

The Eclipse of the Institution of Slavery and its Impact on the Pre-Colonial State of Ibadan, 1873-1900

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Abstract

The concept of progress among individuals, communities and organisations globally implies positive changes. The process of change itself is a normal occurrence and this is why it has been regarded as the most permanent phenomenon in human history. However, it must be noted that despite its permanent nature, societies view the concept of change as less desirable than status quo because of the fear of the unknown. This is applicable to development in the pre-colonial state of Ibadan. The Ibadan of our period introduced quite a lot of dynamism into statecraft. The changes swept through governance, agro-allied and local industrial production; marketing and diplomacy, both at home and in the vassal states. However, decision makers in Ibadan were reluctant when it was their turn to experience similar changes. This is not surprising because the wind of change that confronted the status quo in Ibadan was massive, such that the existing arrangement in which slaves were practically made the mainstay of the political economy of the state, collapsed under the new arrangement that was introduced by the British. This paper therefore, discusses the prelude to the sweeping changes and their effects on the society.

Keyword: Economy; History; Ibadan; Slavery; Trade.

Introduction

Before the emergence of Ibadan, an ancient city in South-western Nigeria, the Old Oyo Empire was the dominant power in Yorùbáland (Johnson, 1921). The Old Oyo Empire determined the peace, stability and progress of the vast area which extended beyond the boundary of modern Nigeria and as far as Togo to the fringes of modern Ghana (Akinjogbin, 1976). It was the collapse of this great empire that paved the way for the establishment and rise of Ibadan as a dominant power in Yorùbáland (Johnson, 1921). The new settlement, that is, Ibadan, which started as a war camp of the allied forces of the various Yorùbá people is currently the capital of Oyo State in present day South-western Nigeria. It was in the pre-colonial city of Ibadan, more than any other Yoruba cities, that slave labour was extensively used in the process of state building. As historians, the institution of slavery in the pre-colonial history of Ibadan is of great significance. The institution manifested itself in all sectors of the economy and politics of the town. Farm products were produced in abundance by the slaves. In addition, various locally manufactured goods flooded the markets and the distribution and exchange of such goods were affected with considerable dispatch by the slaves. They were also part of the law enforcement agents, a dependable fighting force and in the subject territories, they were political office holders. But despite the important role slavery as an institution played in the history of Ibadan, it suffered a crashing collapse from which it never survived.

Bolanle Awe's (1964) Ph.D thesis titled "The Rise of Ibadan as a Yoruba power" is one of the earliest comprehensive study on the history of Ibadan. The study examines how Ibadan grew from a small war-camp to a powerful state. Toyin Falola (1984), remarked that other scholars such as Saburi Biobaku, A. B. Aderibigbe, O. O. Ayantuga., and G. D. Jenkins among others, have also discussed some aspects of Ibadan history. But to a large extent, these writers focused more on the political and military history of Ibadan in the nineteenth century (Falola, 1984). In order to fill this obvious gap in the historiography of Ibadan, Falola conducted a study on the political economy of Ibadan (Falola, 1984). The study examines the economic foundation of the town, touching on very crucial issues hitherto glossed over by other historians. Nevertheless, Falola's work did not examine the eclipse of the institution of slavery in Ibadan. In addition to this, the impact of the cessation of the institution of slavery in Ibadan never attracted much attention of historians in their laudable efforts to reconstruct the early history of Ibadan and Yorubaland. This particular oversight and a gap in the history of Ibadan, is the focus of this essay. The study examines the eclipse of this all-important institution in the socio-economic history of Ibadan.

However, the demise of this all-important institution did not just begin in the 1890s. It had its roots earlier. Of course, there was the legal abolition of slavery as championed by Britain from 1807 in addition to the

consistent condemnation of the institution at every opportunity by the missionaries. The *Ajele* had also become lords onto themselves. The British had continued to intensify efforts, particularly in the 1880s, to stop the war among the people of the interior, an act leading to the signing of the 1893 agreement. What was more, the Hausa slave-soldiers of the British had been effective in aiding Ibadan slaves to escape into their fold, while the railway construction was in progress with its labour problems, which was to be salvaged by the labour of the slaves who eventually became free citizens. These were some of the factors that dealt devastating blows on the institution of slavery in the growing economy of Ibadan in our period.

