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## **West Africa and Colonialism, Part 1**

**by Wendy McElroy**

Until recently, Western scholarship ignored West Africa. The blind spot reflects Europe's historical view of Africa as a continent to be exploited, not examined. To Europe, Africa was a market for products and a source of raw goods. In short, it was an object of mercantilism — the economic system by which colonial powers economically exploit weaker regions. Thus, West Africa was defined in terms of economic goods — the Ivory Coast, the Gold Coast, the Slave Coast. Beneath the definitions imposed by mercantilism, however, lay a remarkable network of peoples and cultures that amazed and even frightened the West.

Black Africa — sometimes called the “heart of Africa” — is one of four distinct areas on the continent. The other three are the Mediterranean coast to the North; East Africa; and South Africa. The Mediterranean and the East have been known to the world since Biblical times, and South Africa was one of Europe's earliest colonies. But, until the 19th century, Black Africa was almost unexplored.

West Africa bulges into the Atlantic Ocean and offers a doorway into Black Africa. At first, Europeans frequented the approximately 500-mile coast of lower West Africa but rarely traveled inward because the rivers were impassable. Those who conquered the many barriers found wild animals, unpredictable natives, and tropical disease. Ultimately, however, the Niger River would provide access into the heart of Africa, and the area surrounding the river would become known as Nigeria.

Nigeria comprises the lower section of West Africa. Europeans created Nigeria as a political unit in 1914, but since the Stone Age it has been peopled by a multitude of ethnic groups with distinct customs and languages.

Until about 2000 B.C., the Sahara region was fertile and probably well inhabited, with the peoples of Northern and Western Africa trading freely. Then, as the Sahara began to dry, the desert severed most of West Africa, especially the south, from contact with the outside.

What is known about the early history of southern West Africa comes from oral traditions, which are often unreliable. Nevertheless, they render a sense of the south's separate development.

People seemed to live on roots, wild animals, and fruits, with the main crafts being pottery and woodcarving.

Empires, such as that of the Ibos, arose. The Ibos were organized into a lineage system with the nuclear family as the basic unit. A cluster of families constituted a family group; a collection of family groups made up a lineage; lineages formed a village; villages formed a town. Religion was a main foundation of social control but the Ibos were also bound together by a well-established economic system in which the village market was the center of socializing as well as of trade.

A London commission later described the network of crucial paths that connected such marketplaces:

You must pass through it by files. It is like a town a thousand miles long. The paths lead to perfectly definite spots, from one village to another. Every village is a road-block; the path comes to the village . . . regathers itself, and leads out the other side.

In 1472, the Portuguese arrived in West Africa on an exploratory expedition; perhaps, through West Africa, they could find a trade route to India? Instead, they encountered the African empire of Benin on the coast. Hitherto, most trade had been overland. Now the Portuguese established “factories” — as European trading stations were called — to purchase slaves and other commodities for which they traded firearms. Benin was uniquely suited to the slave trade. It had access to the ocean and rivers, and dominated the slave-supplying forest regions. Soon, a large and well-equipped army allowed Benin to expand.

The Dutch and British followed. Europe was hungry for pepper, ivory, timber, gold, and slaves. The slave trade soon dominated, largely because the trading nations were also colonizing the New World across the Atlantic. The colonization was a brutal process during which much of the indigenous population died. This created a labor shortage, especially on the sugar-cane plantations that fed the European sweet tooth.

Estimates of the total number of slaves exported from Africa range from 14 million to 24 million, with half or fewer surviving the cruel Atlantic passage. Many more died in the wars and raids that netted slaves or in the forced marches to ports and the brutal waiting camps.

## **Slavery in Africa**

Slavery was not new to Africa but it differed from the European variety in at least three major ways. First, the Europeans transported slaves over long distances under inhumane conditions. Second, slaves within Africa had well-defined privileges and rights, while slaves within European societies were virtually nonhuman. Third, European slavery was immense in scope. It affected four continents: Europe, Africa, North America, and South America; it spanned

centuries. It is scant exaggeration to say that much of the wealth of the British Empire was built on the slave trade.

Meanwhile, West Africa was desolated. The slave trade first affected the peoples who lived on the Atlantic seaboard, then it moved inward along the banks of major rivers. Those kidnapped were the healthy and young, leaving tribes without productive members to care for the old and weak. Constant warfare and the slave trade disrupted all traditional social and economic life. Power now became concentrated in the hands of traders whose business concerns were called “houses” — the house system being the clearing place through which Europeans carried out major financial transactions, such as granting credit. The traditional economic system, which was based on villages that traded with each other through various established currencies, was destroyed. Ideas and culture had also been exchanged along with goods; they, too, disintegrated.

