Reconnecting to Rebirth a New Progressive Africa and World

Mnena Abuku

Abstract— Prevailing linear theories of historical progress, derived from European experiences, have often obscured Africa's foundational and cyclical contributions to human civilization. This paper critiques this linear paradigm, arguing that it selectively edits history to emphasize a European trajectory from Greece and Rome to the Industrial Revolution while neglecting Africa's pivotal early roles in human evolution, agriculture, technology, and the early Christian Church. The analysis traces how this external lens, combined with the catastrophic disruptions of the trans-Saharan and trans-Atlantic slave trades, fractured African development. The Atlantic trade, in particular, represented a unique and dehumanizing system that commodified people, triggering internal warfare and state destabilization across the continent. Moving forward, the paper contends that Africa's renewal, a "rebirth" akin to a spiritual transformation, requires a deliberate reconnection with its own historical legacy and epistemic roots. This involves transcending a human rights framework to embrace a more profound African conception of human dignity, fostering internal collaboration, and regenerating knowledge systems in education, technology, and culture. Ultimately, the path to a progressive Africa and a more equitable world lies not in linear catch-up but in a cyclical reclamation and modernization of indigenous African genius.

Keywords: African historiography; linear versus cyclical history; trans-Atlantic slave trade; human dignity; African renaissance

[1] Rev. Fr. Moses Orshio Adasu University, Makurdi Email:. mneabuks@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

For centuries, dominant theories of development have been derived from the European historical experience, establishing an idealized endpoint and charting a singular path of progress toward it (Chakrabarty, 2000). In this framework, Europeanisation or Westernisation became the benchmark for advancement. Africans themselves have often internalized this view, holding the industrial civilization of Victorian England as the pinnacle of human achievement, even as Europeans have begun to question this very notion of perfection and now speak of pre- and post-industrial eras (Ferguson, 2011). This linear narrative traces a steady progression from Greece and Rome to Renaissance Italy, through the Scientific Revolution of Newton, the Age of Enlightenment, and onto the Industrial and Political Revolutions of the eighteenth century, culminating in the Victorian Era.

This constructed history promotes a vision of continual progress, marked by the increasing spread of democracy and the liberation of the human spirit. However, in pursuit of this linear theory, history is often edited, neglecting aspects inconsistent with the European view of development (Rodney, 2018). For instance, this narrative fails to emphasize that the celebrated expansion of democracy and liberty in the Western world was, for centuries, built upon the exploitation of Black slaves from Africa, a continent that once set the pace for global development (Nunn, 2008). Critical milestones in human history, such as the transition from hominids to *Homo sapiens*, occurred in Africa. Africa also took the lead in the development of agriculture and iron technology (Iliffe, 2017). The dominant role of Egyptian civilization is frequently minimized, as is the fact that Greek luminaries like Plato, Aristotle, Herodotus, and Archimedes studied at the famed Museum and Library of Alexandria (Bernal, 1987).

Scholars often play down the fact that the Early Church developed principally among the Berbers of Ancient Carthage and the Egyptian Copts around Alexandria, where the Old Testament was translated into Greek as the Septuagint. It is routinely ignored that major figures of the Early Christian Church, Saints Augustine of Hippo, Clement, Cyril, and Athanasius of Alexandria, were all Africans (Oden, 2007). The linear vision neglects the dominant historical pattern of rise and fall, of cyclical renewal. As taught in Christian scripture, rebirth is not a moment of linear progression but a transformative process: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Corinthians 5:17, New International Version).

This linear model cannot adequately explain the vital role of North Africa in the Early Church, the rise of Islam and the golden era of Islamic North Africa, or the heyday of institutions like Al-Azhar University in Cairo and the University of al-Qarawiyyin in Fez, the latter being older than the University of Oxford (Hunwick, 2006). It was often through Islamic universities that the philosophy of ancient Greece was rediscovered, detached from its African contexts, and developed as the foundation for the Humanist view that fueled the Italian Renaissance and subsequent European development (Lewis, 1990). What, then, explains the rise of one civilization and the fall of another? The fourteenth-century Tunisian scholar Ibn Khaldun postulated a cyclical theory where hardy desert nomads conquer settled agrarian societies, establish dynasties, become softened by urban luxury over three generations, and are

subsequently overthrown by a new wave of invaders, a process he termed *asabiyyah* (Fage, 1981).

