

Complexity of Africa

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To think that Africans are the same from the East to the West, or from the North to South Africa is the same as saying that all people in Europe are the same. In Europe, same as in Africa, there are many countries with different histories, languages, religious backgrounds, and customs. As the historian James Walvin has noted, "[T]o suggest that there were only two sides, black versus white, African versus European, is to create too simple a picture from an amazing confusion of groups, places and interests." In my essay, I will show that the picture of Africa during the slave trade and colonization was very complex, with many different groups among Africans, and that background, religion, languages, customs, and geography played a very important role in denying that there was just one side, one black Africa.

Patrick Manning in *Slavery and African Life* claims that, "Africa - given the range of its languages, cultures, geographic and economic conditions - is the most diverse of the continents" (Manning, 25). "Today's Africa is constituted of 53 countries and around 700 million people. There are four root languages and over one thousand spoken languages" (Notes, Jan. 14). The best proof we can have today of how many groups there were in Africa in the past are those spoken languages, which means that there were, and are today, at least one thousand different groups on the African continent. "Africa is a continent of great contrast and diversity. Its vast size and its diversity make it difficult and at times misleading to generalize" (McNulty, 11-13). Even some groups that had the same language were different in some other way, such as religion or customs. It is not too hard to imagine how difficult it was to establish communication among different groups who were speaking different languages and had different backgrounds at the time of slavery and colonization. There are problems in communication among people who speak different languages even today.

"There were and there remain many Africas, not because each village was isolated from all the rest, but because, in interacting with each other and with the outside world, distinct populations relied effectively on the specificity of local conditions and outlooks" (Manning, 26). This is very evident in *Arrow of God*. "Different people have different customs. In Okperi it is not our custom to welcome strangers to our market with the *ikolo*" (Achebe, 23). Even though they spoke the same language and were relatively not far from each other, people from Okperi and Umuaro had misunderstandings because their customs were different, and those misunderstandings, among other things, were big enough to cause a war between the two groups.

When Patrick Manning talks about the decline in African population during the slave

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trade, he says that, "the important reason why it was not possible for Africans to know about the decline in their population was that they did not then accept the notion of a common African identity" (Manning, 87). They did not see their neighbors as members of the same group but just as another group of people different from their own, with a different language, gods, and customs. This was very evident during the slave trade when neighbors were fighting with each other with a goal of defeating and enslaving as many others as they could to sell them to the slave traders, and take over their land. Also, it is very important to mention that, at the same point in time, which is evident even today, the Europeans did not accept a common European identity and they were fighting one against another over land, religion, or other misunderstandings, which confirms that Africa, the same as Europe, was a place of very different groups who lived on the same continent.

Religion played and still plays a very important role in Africa. When we look at religions, we can see that Africa is not just a simple region with black people who are not different in any way. There are Christians, Muslims, and many native religions. Muslims came to Africa from Arab countries and "by the eleventh century, Muslims were a majority in northern Africa" (Hanson, 100). Christianity came to Ethiopia in the 5th century but a lot later to the rest of the continent with missionaries who came to Africa with the slave traders and merchants. According to Curtis Keim, "Christian missionaries came to South Africa in 1737 and established there permanently in 1793" (Keim, 125). Muslims in Africa were influenced by the Arab world and African Christians were influenced by the western missionaries. It is not an exaggeration to say that two totally different worlds from the African one, the Arab and the European, came to an already diverse Africa and influenced people of the continent.

That the Africans were not the same in the eyes of the slave traders and colonizers can be seen from the examples of northern Africans who converted to Islam and Africans in Ethiopia who converted to Christianity. According to John Hanson, "Capturing and owning non-Muslims was acceptable, and Muslims sometimes justified the practice as an effort to convert slaves to Islam. In northern Africa Muslims used African, Asian, and European slaves as domestic servants, manual laborers, and soldiers" (Hanson, 105). Even though they all were black, those Africans who converted to Islam were safe in northern Africa from being enslaved by Muslims, and actually were able to own and trade slaves with Arabs and Europeans. In northern Africa there were two sides among Africans: African Muslims and other Africans who were not converted to Islam. This supports Walvin's claim in a way that shows that in northern Africa, besides black versus white, there were black Muslims versus black non-Muslims.

During the colonization era, Ethiopia was one of two countries in the African continent that was not colonized. The other one was Liberia where freed slaves from the United States came to live. The reason why Ethiopia was not colonized was simply because the majority of people there were Christians and Europeans thought there was not a "need" to colonize them and bring them "civilization." Eventually, in the 1930s, Italy was ruled by the Fascist party and Mussolini decided to take over Ethiopia. The example of Ethiopia shows us that Walvin's claim that there were not just two sides in Africa, African and European, is correct. If there had been just one African side, the European colonizers would have treated Ethiopians in the same way they treated other Africans. In the Ethiopian case, we can see that the European interest was to show to others that Christianity would bring them safety and a better life, and that they, Africans, might be able to live in their sovereign states, not afraid of slavery, if they converted to Christianity.

Geography played a very important role in Africa at the time of slavery. Not just in northern Africa were there Africans versus other Africans. They were engaged in conflicts all over Africa during the slave trade. Some Africans who lived on the western coast of

the continent were able to trade with the Occidental traders and become more powerful than their neighbors who lived more inland. More powerful groups of Africans were capturing their less powerful neighbors and selling them to the European slave traders. Some groups had natural resources that helped them stay free. Such examples are Asante and Benin. "They were not enslaved because they had gold and good geographical location on the west coast of Africa to conduct trade" (Notes, Jan. 20). "The mistake of our African protagonists was their willingness to participate in slavery and in the slave trade, even if they did so only to dispose of enemies in revenge, or in hopes of securing a fortune which might enable their family or their kingdom to grow and profit" (Manning, 2). Here we can see again that there was not just black Africa against white Europe, but more powerful African groups versus less powerful Africans, and European traders from all over Europe who were waiting with their money and goods on the coast to exchange them for African slaves captured by African traders.

In my opinion, the Europeans were those who wanted to make the picture of Africa and its people as simple as possible and to show Africans as immoral, wild, irreligious, and not able to take care of themselves. An example of what Europeans thought of Africans is captain Winterbottom's saying to Mr. Clarke in *Arrow of God*: "One thing you must remember in dealing with natives is that like children they are great liars" (Achebe, 37). Europeans claimed that the reason for colonization was to help Africans, to bring them civilization, and teach them good manners. So if they claimed bringing civilization and helping Africa, they had to show Africans as everything else but human beings. Presenting Africans as humans, who had their own religions, customs, languages, and historical backgrounds, would just confront their previous claims. "Apologists for European colonialism and imperialism argued that it was right, indeed the duty, of the 'higher' civilizations to conquer the 'lower' civilizations in order to bring prosperity and 'progress' to all parts of the world" (Gellar, 141).

Africa is the continent more diverse than any other on earth. There are more than 1000 languages spoken by 700 million people in 53 countries. To say that in the past, during slavery and colonization, there were just two sides, black versus white, African versus European, we have to deny the differences among African people in language, religion, geographical position, historical background, and customs.

Note: References are not available