



Slavery In Postcolonial Africa: The Role Of Technology

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ABSTRAK

Technology is a two-edged sword. It is at once negative and positive in its constitution. It could be used for good; it could also be used for evil. It use therefore, is dependent on the morality of the mind that employs it. In the past and sadly, presently it has been used to foster slavery in Africa. I however believe that technology could be made to make a positive turn to aid the total abolishment of all forms of slavery in postcolonial Africa. Slavery rides on factors like poverty, illiteracy, insecurity, lack of infrastructures etc, which abound in Africa. Slavery would end if these factors are removed. Thus, if conditions are made possible for comfortable living, then slave masters would run short of slaves and would be forced to look for alternative to slaves. However, the best way to improve the living conditions of a people is through technology. The work therefore, urges the developed world to be generous to Africa by way of technology transfer. One way to do this is through biffing up its indigenous technologies with foreign technologies through technology transfer. Another way to do this, which is the proper responsibility of African government themselves, is to stop the brain-drain wave which is presently moving with a very strong current towards the West and the South. When the best brains are retained in the continent, there is a likelihood that technology would grow in Africa and consequently Africa would know development. When this is so, slavery would lose its roots and would therefore wither off.



INTRODUCTION

The world today is plagued with myriad of evils like terrorism, wars, flood, global recession, pollution, climate change, global warming and others. Slavery is one evil that many thought, has been lifted off the shoulders of the world. But sadly, slavery continues. It is still on after about one hundred and fifty years when it was banned by the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and about 70 years after Article 4 of the U.N.'s Universal Declaration of Human Rights banned it worldwide. Although slavery is now illegal in all countries on earth, it is argued that there is no era in history that had more slaves than our present world, with an estimated 29.8 million slaves worldwide (Global Slavery Index 2013). Slavery is a system under which people are treated as [property](#) to be bought and sold, and are [forced to work](#) without pay (Brace 2004). Slaves are those held against their will, and made to work without the freedom to leave, demand for compensation or refuse to work. They are usually bought, captured or born of slaves. Modern slavery takes the following forms: forced prostitution, forced labour, [debt bondage](#), [indentured servitude](#), [serfdom](#), [domestic servants](#) kept in captivity, [child soldiers](#), and [forced marriage](#) (Anakwe 2018).

The questions that would quell in a contemplative mind are: why has the demand for human slaves increased in this age where advanced and computerized machine-slaves do so much of our daily work? And why is the modern day slave trade flourishing so well in spite of its illegality? What is the best way to put an end to this modern day slavery? These questions would be answered in the course of this paper but our search light would focus more on the last question. Technology has been at the forefront of the slavery drive both in its old clothing and in its new dimension. This paper believes that technology, when well employed could be made to take the repentant path and lead the fight against slavery and slave trade. Technology could be made to solve the problem it helped create by enhancing development of the third world countries especially Africa. This need to be so because, it is poverty that has been a major booster to slavery. When technology is directed at advancement of the lives of the populace as well as stifling the activities of traffickers, slavery would be curbed.