James S. Coleman, in his study *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism*, pointed to the lasting impact on modern Nigeria:

Many educated Africans believe that the slave trade is the main explanation for their so-called primitiveness. They bitterly resent the stigma of inferiority implicit in the fact that their race was once a race of slaves. They feel that they were victims of history, held back while other peoples were advancing.

By the end of the 18th century, all of West Africa seemed in flux, not only because of the widespread collapse of traditional societies but also because of warfare between competing kingdoms over “good slave” land.

### **Ending European slavery**

At the same time, Europe experienced what has been called the Age of Enlightenment, which emphasized freedom and the equality of men under law. These ideas would spark the American and French revolutions; they also brought slavery into question, especially in Britain. Having dominated the Atlantic slave trade, Britain would become instrumental in banning it.

In 1772, *Somerset v. Knowles* — a test case — was brought before British Lord Chief Justice Mansfield to establish whether slaves were free men under British law. Mansfield ruled that slaves who set foot on English soil became free. The ruling signaled the beginning of the end of European slavery. In 1776, Adam Smith published *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, in which he argued that the work of free men was cheaper than that of slaves. Economic arguments became mixed, with the religious ones being advanced by Quakers.

The obstacles were incredible. Many politicians were personally involved in the slave trade, which they argued was necessary to the British economy. In 1790, Britain had approximately £170 million invested in the slave-dependent West Indies alone. Back at home, in

just one city — Birmingham — 100,000 muskets a year were manufactured to barter for slaves. In Lancashire, textile mills ran at full-tilt to produce material both to trade for slaves and to clothe them.

Nevertheless, a moral and political tide had turned. In 1807, the slave trade became illegal for English merchants. In 1833, it was abolished throughout the British Empire, and Britain pressed other nations to abandon the trade as well. To the utter bewilderment of West African chiefs, the British started making treaties for them *not* to provide slaves. The British now adopted three basic strategies toward West Africa: first, they attempted to substitute other goods, especially palm oil; second, they took over parts of Africa, ostensibly to aid in the production of the substituted goods; and, third, missionaries increased their efforts to save African souls.

But, without the slave trade, most British merchants had little interest in a ravaged West Africa. Investment flowed instead to America, Europe, Australia, and Canada. The two elements within British society that kept interest in West Africa alive were explorers and missionaries.

### **Exploration and trade**

Even after hundreds of years of exploitation, Europeans had not mapped the region's two main rivers — the Niger and the Congo. The conventional method of exploration — that is, by simply sailing up rivers — did not work well in West Africa. Many rivers had unnavigable, swampy deltas at their mouths and, farther inland, giant waterfalls plunged down to the plain. But the greatest barrier to exploration was disease.

Nevertheless, in the 1820s, the British government funded an expedition under Captain Hugh Clapperton, which became the first European venture to reach Lake Chad in the heart of Black Africa. Hinting at the richness of African culture, Clapperton described a city in this near mythical region:

The market is well supplied. Bands of musicians rove between stalls to attract purchasers to particular booths. Here are displayed coarse writing paper of French manufacture, brought from Barbary; scissors and knives of native workmanship; unwrought silk of a red color . . . armlets and bracelets of brass; beads of glass, coral, and amber; finger rings of pewter and a few silver trinkets, but none of gold . . . coarse Moorish dresses, pieces of Egyptian linen . . . sword blades from Malta, etc.

Missionaries spread not only Christianity but also the virtues of hard work, a combination called “the Bible and plow.” Missionaries believed that teaching Africans to make money by other means would prevent slavery; happily for British merchants, it would also enable them to buy British goods.

Anti-slavery efforts often coincided with British merchant interests. For example, the British tried to persuade the influential king of Dahomey to stop slave trading. The king refused,

arguing that this would give an advantage to his rival in Lagos, who would continue to trade. Lagos was a strategically placed island, of great importance to trade on the coast, with a king notoriously hostile to British merchants. In 1851, the British captured Lagos. The new king signed a treaty that denounced slavery and favored British trade. Although the anti-slavery aspect of such treaties often dissolved — the slave trade withered only after American slaves were emancipated — nevertheless, the anti-slavery treaties tended to cement British power in West Africa. British power was also aided by the close-to-constant hostility among indigenous peoples that left them unable to unite in opposition.

*Wendy McElroy is the author of **The Reasonable Woman: A Guide to Intellectual Survival** (Prometheus Books, 1998). For additional articles on current events by Ms. McElroy, please visit the [Commentary](#) section of our website.*

**This article was originally published in the October 2004 edition of *Freedom Daily*.**