

The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: An Examination of the Incorrectness of the Ghana Senior High School History Syllabus

by

Nana Osei Bonsu
nanseezy@gmail.com
University of Cape Coast, Ghana

Introduction

‘Slavery’ does not lend itself to a single and easy definition. There are many definitions for the phenomenon and this is because scholars define it to suit their cultural and social background (Bonsu, 2015). Moreover, the kind of slavery that existed in the Gold Coast (a former British colony until 1957, now the independent nation of Ghana) was different from that of Europe. Indigenous slavery existed in various forms before the arrival of the Europeans in the Gold Coast. These following terms were associated with servitude in Ghana: *Ahubanyi*, *Odonko* or *Adihyifunafu* or *Akoa* (all in the Akan language). R. S. Rattray (1929) found out that in Asante, the term *akoa* did not mean ‘slave’ in the degrading European sense, but to anyone in a subordinate position such as the subject of a ruler. Again, *Adihyifunafu* was a voluntary slave who sought protection from a powerful family whenever he or she was in crisis or hardship.

Persons under bondage in the Gold Coast enjoyed privileges in many respects and in most cases the distinction between an enslaved and the free person was slender. An enslaved person could marry, own properties and sometimes even own slaves themselves (Falola, 1987). Enslaved persons often enjoyed social mobility and this allowed servile persons to rise to positions of authority and influence in many the Gold Coast societies. In some cases, persons in servitude in privileged households enjoyed higher standards of living than poor free persons. Moreover, the enslaved status in societies like the Fante Ghana could not be transmitted beyond the second generation. Enslaved Ghanaians were thus treated humanely and with dignity before the introduction of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. According to Boahene (1975), this trans-Atlantic slave trade began with the arrival of the Portuguese on the coast from 1470 onwards and later followed by the French, the English, the Dutch and the Danes. It is important to note that the Ghanaian senior high school history syllabus (2010) gave these following reasons for the arrival of the Europeans in the Gold Coast to search for a sea route to the Far East for commodities and to facilitate direct trade in the Gold resources of West Africa (the trade in Gold later resorted to a trade in ‘slaves’).

Primary and secondary sources were used for this study. Hence, study largely employed secondary sources such as books and articles; although primary sources were used to verify the authenticity of the secondary sources (secondary sources were carefully collected and verified for its authenticity before they were analyzed for the study).

The Problem

History is a subject of study in the Ghanaian senior high school. In the second year, students study a unit called: “The Coming of Europeans” under which a sub-topic called “Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade” (the notion of ‘trade’ is a dishonest reading of history) can be found. Under the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, students are to examine the positive and negative effects of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The Ghanaian senior high school history syllabus (2010) outlined positive effects of slavery such as:

- Introduction of new crops
- European cloths
- Home and work equipment
- Literacy
- Religion
- Employment opportunities in offices
- Commerce work

And the negative effects such as:

- Intensification of the inter-ethnic wars
- Depopulation
- Displacement of Africans to the Diaspora

One can see from the above that the positive effects given by the writers of the syllabus far outweigh the negative effects. The question is, did the people of the Gold Coast (Ghana) benefit from the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade? The answer is obvious. Only the European slave merchants benefited at the expense of the people of the Gold coast. The enslaved people of Africa were taken away to America and the Mediterranean to work sugar-cane, cotton and tobacco plantations, thus, they contributed to the growth of the economy of two continents.

The prime purpose of this exercise is to examine the positive effects of trans-Atlantic slave trade as specified in the senior high school history syllabus in Ghana and ascertain whether they were indeed positive. Hence, it is my hope that this study will add to existing works on the problem and that the findings will serve as a platform for organizing another study towards finding a lasting solution to the problem.

Second, I think my findings could be of benefit to the Curriculum Research and Development Division of the Ministry of Education in Ghana, so that the current syllabus can be revised or amended. And next, History teachers in Senior High Schools should also benefit from this study as they will be informed on the need to change their syllabus as they teach.