The abolition of the external slave trade could be regarded as one of the very first factors that laid the foundation of the demise of the institution of slavery in Yorubaland. The British Government took the lead in this direction and by 1807 it had become illegal for British subjects to engage in slave trade. By 1833, the institution of slavery was outlawed in all British imperial possessions. But the Yoruba country was not affected directly by the British action since Britain was yet to have a foot-hold in the area. As a result of this, external slave trade still continued in the Yoruba country. This was possible because there were still ready markets, particularly in Cuba, Brazil and other Latin American states, for the production of sugar and coffee. The southern states of North America also formed centres of demand for cotton production in which slaves labour were equally required (Hopkins, 1973). Meanwhile, Britain continued her international bargaining to end the obnoxious trade. In 1861, Lagos was annexed by Britain making it possible for her to embark on the process of venturing into the interior of Yorubaland. By that year, most of the European nations had passed anti-slavery legislations. In the 1870s, North Africa, the Middle East and the Latin American states also followed the footsteps of the European nations (Hopkins, 1973).

With the British hold and influence in West Africa, the natives witnessed a period of renewed activities against slave trade. The British Government deployed an anti-slavery Squadron in West African waters and subsequently annexed certain key parts on the West Coast. Therefore, by 1860s and 1870s, the activities of the abolitionists began to be felt in *Yorubaland*, though the internal slave trade continued to flourish. But the foothold which the British had got in *Yorubaland* made it easier for her to enforce the 1807 law. Her nationals along with other Christian missionaries had also taken the opportunity of the 1807 proclamation to condemn slavery. Their sermons were based on the idea that slavery as an institution was not just a cruel and inhuman practice, but also a sin that must be abolished. This involvement in anti-slavery movement led the missionaries down many unexpected paths. Over a period of time, the movement spread to cover diverse areas in which missionaries in Africa found themselves not only as champions of Christianity but also and agents of 'European civilization' (Ajayi, 1965).

The Yoruba country was, however, not left out of this missionary enterprise. The Church Missionary Society (CMS) was the dominant group in this part of West Africa. The activities of the Reverend David Hinderer and his wife should be commended in this direction. This couple started their 'civilizing' activities in Ibadan in 1850s and by 1860s, had made their presence felt in the city. In 1853, they had the first set of native children who were to be taught the words of God. For a beginning, they had only two children, *Yejide* and *Akinyele*, because the Ibadan never liked to send their children to live with the white-man for fear of being taken away (Salami, 1988). They also believed that 'book will make a coward' of their children (Oroge, 1971). Before long, the number of the children in the mission house rose to sixteen (Akinyele, nd). But one important thing to note is that apart from *Olunloyo* and *Onibudo's* children, the other pupils were mostly young slaves. The children were taught elementary Mathematics, English and Christian Religious Studies.

After sometime, Mrs. Hinderer, her husband and other missionaries started to ransom women and children who could have been sold into slavery in Ibadan. It was common for the children-slaves to approach the missionaries so as to be bought into freedom. The usual word was: '*e ra mi*', that is, 'please buy me and take me home' (Akinyele, nd). For example, the mother of one *Ogunyomi* who had been staying with the Hinderers in the mission house was ransomed and was later employed as a cook for the children under the care of the missionaries. Some of the children were Lowestoft *Akinyele*, Susanna Dalley, *Laniyonu*, *Konigbade*, Robert Scott and so on, most of whom became teachers and priests (Akinyele, nd). The

importance of the activities of the missionaries to the demise of the slave factor in Ibadan is that slaves started realizing the need to be free persons, hence demanded that they should be bought into freedom. Also, the education which they received from the missionaries opened their minds and they started to see the evils of slavery. Therefore, more and more slaves started to run to the mission house in the city. Although some of the slaves were persecuted for this act, it was among them the missionaries made the greatest number of conversion (Oroge, 1971). By 1880s, the missionaries had constituted a temporary Redemption Court where slaves were redeemed in Ibadan. The following among others were redeemed:

Famure, a boy of about 22 years of age, Moses Abu, a young man of about 30 years of age, William Momo, a boy of about 20 years of age and Sarah Awa, a young woman of about 18 years of age (NAI, Yoruba Papers, (Y) 2/2/3).