TECHNOLOGY AND THE BEGINNING OF SLAVERY

The [Merriam-Webster](#) dictionary (2002) defines technology as "the practical application of knowledge especially in a particular area" and "a capability given by the practical application of knowledge". It refers to the creation, modification, knowledge and usage of tools, machines, crafts, systems etc in solving or improving pre-existing solution to practical problems. Technology is a term that includes simple tools, such as farming hoe or knife, or more complex machines, such as a [space station](#) or [particle accelerator](#). Technology however, is not only material or tangible like in the examples we mention above, but it could take the form of virtual technology, like [computer softwares](#). Technology affects virtually every aspect of human life – it enhances their ability to control and tame the world in which they live. Technology began with human's invention of simple tools like hoes and knives, which enhanced agriculture and thereby increasing food supply (Andrew et al., 2014; Iyorza 2015; Nzuanke & Chinaka 2018; Andrew-Essien 2021). The invention of the means of transportation like cars and ships made transportation easier. Other inventions like printing press, telephone, internet et cetera have made global communication easier. However, not all technologies have always produced positive result. Guns, gunpowder, ships, compass and similar technologies have for instance been used to foster slavery and slave trade both in the past and the present. The invention of the internet and the improvement of the communication industry have made slave trade easier now than it was in the past. Most slaves today are recruited through the internet with false promises of job, marriage, education et cetera as baits. Some others are tricked by their relatives, family friends, tribe's men etc with an offer of a better life abroad. Those trafficked are often forced into slavery through coercion, deception, fraud, intimidation, isolation, threat, physical force, debt bondage or even [force-feeding](#) with [drugs of abuse](#) to control them (Bales 2004). According to Kara, between 1.5 million and 1.8 million individuals are trafficked either internally or internationally annually (Kara 2008). Through the aid of good transportation and communication networks, slave trade has become alarmingly easy, cheap and almost imperceptible and of course money-spinning.



Technology has not just aided slavery in this age alone; it has been there propping and encouraging slavery also in the past. For instance, the invention of a machine that separates cotton fibres from its seed by Eli Whitney in the 18th century props up the demand for slaves. By hand it took one slave a whole day to produce a pound of cotton, whereas with the machine two slaves could produce 50 pounds of cotton per day (Wren & Greenwood 1999).

This invention made cotton business very profitable and thereby increasing the demand for slaves. In the 18th century therefore, the cotton gin technology sped up the rate of demand of slaves. The ships, guns and gunpowder also encouraged and inspired the sojourn of Westerners and other slave traders into strange lands in search of slaves. Without these available technologies, slave trade would have hardly been thinkable. With the advancement in technology, slave trade is no longer with compass, guns and ships. It is no longer a system of chains around the necks and waist. It is now a subtle system where the internet and communication system lure victims to the hands of their captivators. Unlike the former that is visible, slave trade now is opaque and hardly noticeable, thanks to the superior technologies available. Thus, without us being aware, slaves are said to be responsible for the manufacturing of a host of products, ranging from soccer balls in India and Christmas decorations in China to footwear in Brazil (Fishman 2005). Most of the products we consume daily are probably produced by slaves somewhere. Advances in manufacturing and transportation technologies and a corresponding increase in price consciousness by consumers have prop up the demand for low cost labour. This demand for low cost labour has fuelled up the demand for slaves. Manufacturing companies that wish to expand their production and sell at a low price to gain a competitive advantage make recourse to slave trade. This is perhaps, why slavery is at a world record high today.

SLAVERY AND AFRICA'S DEVELOPMENT

Though slaves in the past and at present come from all continents, Africa it could be argued had the greatest contribution to slavery (in terms of number of slaves) than other continents. This could be gleaned from Robert E. Lee appeal for the abolition of slavery, he writes:

slavery is a moral and political evil. It is idle to expatiate on its disadvantages. I think it is a greater evil to the white than to the colored race. While my feelings are strongly enlisted in behalf of the latter, my sympathies are more deeply engaged for the former (Gleissner 2010, p. 75).

His use of the terms coloured and white race, is a glaring picture that shows that slaves were associated with the coloured race (blacks). The slaves were therefore, mainly Africans. This was made possible by the preponderant belief that pictured Africans as subhuman. [IbnKhaldun](#) for instance, according to Lewis captures this belief thus: "the Black nations are, as a rule, submissive to slavery, because (Blacks) have little that is (essentially) human and possess attributes that are quite similar to those of dumb animals" (p. 53). It is argued that between the 16th and 19th centuries more than 13 million slaves were produced in Africa and transported across the Atlantic. This figure does not include the slaves that die on the way and those that were killed in the struggle to capture slaves. As recanted by Olauda Equiano who himself was captured and later became a leading force in the British abolition movement, the physical and social deaths that resulted from the production of the 13 million slaves, was almost twice that number (pp. 37-48). 77 percent of these 13 million slaves (i.e 10.1 million) were produced along the West and West Central coasts of Africa during the 150 years between 1701 and 1850. Brooding on the fact that, the population in this region was estimated to be at 28 million (McEvedy and Jones 1978), it would be easy to see the impact slavery had on the economy of Africans. The impact is not limited to the drastic reduction in population, leaving few behind to develop Africa, slave trade also encouraged slave raiding and discouraged state-building. The high demand of slaves and the cost implication, made a lot of states to delve into raiding of weak and unsuspecting villages for the purpose of getting slaves for sale. Rodney comments on this thus: there have been times in history when social groups