According to Stabler and Owusu (2013:9), “most textbooks reference colonization and trans-Atlantic slave trade as positive that brought many good things to Ghana”. Again, the syllabus discusses trans-Atlantic slave trade in brief, rather than in detail. The Ghanaian senior high school history syllabus also limits authors, since they are to publish textbooks which are in line with the syllabus. J. K. Fynn and R. Addo – Fening’s *History for Senior Secondary Schools* (2002) and Okyere’s *Ghana: A Historical Survey* (2000) are the most widely used textbooks for the teaching and learning of history in the Ghanaian senior high school, and these two books failed to do justice to the topic “Trans-Atlantic slave trade in Ghana”.

In regards to the positive effects of the trans-Atlantic slave trade such as the introduction of new crops, European cloths, home and work equipment, literacy, Christianity and employment opportunities in offices and commerce. In reality, there were no positive effects, what the syllabus claims are simply fallacies and distortions.

What is good about Christianity?

I ask, what is good about Christianity? Am sure most Christians will say a lot of good things about their religion, but what will African traditionalists also say? Before Christianity arrived in the Gold Coast in the 15th century, African traditional religion was the predominant religion of the people of the Gold Coast. African traditional religion according to Awolalu (1976) is based mainly on oral transmission. It is not written on paper, but in people’s hearts, minds, oral history, rituals, shrines and religious functions. It has no founders or reformers like Gautama the Buddha, Asoka, Christ, or Muhammad. It is not the religion of one person; it has no missionaries, or even the desire to propagate the religion, or to proselytize. However, the adherents are loyal worshippers and, probably because of this, African people who have their roots in indigenous religions, find it difficult to sever their connection to it. And since African religions have no founder, one cannot trace it origin, but scholars agree that it is older than Christianity. This religion recognized the existence of the Supreme Being (God) long before the introduction of Christianity. However, African religions have gradually declined after the arrival of Christianity in the Gold Coast as Ghanaians were made to believe via the Westerners (Europeans) that their culture and religions were irrelevant. And Ghanaians easily rejected their cultural value and today, according to the website of the Ghana Embassy in USA, 71% of Ghanaians are Christians while less than 5.2% are traditionalists (2012 census), thus, how can one say that the introduction of Christianity is or was a positive effect for the people of Ghana in relationship to the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Literacy

Second, by literacy, the syllabus means ‘western education’ and that was a type of education introduced in the Gold Coast by the Europeans missionaries; started before the colonial government took over (Boahene, 1975; Okyere, 2000; Amenumey, 2008). This kind of education focused on reading, arithmetic and writing (the currently Ghanaian educational system is based on what their colonial masters left for them). This system encourages and rewards people who are able to memorize what they read and “pour” them during examination to pass (learning by rote), as the most preferred type of assessment in Ghana is now the ‘paper and pencil test’ (traditional assessment) type of assessment (Oppong, 2009).

As Agyeman, Baku and Gbadamosi (2000:9) noted, “it is universally accepted that one of the benefits of good education is that it enables individuals to contribute to development and improvement in the quality of life for themselves, their communities and the nation as a whole”. Yet in Ghana, most engineers and scientists only memorize theories, and it comes to practicality, they are unable to do anything. These engineers are not making inventions such as vehicles, planes etc. The educational system introduced in Ghana during colonialism was not to train better technocrats, but to train people who could only read, write and calculate, and in this 21st century, as the current Ghanaian educational system is still following a colonial system, and thus, not in any way, a positive effect in relationship to the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