The missionaries did not stop their efforts to eradicate slavery. In fact, their efforts continued to have dismantling effect on the institution from time to time in Ibadan and *Yorubaland* in general. At a time when it became difficult for them to operate because of the protracted civil wars in *Yorubaland*, they urged their home government to try and mediate in the conflict among the Yoruba of the interior. The British then sent her nationals into the interior to secure peace. This was the beginning of the immediate destruction of slavery in *Yorubaland* generally and Ibadan in particular. In 1886, A. C. Moloney arrived in Lagos to assume duty as the new Governor of Lagos. He was approached by Reverend Samuel Johnson to help put an end to all wars (*Kiriji/Ekiti parapo*). In response to Johnson's request, Moloney quickly made the war leaders aware that the common people were already tired of wars which had brought only sorrow and misery. Before long, the Governor was able to secure a six-month truce with the assistance of Revs. S. Johnson and C. Phillips (Akinyele, nd). Therefore, by 1886, when all the parties involved had agreed to a ceasefire, *Ibadan, Oyo, Ijebu, Ilesa, Ekiti and Ondo*, all sent their representatives to meet the Governor in Lagos. By June 4, 1886, all had signed a treaty to end all wars and by September, 28, 1886, the whole war camps were in flames (Akinyele, nd).

The effect of the termination of the war on the slaves was dramatic. Many soldier-slaves and some *Ajele* who were not consumed by the war, became jobless. Thus, there was the possible insurrection of the unemployed slaves (NAI, CMS, (Y) 4/1/8). To compound the problem, the British annexed Ibadan in 1893 and intensified her efforts to stop slavery. This state of affairs increased the number of the unemployed in the town as the slaves who were engaged in the other sectors were thrown out of job. At this point, it was beginning to dawn on the authorities in Ibadan that the days of the institution which had given them wealth, fame and power was numbered. Thus, by the time Ibadan leaders signed the 1893 agreement with the British, the institution of slavery in Ibadan was uprooted from its foundation. A critical look at the agreement would reveal the extent of its destruction of the governmental processes as organised by the military state of Ibadan in her subject territories. The implication was that all the Ibadan *Ajele* and other soldier-slaves who had been part of the institutions of government were thrown out of job and Ibadan itself lost her over-lordship over the subject towns. But the British were aware of these problems and so included in the agreement that a force of the Lagos constabulary would be stationed in Ibadan, implicitly, to accommodate the war-hungry inhabitants. That is not all, the agreement also provided for the construction of railways which would invariably solve part of the unemployment problem.

However, the authorities in Ibadan realised the dangers and ambiguities inherent in the agreement as they refused to sign it at the first presentation. Even when they had to sign, it was not without the expression of their fears and conditions which they thought would protect their interest. The fears they expressed in their letter to the Acting Governor of Lagos were:

First, we fear the authority and respect of the Bale and chiefs will suffer deterioration, as there may be two courts of appeal. We fear our slaves will assert their freedom by running to the Resident (Macaulay Papers; Johnson, 1921; Akinyele, nd).

Having expressed their fears, the Colonial authorities in Lagos replied and promised them that all would be well with the people, especially the chiefs, since the agreement was not intended to interfere with the authorities of the chiefs and customs of the land. Ibadan authorities signed the agreement with the hope that their fear would be allayed, but they were wrong in their calculation. This is because a closer look at the reply from Lagos showed that the chiefs had been deceived. The section of the letter that the officer-in-charge would not set up any court, or take any action that opposed local customs, provided the custom did not conflict with the ordinary principles of humanity, would be impossible to meet. This is because Ibadan was a military state of which the custom of institution of slavery was firmly rooted, conferring the greatest honour on a single individual who could hold as many slaves as possible. In this regard, such customs could not have been observed given the conditions of Lagos government on the issue of slavery. In other words, it became so difficult to operate the institution of slavery within the ambit of the ordinary principles of humanity. Also, the part that says the officer-in-charge would not interfere with domestic slavery if it was conducted on human principles was also difficult to meet since there was no way the institution could again be operated strictly on the basis of humanity. Therefore, there was no way the slave holders in Ibadan would not incur the wrath of the British, if they should continue with slave holding.