Notably, medieval Muslim scholars documented their world with particular interest in neighboring regions. As historian Bernard Lewis (1990) notes, "Muslim geographers and to a much lesser extent Muslim historians- have something to say about various peoples beyond the frontiers of the Islamic ecumene. About Western Europe- remote and, in their perspective, unimportant, they knew little and cared less" (p. 50). Their closest and most sustained relations were with Black Africa. Early Arabic references classified Black Africans as *Habash* (Abyssinians/Ethiopians) or *Sudan* (blacks in general). With Arab expansion into Africa, more specific terms emerged: *Nuba* for Nilotic peoples south of Egypt, *Bujja* for tribes between the Nile and Red Sea, and *Zanj* for coastal East Africans (Lewis, 1990).

The term *Bilad-al-Sudan* (Lands of the Blacks) applied to the entire sub-Saharan region from the Nile to the Atlantic, encompassing great West African states like Ghana and Songhai (Nabiebu & Ekpo, 2025a; Nabiebu & Ekpo, 2025b). From the ninth century onward, Arab and Muslim scholars documented the movement of slaves from these lands north and east across the Sahara, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean. The geographer Ya'qubi noted that from Zawila, "black slaves [were] exported belonging to the tribes of Mira, Zaghawa, Maruwa and other black races" (as cited in Lewis, 1990, p. 52). These accounts sometimes contained derogatory descriptions, reflecting prejudiced views. For instance, the Zanj were occasionally described in dehumanizing terms. However, as Muslim polities and Islam advanced into Black Africa and kingdoms like Mali and Songhai became celebrated parts of the Islamic world, such simplistic and negative accounts became less frequent, though a perception of African Muslims as different and Africa as a legitimate slave source persisted (Miers & Kopytoff, 1977).

The collapse of Graeco-Roman civilization under barbarian invasions (Vandals, Goths, Celts) and its subsequent reinvigoration under Charlemagne's Holy Roman Empire suggests that progress in one region has often relied on the exploitation or stimulus of another. Medieval European nobility required serfs; classical Greeks required "barbarians"; Islamic empires required non-Muslim *dhimmi* for specific taxes and labor (Lovejoy, 2012). This raises a central question for African development: How much can a society progress through self-directed effort, and how much does progress depend on external stimulation, whether through conquest, cultural exchange, or, detrimentally, exploitation?

THE PATTERN OF EXTERNAL STIMULATION AND THE CATASTROPHE OF THE SLAVE TRADES

In Sub-Saharan Africa, a decisive shift in the nature of external contact occurred with the arrival of Europeans. Initially, as with the Portuguese in Benin at the end of the fifteenth century, contact was between relative equals, featuring treaties and mutual exchange (Akinjogbin, 2000). This equilibrium was shattered by the rise of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The Benin Kingdom eventually expelled the Portuguese but could not stem the tide of a commerce now driven by immense European demand. The critical factor was a growing imbalance in technology: European maritime power and firearms transformed trade from a mutual exchange into an extractive, coercive system (Inikori, 1982).

This system created a vicious internal logic. To survive, African states felt compelled to ally with European traders, acquire guns, and strengthen themselves at the expense of neighbors. The slave trade, therefore, exerted one of its worst effects by forcing a state of constant, debilitating warfare, "beggaring thy neighbour", instead of fostering peaceful commercial intercourse and mutual development (Nunn, 2008).

WHAT WAS SLAVE TRADE LIKE IN AFRICA?

It is crucial to distinguish between indigenous African slavery and the commercialized systems that followed. Slavery existed in Africa from antiquity, rooted in social relations rather than pure commerce. Slaves were typically war captives or individuals marginalized due to religious taboos. In empires like Mali, Songhai, Ghana, and the Hausa states, slaves were one commodity among others (like gold, ivory, and textiles) in the trans-Saharan trade with Berber, Arab, and Tuareg merchants (Miers & Kopytoff, 1977). This trade was mutually beneficial, bringing Islam, literacy, and goods to Sudanese courts.

Within these African societies, slavery, while hierarchical, retained a human dimension. Slaves were integrated into households and lineages; they could own property, their children were often free, and they could sometimes earn their freedom. There was a reluctance to enslave fellow Muslims, and conversion could theoretically lead to manumission (Lovejoy, 2012). This system was violently disrupted by external forces, notably the Moroccan invasion of Songhai in 1591, which destroyed centers of learning like Timbuktu but failed to establish stable rule.