have grown stronger by raiding their neighbors for women, cattle, and goods, because they then use the "booty" from the raids for the benefits of their own community. Slaving in Africa did not even have that redeeming value. Captives were shipped outside instead of being utilized within any given African community for creating wealth from nature (p. 100). Wilks supports Rodney's assertion, when he writes:

We believe that Asante expansion halted after 1750 because the price of slaves started a sharp upward trend such that by the end of the 18th century the price had increased by 500%.¹⁶ In Asante history this is called the "southern problem," where peace was elusive and where rebellion and re-conquest were the recurrent pattern (Wilks 1975, pp. 26-28).

Slave trade therefore, reallocated labour away from agricultural and industrial work, and bends it towards slave trade. This constant wars and raids injected fear and a sense of insecurity in Africans, this is perhaps, the reason why villages constantly migrated (Andrew 2002; Andrew 2010; Umukoro et al., 2020). My village Nkim of Cross River State according to oral tradition migrated from four different locations before finally settling down at its present location. This constant migration fragmented Africa which, has resulted to various ethnic diversities and conflict that is presently the bane of Africa development. This constant migration also stifled development in Africa, because of the effect of diminishing return. Stability is surely needed for development to thrive – this the Africans of the traditional slave trade period never had. It is arguable therefore, that if slave trade had not existed, Africa would have developed better than this. Nathan Nunn supports this position, he writes:

According to my calculations, if the slave trades had not occurred, then 72% of the average income gap between Africa and the rest of the world would not exist today, and 99% of the income gap between Africa and the rest of the underdeveloped world would not exist. In terms of economic development, Africa would not look any different from the other developing countries in the world (Rhode et al., 1993, pp. 103).

Slave trade therefore, not only had an immediate impact on Africa, it also had a negative long-term effect on Africa's economic performance (Nunn 2014). Nathan Nunn made this clearer by his assertion:

Then looking across countries within Africa, one should observe that the parts of Africa that are the poorest today are also the areas from which the largest number of slaves were taken in the past. My research shows that this is indeed the case. The countries from which the most slaves were taken (taking into account differences in country size) are today the poorest in Africa (Sahn & Stifel 2003, p. 54).

There are historical documents from case studies that point to: political instability, weakened states, political and social fragmentation, deterioration of domestic legal institutions, violence, diversity, social hierarchy et cetera as resultant effect of slave trade. Some of these are however, contestable; some are over exaggerated, others are unfounded, but there are some that are absolutely true – there can never be debunked. No matter, how we look at it therefore, slave trade has a large chunk of blame to swallow, as regards Africa's backwardness in development. The modern day slave trade, may not be doing the same kind of damage as the olden day slave trade, but it is arguably doing more havoc than the former. For Africa to develop properly therefore, and compete favourably with other nations, slavery in all guise must end.



TECHNOLOGY AND THE END OF SLAVERY IN POSTCOLONIAL AFRICA

The 19th century abolitionists movement in its quest to end slavery, appealed to the sympathy of the slave owners. Thomas Jefferson for instance, writes: “the whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other, [Our children see this, and learn to imitate it](#)”. (Crews 1997, p. 510). They also appealed to the interest of the slave owners themselves. Robert Lee wrote on this thus:

I think it is a greater evil to the white than to the colored race. While my feelings are strongly enlisted in behalf of the latter, my sympathies are more deeply engaged for the former (Roper 2009, p. 280).