Generally, the fact that slavery had been painted black by the British would even make it more difficult for the Ibadan to meet the conditions in the 1893 agreement. Furthermore, the part that the rights of the Ibadan authorities would not be infringed upon by Lagos and that what the Lagos government wanted was to secure reasonable freedom of action for the inhabitants, made it difficult for the slave-owners to retrieve their slaves whenever they escaped to the Resident Commissioners. In fact, many slaves took this opportunity because they knew their running to the Resident Commissioners, meant freedom and gainful employment. It is also clear from the conditions that for the Lagos government to be able to secure reasonable freedom of action for all the inhabitants of Ibadan, including the slaves, then it was obvious that the institution of slavery had to be pulled down in its entirety.

The deceitful action of the British was given credence by the actions of the Resident Commissioners in Ibadan. For instance, it was not long after Captain Bower, the first Resident Commissioner, had settled down, then he started the policies that dismantled slavery. By 1894, Bower had stationed a detachment of the Royal Forces outside the gates of Ibadan where he built a camp for his forces (NAI, CSO.1/1. Vol. 14, Despatches). After they had settled down in Ibadan, the soldiers, cooks, stewards and other employees of the British officials, being mostly slaves before and some of whom must have been enslaved by the people of Ibadan, disturbed the peace of the town and encouraged fellow slaves to escape into their fold (Oroge, 1971). Even before then, Ibadan slaves had been escaping to Lagos where they joined the army. For instance, Ibadan slaves who escaped to Lagos, numbered about one hundred, were said to have participated in the 1892 campaign against the *Ijebu*. Their collective performance in the campaign was so recognised that the Acting Governor recommended that they be given the West African War Medals (NAI, CSO.1/1. Vol. 14, Despatches; Akinyele, nd; Johnson, 1921, Jenkins, 1965).

However, despite the fact that some of the slaves were lured into the military camps of the British recruited soldiers, majority of the slaves who were still in bondage remained idle. Therefore, they still preferred to go back to the battle field where they could be engaged adequately. It was not uncommon to hear such idle slaves say '*nje Bower ko ni si Ogun Ilorin yi fun wa*' meaning "will Captain Bower not open for us the Ilorin Campaign" (Johnson, 1921). This is not surprising because Ilorin was a power which the Ibadan had not come to a definite term with. The result was that, the soldiers became tired of staying idle and so took to plundering, raiding and stealing (Akinyele, nd; Johnson, 1921; Jenkins, 1965). The situation got to a head that Governor Carter angrily addressed the *Bale* to complain that slave raiding which had earned so 'bad' a name for Ibadan, was still being practised. He thus, advised the *Bale* to encourage the people to make honest living through commerce and agriculture. He further stated that he had no desire to interfere with the *Bale's* authority in ordinary matters, but the question of slavery was so hostile that it must be stopped at all cost (Jenkins, 1965). With this warning, it became clearer to the people of Ibadan that the institution which had served them for almost a century, was already in extinction.

Meanwhile, the British Government had written to instruct Governor Henry McCallum of Lagos to ‘recruit a large number of Hausas for general service in West Africa as part of the English army’ (Ibadan Historical Papers, No. 93; Burns, 1955). Although the letter specified that the recruits should be made up of Hausa stock, the Governor, to further destroy slavery in Ibadan wrote back to his home government that there were fine men amongst (the Yoruba) who were used to war, and that if they were trained as soldiers under European officers, they would be equally as good as the Hausas (Ibadan Historical Papers, No. 93). Having received the green-light to put his ideas in operation, the Governor invited the Bale of Ibadan to Lagos and told him his desire to recruit soldiers from his domain. He further told the Bale that ‘as a compliment to my friend (the Bale), I have selected his town as their training ground’ (Ibadan Historical Papers, No. 93). In fact, when the soldiers were eventually recruited, four out of the eight companies of Yoruba troops, each of 100 men, were from Ibadan (Ibadan Historical Papers, No. 93). This was so because Ibadan, as a military state, recorded the largest number of unemployed soldier-slaves and other groups of slaves who were to be provided for. It has been said that the Ibadan people responded positively to the opportunity. According to Johnson:

This opening afforded relief to all those ardent spirits whose profession was arms, and with a wonderful celerity. They imbibed and assimilated the new method of drill and discipline, by which they were led to a successful campaign (Johnson, 1921).