THE SLAVE ECONOMY AND ITS DESTRUCTIVE EVOLUTION

The influence of external slave demands reached its peak with the Jihad movements of the 18th and 19th centuries, which synthesized trans-Saharan and Atlantic trade legacies. Historian Paul Lovejoy (2012) details how the Sokoto Caliphate became the largest slave economy in African history. It featured organized slave plantations, a refined system called *murgu* where slaves could work to purchase their freedom, and regular raids on non-Muslim communities for captives. The Caliphate's economy, supported by a vast slave population, was described by visitors as a bustling market where human beings were inspected and sold like livestock.

By 1826, the slave economy of the interior had become fully integrated with the Atlantic demand from the coast. Wars became total, aiming not just for conquest but for the complete destruction of communities to capture every potential slave. Samuel Crowther, later a bishop, described the destruction of his Oyo village, Osogun, in 1821 by Oyo Muslims. Similarly, the Owu War (1820-25) devastated Egba villages. The great Oyo Empire, which had grown powerful by exploiting both the trans-Saharan and Atlantic trades, succumbed to internal revolts and Fulani pressure by 1837. Its collapse revealed how centuries of slaving had eroded social solidarity and state cohesion (Akinjogbin, 2000). As scholar Akinjogbin (2000) argues, "the accumulated effect of centuries of slave trade had eaten deep into the fabric of the state destroying the solidarity of its different parts such that it was no longer able to contain revolts but slowly fell apart" (p. 117).

AFRICANS NOT TO BE BLAMED FOR THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE

Some scholarship, particularly in Western contexts, emphasizes the universality of slavery. While academically true, this can misleadingly obscure the unique, catastrophic nature of the trans-Atlantic slave trade (Davis, 2006). As noted, African slavery was primarily a social institution. The trans-Atlantic trade was a perversion of this institution into a capital-intensive, racially codified, and brutally efficient engine of dehumanization.

The key differences are profound. In Africa, slaves were human beings within a social structure; in the Atlantic system, they were legally defined as chattel property. African slaves had rights to family, personal property, and potential integration; Atlantic slaves were denied all such rights, their children were owned by the master, their families were deliberately separated, and their humanity was erased by law and brutal practice (Williams, 1994). The international competition among European nations to maximize profits did more than anything to reduce Africans from fellow humans to commercial cargo, creating a racialized stereotype that has endured for centuries.

WHAT WAY FORWARD? RECONNECTING TO DIGNITY AND REBIRTH

The path forward for Africa must begin by addressing this profound historical injustice, which stripped millions of their human dignity, a concept deeper than the modern framework of human rights. Human rights are individualistic and legalistic, derived from a particular liberal worldview. As Donnelly (1989) notes, they "rest on a moral vision of human nature that views human beings as equal and autonomous individuals who are entitled to equal concern and respect" (p. 24). Traditional African conceptions of human dignity, however, are often communally embedded and spiritually anchored, emphasizing one's worth within a network of relationships (Wiredu, 1996).

The evil of the Atlantic slave trade, a crime against humanity of staggering scale, fractured spirits and severed roots. Its legacy, the "ripples" of trauma and dislocation, still reverberates in Africa and the diaspora. Therefore, the imperative is for Africa and its global diaspora to reconnect with African roots to facilitate a rebirth. This requires the world to unequivocally condemn the unique horrors of the Atlantic system with the same moral force applied to other historical crimes.

CONCLUSION

Africa has endured profound injustices through the Atlantic slave trade, the effects of which persist. To move forward, descendants of this history must confront the past not with shame but with a reclaimed confidence and self-belief. Africa's rebirth hinges on a cyclical return to its own sources of strength, not a linear mimicry of the West. This involves a collaborative regeneration of knowledge in education, technology, agriculture, and culture, supported by a revived ethic of community and unity. By distancing itself from divisive conflicts and reconnecting with its own dignified past, Africa can rebuild itself and contribute to a new, more progressive world. This rebirth is not a return to a mythical past, but a transformative process of becoming a "new creation," forged from the wisdom of its ancient legacy and the demands of the modern age.

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