These appeals went through the hearts of the powerful white nations and resulted in the abolishment of slavery. But can similar appeals lead to the end of modern day slavery. The olden form of slavery was open to air, and everybody could see the horrendous circumstances and treatment the slaves went through. Even the whites themselves could not blot out the fact that the cruelty required to maintain slaves was harming their children and countrymen. They were being turned into heartless beasts. Thus, it was easier for appeals of the sort above to rent the heart. By contrast, modern day slavery is impersonal – it is a hidden form of activity. It is hidden from the people who can take decisions to end it. This is because, those who benefit from this slavery almost never gets to see the slaves themselves – that is, the distant investors and the final consumers who continually demand low prices. In this kind of circumstances, appeals to reason may never make any reasonable change in the slave trade. For the slave masters themselves, due to the heavy billion of money involved in the business, may never give heed to any simple appeal to end slavery. This is why we believe, that the most likely course of action against slavery is to cut off the supply. This would come through development of Africa – the major market of slaves.

Poverty, insecurity, political instability and other societal maladies that make life uncomfortable for people (Ayeni & Odey 2016), have been the factors that contribute to the continual and increasing supply of slaves. The largest numbers of slaves according to Nathan Nunn were taken from areas that were the most underdeveloped politically at the end of the 19th century (<http://www.voxeu.org/article/slave-trade-and-african-underdevelopment>). Africa faces these more than any set of people on earth, explaining why Africa has remained susceptible to slave trade. Africa houses a larger set of people who would be enticed with prospects of immigration. This is as a result of the endemic poverty; the widespread insecurity, poor infrastructural development, poor educational services and a host of other evils. In the midst of these problems, an average African would easily fall to the trickery of the slave traffickers. The promise of a better life abroad would most certainly turn over an average African.

We believe that a germane fight against slavery would start from, making frantic attempts at cutting down the supply chain of slavery. The supply chain could be broken down by totally eradicating those factors that make would-be slaves to fall headlong into the net of their captors. Africa and the third world countries need to be aided to attain development. Technology needs to be made to drive the development of Africa. This has to be so because technology remains the single most important driver of development. The industrialized countries are more developed than the third world countries because of their advancement in technology. Technological advancement would open up ways for more job opportunities and thereby lessening poverty (it is this increased need for labour occasioned by technologically driven companies in developed countries that has kept slavery on); it would lead to higher productivity, thereby making the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and Gross National Product (GNP) to rise. When there is high GDP and GNP, the country would have more money to develop infrastructures, provide basic amenities and arrest insecurities of all forms and thereby creating a better living condition for the citizenry (Bisong, 2018). The immense role technology could play in uplifting the lives of people make me believe that it must be the weapon that need to be employed to



combat slavery. As it has always abated slavery, it could also be a fundamental tool to end slavery. As it was a driver of slavery in Africa, it could lead to its end through development of Africa.

Technology transfer to Africa is one way to speed up development in this zone of the world. Another way is to put an end to the brain-drain wave that is currently on, leaving Africa at a disadvantage in terms of technological development. The former is more the responsibility of the developed countries, while the latter is more of the responsibility of the African states themselves. It is very unfortunate that the brightest minds in Africa are leaving Africa *enmasse* through scholarships schemes, foreign lotteries and through voluntary moves of experts to foreign lands in search of good pay and better working conditions. It is reported that one in every nine people who are born in Africa and have a university degree migrates to one of the 34 member states of the OECD – the world's most developed countries (Docquier & Marfouk 2006). According to a report on global migration released by the United Nations' Department of Economic and Social Affairs, and the OECD secretariat, there are about 30 million African migrants (Abubakar et al., 2018). This acute brain drain leaves African states bereft of enough talents to push their drives towards technological advancement. Technological development and advancement is a function of intellectuals, when the best of these are rooted out to developed countries with whatever guises, it leaves the mother country seriously handicapped. African governments would need to make a conscientious effort to end brain drain, if they hope to be named among the comity of developed nations of the world. A continent, whose best brains are shipped out to aid the development of other continents, would forever remain a dwarf. And being a dwarf and needy continent, its citizens would continue to be easily lured into slavery. African government would need to make policies and laws that would be geared towards stemming brain drain, so that these brains would be retained for the advancement of the continent.