In February, 1897, with the Royal Niger Company, two Ibadan battalions bombarded Ilorin and added the area to British possession in West Africa (Jenkins, 1965). Furthermore, just as the recruitment of the people into the army was progressing, railway construction, another factor that decimated slavery in Ibadan and *Yorubaland* in general was continuing. Railway construction actually started in December, 1895 and its labour requirement provided employment for the idle slaves and other inhabitants of Ibadan. According to Wale Oyemakinde (1974), these idle creatures ... responded encouragingly to railway labour opportunities ... (and this) dealt a severe blow to the old institution of slavery. Domestic slaves who went into railway service soon gathered enough money to pay their ransom. Even free men who had no bond to pay off also found railway service attractive for it gave them money to acquire more wives (NAI. CSO.1/1 Vol. 33).

The response to railway labour by the idle slaves was so enormous that surplus labour was exported to other areas of West Africa. It has been said that about 1,300 people from the Yoruba country were exported to the Gold Coast [Present day Ghana] to provide labour for railway construction, when the Fantes and Asantes of the area could not provide as much labour as needed by the British (Oyemakinde, 1974). The money received by these former human machines both as soldiers and as railway construction labourers, enabled them to pay their redemption fees and to meet other social and economic needs. The rules governing redemption exercise as stipulated by the Lagos Government are as follows: The mere fact of a woman bearing children by her master renders her a free woman. All captured, home born or inherited slaves redeemable for £3: 15 (three pounds and fifteen shillings).

All other slaves (bought) redeemable for the original price paid minus two bags (ten shillings), for every year of servitude. Cruelty on the part of masters or mistress constitutes sufficient grounds for the liberation of the slave in question. Children of a slave, by a master not to be considered slaves, but children of slaves born in servitude as yet redeemable for (three pounds and fifteen shillings) £3: 15 (Lagos Annual Report 1899; Jenkins, 1965). In the redemption arrangement, the entire amount that were to be paid by the slaves, were payable through the Court of Redemption to the master. By 1899, a register had been established to record the number of slaves who availed themselves of the opportunity. The registration procedure was to make provision for the granting of certificates of freedom to the redeemed (Jenkins, 1965). Officially, up to the end of our period only a negligible number of forty-eight redeemed slaves were issued with certificates of freedom in Ibadan as against the case in other parts of *Yorubaland*, particularly in *Akure*, where about one hundred and twenty-six were issued with the certificates over the same period (Salami, 1988). On the strength of this fact, the tendency is to argue that in Ibadan, slaves were still little satisfied with being in bondage since they were generally regarded as ‘*omo*’ (children). Also, it may be argued that

the slaves refused to make the maximum use of the opportunity provided by Lagos because they did not know what the other side of life would be after redemption. It was also possible that many of them must have availed themselves of the opportunity, but may not have applied for the certificates, partly due to their ignorance of the existence of such certificates, given the fact that communication system was then rudimentary. Moreover, some of the redeemed slaves might have thought that the process of collecting a certificate would further delay their freedom and so decided to jettison the idea of collecting one.

Meanwhile, the eclipse of the institution which had been the power house of the economy of Ibadan in our period did not just come without any effect on the society. The highest degree of social and economic dislocation could be seen particularly, in the status of the chiefs. Before the abolition, possession of slaves added dignity to a man and gave him the position of authority among his neighbours. But upon the abolition, a large slave owner was faced with the practical extinction of his source of income and position as an important man in the society. The slaves no longer worked for their masters. Some either proceeded to their native towns or remained with their masters but not on master-slave relationship. He could only remain with his master as a member of the family with reasonable source of income. In Ibadan today, there are some households which had their roots in slavery, though they would naturally resent any reference to their descent (Salami, 1988). In the course of the field work, it was gathered that this group of people were popularly called, *O ni 'le enu iloro, abi a ba ni gbe 'le* (gateway dwellers or squatters), (Salami, 1988). But officially, the bulk of the emancipated slaves were absorbed into normal life of the free population and could therefore, engage in various economic pursuits, e.g. peasant farming, trading, smithery. They could enforce their rights by native laws and customs as if they were originally freeborn. Where the native courts were reluctant to support their claims, they could seek redress in British courts (NAI CSO 26/2/11799, Vol. D).

