 to explain the rapid expansion of agricultural exports in Africa and Asia in the 19th Century, argued that trade contributed to the economic development of nations through specialization, stimulation of linkages in the domestic economy access to technology and exposure to high degree of competitions M. P. Todaro, [9].

On the contrary, the Marxist does not agree with international trade theory, they argued that it was and still a form of exploitation of the developing nations by the industrialized countries. In the era of free trade commerce did not provided the stimulus for industrialization A. Alade, [4].

The introduction of legitimate commerce contributed towards the integration of African economy into global capitalism, albeit in a manner that the region became economically dependent on the industrialized nations. Accordingly, the domestic economy became increasingly vulnerable to international pressure. Export activities continued to influence domestic production. Some local industries collapsed e.g. Blacksmiths, dyeing, and Textiles. Surplus capitals generated by Europeans were not invested in productive economic sectors in Africa. Many African entrepreneurs began to use slaves in farmlands, example in Yoruba land they were used in kola nut farms. It was also used crudely in Zambia. Africa became primary exporter and ordinary consumer. A new merchant class emerged in Africa. Material culture of Africans was affected by mass influx of foreign goods. The era also marked the emergence of a group of African who adopted European manners especially in speaking tones (use of English slangs) A. Boahen, [10], example of these groups can be found in Lagos (Nigeria) and Cape Coast (South Africa). This period also coupled with the idea of commoditization of labour J. B. Webster, [11]. Large areas of land were tilled and people were employed to work.

Europeans took advantage of trade and commercial rivalries among African kings to sign treaties of conquest. Example – in Lagos – King Kosoko vs Mannila people E. A. Ayandele, [12]. It is also pertinent to state that some African rulers became despotic, coercion was institutionalized. New form of currency was introduced as a medium of exchange, such as Spanish dollar, and the British silver coin. These currencies gradually displaced Africa’s indigenous currencies. . The period also witnessed massive conversion into the Christian faith, some traders were missionaries, and others later became political agents E. A. Ayandele, [12].

5. From Trade to Political Influence and control

In furtherance of European imperialistic interest under the umbrella of free trade, attempts were made to exert some form of political control of some African holds. For example, the Great Britain was in South Africa primarily to safeguard eastern trade routes by preventing foreign powers from acquiring bases on the flank of those routes. This imperial interest necessitated the control of Africa South of the Limpopo River. The Boer Republic was effectively dominated through informal colonial activities – annexation of Natal in 1843; by blocking the Boer Republic from the India Ocean. British interventions to prevent the union of the two Republics under preterious in 1860, annexation of Basutoland in 1868, are few cases in point. British argument was to ensure the safety of their south-African possessions J. E. Flint, [13].

Similarly, Britain through its East Indian Company exercised political control in Uganda in 1870. It also intervened in Kenya and Tanzania, in a similar vein. These intrusions into the affairs of African politics were conducted under the banner of free trade which on the contrary pre-supposes the conduct of commerce on mutual bilateral agreements devoid of any form of political intervention T. O. Odunsi and T. A. Osae [14].

North Africa also witnessed attempts by the imperial British and the French to establish informal empires. Although, in Egypt from the onset both the French and Britain did not demonstrate any form of political interest until a later stage. In 1868, France, Italy and Britain assumed financial control of Tunisia's finances J. E. Flint, [13].

Records have also shown the activities of the French in Senegal, Mauritania, Niger, Mali, etc. Other European countries that made advances to keep hold on some African territories include; Germany, Belgium and Portugal. It will also be relevant to mention at length how various European motives were translated into political terms by institutionalization of colonial rule in Africa. The Royal Niger Company, the British East Indian Company and multiple of imperial French, German and Belgium trading firms at a later stage played a very crucial role in the formalization of colonial empires in Africa through treaties and military conquests culminating into the Berlin Act, signed on 26/2/1885 and Brussels Conference M. Crowder, [15]. Those treaties of trade and protection which were earlier signed were later used as the legal bases to establish formal colonial empires in Africa.

6. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to examine how imperial activities during the period under review led to the political conquest of some African states through the activities of the imperial powers in Africa from the era of slave trade to legitimate commerce – free trade. Therefore, the fact remains that the drive for overseas expansion in the late 19th Century was largely the result of the need of the imperialist nations to cope with the strain imposed on their economy and societies by periods of irregular and unstable economic growth. The arguments that few African benefited in the European commerce (profit margins) does not explain the general condition of Africa. Practical features of socio-economic underdevelopment have been the main characteristics of colonized economies in Africa, Latin America, and Asia commonly referred to as the Third World.

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