New Variety of Crops

According to Okyere (2000:31), among the new variety of crops introduced by Europeans were Asian food crops such as coconut, onion, garden eggs, okro, rice, and cocoyam. From Europe was introduced orange, melon and lemon while cassava, sweet potatoes, maize, groundnut, pineapples, guava, and sugar-cane were brought from the New World. One must ask, how can the introductions of food crops from elsewhere into the Gold Coast be a positive effects of the trans-Atlantic slave trade? How did that contribute to the economy of the Gold Coast and are they still contributing to the Ghanaian economy? No. These new crops did not contribute anything to the Gold Coast economy. Ghana spends a huge sum money to import sugar from Brazil and rice from Asia, and this is as a result of the ‘taste’ that Ghanaians have developed for these foreign food crops during colonialism. Prior to the advent of these foreign food crops, the people of the Gold Coast had wonderful and edible crops that they were eating. Hence the syllabus cannot say that the introduction of food crops in the Gold Coast was a positive effect of on the trans-Atlantic slave trade in regards to Ghana.

Introduction of European Cloths

According to Okyere (2000), the Europeans were attracted to the Gold Coast because of the desire to trade in Gold, and as a result, they tried to win Gold Coast traders to their side by introducing a wide range of European textiles. From this statement, one can clearly see the motive for introducing these cloths. Amenumey (2008) also asserts that cotton cloth that could be easily washed or replaced now became available. However, his statement is not concrete enough to support the fact that the introduction of European cloths in the Gold Coast is a positive effect of trans-Atlantic enslavement on Ghanaians. Prior to the arrival of Europeans, Ghanaians had their own indigenous cloths that were of good quality. The Ewe and Akan produced kente cloths, while the northern part of Ghana had Smock dresses before the arrival of the Europeans in the Gold Coast in the 15th century. Ghanaians were not naked when the Europeans arrived in the 15th century, and although European cloths were of little significance, we cannot dwell solely on that to say that the trans-Atlantic slave trade had positive effects on Ghanaians.

Employment Opportunities in Offices and Commerce Work

Okyere (2000) and Fynn (2002) state in their textbooks that the trans-Atlantic slave trade led to a class of wealthy indigenous Ghanaian merchants, and Okyere (2000) mentioned merchants like Edward Barter of Cape Coast (d. 1702), John Cudjoe, John Cabes, John K. Caboecer of Cape Coast (d. 1776) and Philip Quacoe. Okyere also added that though these merchants he listed contributed in one way or the other to the development of the Gold Coast, the harmful effects of the unpleasant trade makes such contribution of no permanent value. However, both textbooks did not state the roles played by these merchants, they were silent. Amenumey (2008) however stated that these merchants served as middlemen to the Europeans in the 'trade' since the Europeans did not go inland to capture or buy people. From this, we can at least see some of the roles played by these merchants, some bought and sold their own people; some also gained employment as interpreters, record keepers and assistants to assist Europeans merchants. In short, the role these merchants played were to perpetuate slavery or simply, 'the holocaust of enslavement' as Karenga (2010) refers to the trans-Atlantic crime against African humanity. Thus, they gained money through the selling and buying of humans. They also helped the European slave merchants in the slavery business. Whether these indigenous merchants contributed to the development of the Gold Coast or not, the fact still remains that their main source of wealth was through evil means. Furthermore, these merchants were fewer in numbers and they were those who became rich while most Ghanaians were in poverty. Okeyre did well in stating that the harmful effects of the unpleasant trade makes the contribution of the indigenous merchants of no permanent value or worth, yet he went ahead to place this point under a positive effect of trans-Atlantic slave trade in his book. From the foregoing, it is clear that the contributions of these merchants were of no significance, and therefore cannot be a positive effect for Ghana.

Conclusion

The trans-Atlantic slave trade did not have any positive impact on Ghana. The trade itself doesn't have any positive effects. Everything about it was negative. It created insecurity, increased inter-ethnic wars, contributed to the depopulation of the Gold Coast, led to the decline of African traditional religion and the Ghanaian indigenous culture, therefore, I recommend that the Ministry of Education should revise or amend the current syllabus to exclude the positive effects of trans-Atlantic slave trade and that the trans-Atlantic slave trade as a topic should also be taught in detail so that students will not only know what happened to people enslaved in Ghana, America and in the Caribbean.

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