In the case of the large land owners, the immediate problem was labour force. Palm produce, the traditional produce that had entered into the international market due to the industrial revolution, was fast losing its importance with the greatest challenge from Rubber beginning from 1895. But by 1899, rubber itself had lost its place in the international market due to shortage of labour and bad tapping (Omosini, 1979). Another experiment, cocoa cultivation, which would have brought back the glory of Ibadan was tried. But all these experiments had common problems. To make a success of the new agricultural enterprises, adequate labour supply was necessary. But with the destruction of slavery, the required labour could not be procured. Therefore, the people of Ibadan went grudgingly to their farms without any reasonable and dependable source of labour, except the paid labour introduced by the British, which of course, the people could ill-afford. There were no more slaves to be used as carriers. The tsetse fly and the forest in which the people inhabited made the use of pack-animals impracticable and what was more, the wheel was not also available. Gradually, they resorted to their traditional mode of mustering labour force which could not adequately serve the farmers especially those that would want to practice large scale farming.

In the area of toll collection, the people of Ibadan and particularly, the chiefs also lost a good source of income due to the British Colonial Government reforms on toll collection. Although, the British Colonial Government started the reforms in 1897, the chiefs were still allowed to collect tolls through their agents of which some were still more or less slaves. This was allowed because politics dictated that caution must be taken so as not to antagonize the chiefs who derived substantial benefits from toll collection. More than ever before, toll collection became more important to the chiefs, since booty of war and slaves could no longer be obtained because of the cessation of wars. In fact, there were quarrels after 1893 on who should dominate major gates, who should collect tolls and how the proceeds should be shared (Falola, 1984).

However, by 1900 when the British Colonial Government had completed its reforms on tolls, collection of tolls by the chiefs' agents was stopped and the government appointed its own agents. The government also abolished several customs gates in *Yorubaland* to reduce the number of places where tolls were collected. Initially all towns and major settlements had customs gates, but government considered this an unnecessary duplication, more so, as traders paid duties on the same item in more than one places. Although, most of Ibadan gates were not closed, by 1900, toll collection had been completely taken over by the British

Colonial Government, and the toll accounts were audited monthly (Falola, 1984). This act removed about the only source of income left for the Ibadan and their chiefs, and for about a century after, they remained under British domination. Finally, up to 1900 when our period ends, it can be submitted that, with all the above factors at work and their resultant effects, slavery as an institution in Ibadan and indeed, in the whole of *Yorubaland*, was dead, only to be interred by Lord Lugard's Ordinance, No.5, of 1916 (NAI CSO/26/2/11799, Vol. IV).

Conclusions

The institution of slavery had enormous importance in the process of state building in the pre-colonial Ibadan. The institution manifested itself in all ramifications in the development of the settlement. In the field of agriculture, industrial design and production; marketing and distribution of goods and services, slaves were abundantly deployed. In governance, diplomacy, and war, slaves featured prominently. For about six decades, the impact of slave labour was felt in the process of development and growth of the military state of Ibadan. However, the change that swept through Yorubaland due to the Ibadan experiment appeared to be waning. This is because the Ibadan Empire that was built on the blood and sweat of slaves was gradually finding it difficult to control its human machine both at home and abroad, particularly the *Ajele*, that served as Ibadan representatives in the conquered territories. At home, slaves became uncontrollable and they extort money and other material things from the people. Outside Ibadan, the *Ajele* (resident political representatives) had become lords and their words were law. It did not take long before the people of the conquered territories especially the Ekiti took up arms against Ibadan and the resident political representatives. It was during the prosecution of the Ekiti campaign that the greatest wind of change swept through the whole of Yorubaland, leaving Ibadan with no alternative other than to assent to the superior fire-power of the British. The British supervised the dismantling of Ibadan Empire and introduced the British 'civilisation' that were alien to the leadership in Ibadan. By the time the British signed the 1893 agreement with the people of Ibadan, it was clear that the leadership in Ibadan had lost its grip of the slaves that had once proved to be so efficient in the process of state building and by extension the empire they had laboured hard to build.

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