The developed countries would also need to complement the effort of the African governments through technology transfer. It is disheartening that, some companies that have operated in Africa for decades are still to transfer this technology to Africans. Coca Cola and Guinness Nigeria Plc for instance, have operated in Nigeria for long, but the mother liquor for their drinks is yet to be known by Nigerian staff. The same is true of most other companies in Africa. They hardly let in their resident countries into the knowledge of their technologies. Africans are therefore, consigned to the status of receptors and not participants in the technologies. If this continues then, slavery would continue. This is because technology is the mother of development, and development is anathema to slavery. Thus, letting in technology into an area would boost development which would put an end to slavery. The developed countries, since they have a hand on Africa underdevelopment, no matter how remote this may be, have a moral duty to contribute to the development of Africa. A policy of technology transfer that stipulates the number of years a given company would operate in a country before its technology is transferred to that country, would be one way to ensure that technologies are not perpetually hidden from Africans as is presently the case.

CONCLUSION

Africa's development may not directly be a responsibility of the Whites, but it is incontrovertibly a duty they can never inculpably shake-off. It may not be a legal duty, but it is arguably a moral duty. In as much as the developed countries contributed to the underdevelopment of Africa, they have a moral duty to contribute to its development. Apologies alone cannot recompense what they did to Africa. The best remuneration would be to aid the crawling Africa to stand on its feet. As we have already noted above, one way to do this, is to lift Africa from being a dumping ground of technologies to participants in these technologies. The UN should formulate policies that would favour technology transfer to Africa to boost up its development. Africa too would need to quail its wailing – it has lamented and wailed for too long; it need to stand up and take up drastic steps to attain development. There is no need to cry over spill milk, what has happened has happened, the only option now is to rise up to the present, and ensure that the future comes to us brighter and fairer. One way to do is to fight against brain drain that is presently gnawing at the marrow of Africa. When Africa succeeds in retaining its best brains, its chances of developing indigenous technologies



would increase. Improvement of working conditions in the continent, added to the formulation and implementation of immigration and other policies that would cut down brain drain to other continent would go a long way in advancing technological drive in the continent.

The complementarity of the efforts of the foreign and indigenous government would enhance African technological development and consequently would put a knife to slavery in the world. Any effort at ending slavery that is not geared towards blowing out the supply of slaves would not yield useful results. For as long as there remains a good supply of slaves, slavery would continue. But when the supply is cut-off, slavery dies a natural death. When Africa which is arguably the highest supplier of slaves is freed from those factors (poverty, insecurity, illiteracy etc) that make its citizen susceptible to slavery, then slavery would end or reduce to a minimal level. When the lives of citizens are improved, the lure of a better life abroad would be reduced and thereby the machinery with which the traffickers operate with would be disambiguated and rendered ineffectual. Modern day slave traffickers use trickery as their machinery and not force as it was predominantly the case in olden day slave trafficking. If there were to use force, they would most likely not sail through the various immigration points en route their destination. The olden day traffickers succeeded with force, because slavery was legal that time. The only way open for modern day traffickers is to cajole the would-be slaves through whatever trickery devices available, to willingly transport or allow himself/herself to be transported to their zones. Afterward they can use whatever means ranging from threats, force to drugs to make them submit to enslavement. However, when a better life is instituted in Africa, the quest in Africans to migrate to Europe and America would reduce, and therefore traffickers would be handicapped in their heinous devices of trickery and deception. It is at this moment that the multi-billion dollar 'slave trade industry' would crumble to the ground. It is at this moment, that the ardent slave masters would be forced to gun for alternative ways to enhance high productivity without compromising the demand for low prices by the consumers

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