

The impact of european commercial activities



Assess the Impact of European commercial activities in the Atlantic Islands and West Africa from 1415 to 1600. When one queries the assessment of the European commercial activities and its impact in the Atlantic Islands and West Africa between the years 1415 and 1600, trickery, social violence, intrusion and the horrors of slavery comes to mind. There were many negative impacts such as population loss, loss of self worth and loyalty, the Europeans involved caused the demise of the European cloth industry. The Portuguese were the first Europeans to set foot in this area in the fifteenth century.

During the history of Portugal (1415-1542), Portugal discovered an eastern route to India that rounded the Cape of Good Hope, established trading routes throughout most of southern Asia and they colonized selected areas of Africa. It was the genius of Prince Henry the Navigator(1) that coordinated all these quests of expansion. Prince Henry placed at the disposal of his captains a plethora of resources, of which he was the head, and the best information and most accurate instruments and maps that could be obtained.

He sought to meet with the infamous Christian Empire of " Prester John"(2) by way of the " Western Nile" (the Senegal River), and, in alliance with that to crush the Turks and liberate the Holy Land. Slavery was practiced in Africa before the beginning of the European slave trade. Slavery and the slave trade were an integral part of African societies and the Arab world was supplied with African slaves for centuries before the arrival of the Europeans. The African slave trade provided a large number of slaves to Europeans and their African agents.

Initially, the Portuguese started trading in copper, brass, European cloth, etc in exchange for gold, which was in high demand in Europe. Above all things, the most impact full commercial activity of all was the European Slave Trade and its economic and social effects it had on West Africa and the Atlantic Island. The Atlantic Islands which were involved with the European commercial activities were: The Azores, Madeira, Sao Tome & Principle, Cape Verde, and Goree Islands.

The African countries that were involved in the Portuguese trade were the coast of the Congo, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Liberia, Angola and Morocco. In order to assess the impact or extent to which West African and the Atlantic societies were affected by the European commercial activities, one must certainly look into the number of slaves that were either traded or raided from their homelands. Population loss is certainly a focal point when assessing the impact of the European Commercial activity.

According to Walter Rodney in ' How Europe Underdeveloped Africa' he states that " One of the uncertainties concerns the basic question of how many Africans were imported. This has long been an object of speculation, with estimates ranging from a few millions to over one hundred million. A recent study has suggested a figure of about ten million Africans landed alive in the Americas, the Atlantic islands and Europe. " The actual number of slaves is certainly a very difficult figure to ascertain.

However there is no doubt that it was an absolutely staggering number of natives that were taken from their homelands, sold and enslaved. Population loss is a very serious loss when it comes to the development of a people. The

economy and the social fabric of the people are utterly destroyed, leaving Africans in a state of chaos. The impact of the population loss as it relates to commercial activity is so severe that at present more than a bicentenary Western Africa is still in shambles, with an economy barely able to stand.

It was even more difficult during the years of the slave trade for West Africans to replenish their population simply because when trading the adult males were high in demand in opposed to that of the females, thus leaving the remaining ratio of men to women in West Africa in trouble. John Thornton, in his book ' Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World' says that ' In addition to the net demographic drain, which began early in some areas (like Angola), the loss of adult males had potentially damaging impacts on sex ratios, dependency rates, and perhaps the sexual division of labor".

This goes to show the gravity of impact the population loss had or still has on West Africa. In Walter Rodney's ' How Europe Underdeveloped Africa' he states that " The massive loss to the African labour force was made more critical because it was composed of able-bodied young men and young women. Slave buyers preferred their victims between the ages of 15 and 35, and preferably in the early twenties; the sex ratio being about two men to one woman. " The people, or lack thereof, of West Africa found it very difficult to replenish the population, not to mention the interruption of thefamilystructure in his part of Africa. Like most cultures, in Africanculturethe men are the head of the household and were the chiefs of the various villages. In the absence of these men, many women found it very difficult to survive having lived as housewives and depending on men as the

<https://assignbuster.com/the-impact-of-european-commecial-activities/>

bread winners of the household. As a result, there was social chaos in the Western part of Africa. Social Upheaval and Low Self Worth was another one of the major impacts of the European commercial activities on West Africa. As a result of the slave trade through raids and trade, there is no doubt concerning the social ills that plagued Western Africa.

Many Africans were betrayed by their own political leaders who sold their African people to Europeans for items such as guns, horses and cowrie shells(3). As a result of this vicious betrayal there was social upheaval and chaos. Raids occurred and many villages were uprooted. Walter Rodney mentioned in his book *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* that “ The opportunity presented by European slave dealers became the major (though not the only) stimulus for a great deal of social violence between different African communities and within any given community.

It took the form more of raiding and kidnapping than of regular warfare, and that fact increased the element of fear and uncertainty. ” West African people tried to protect themselves and tried to fight back against the Europeans as they were all very unwilling to participate in the Slave Trade. This slave trade caused social disruption and increased inequality and intensified exploitation. In James Duffy “ *Portugal In Africa* ” he says that “ On the Gold Coast Portuguese traders could not move with the freedom and security through the interior.

They were obliged to use whatever force or methods of terror they had at their disposal, and when this failed they relied on intrigue and bribery”. The moral fabric and self worth of Africans were also tremendously damaged as a

result of European influence. Lives were destroyed, and whole ethnic groups wiped out.. African Pride years and materialism was born into the African mentality and thought process. The African man, who was once concerned with skill, prowess, strength and knowledge had changed to intense materialism.

African chiefs sold their own people for simple items such as cheap gin, gunpowder, pots and beads. These items were not coveted and demanded by the African chiefs and they continued to sell their people for their selfish gains. This created mistrust and bitterness between the African villagers and their leaders, thus causing internal conflict amongst West African societies. European commercial activities caused a stand still in technology and as a result in the economy of Western Africa. During the European Slave Trade there began a demand for cloth in Africa.

There became a strong dependency on Europe in Africa. There was cloth made in Africa when the European Slave Trade began and there were also imports from Europe and Asia. Soon Europe and Asia were copying African cloth designs and materials and they were imported into Africa creating stiff competition with the local producers. European cloth was then imported in bulk thus having more supply and at cheaper rates. The local cloth industry was certainly in trouble. Europeans produced cloth on a large scale by using energy from wind, water and coal.

Thus the local cloth manufacturers were forced to end their work leaving African cloth producing industry at a stand still and it eventually was shut down. In Walter Rodney's book on " How Europe Underdeveloped Africa" he

says that Therefore, there was what can be called ' technological arrest' or stagnation, and in some instances actual regression, since people forgot even the simple technique of their forefathers. The abandonment of traditional iron smelting in most parts of Africa is probably the most important instance of technological regression.

European activity crippled the industrial life of many West African countries and caused West Africa to become completely dependant on Europe. The European Commercial activities did very little if any to contribute to the development of Western Africa. In fact the development of West Africa was retarded and was undoubtedly damaged and destroyed in many ways. Europeans did not just uproot the West Africans physically by ways of loss of population and death but socially because their pride was broken, they were said to be useless and inferior to the Europeans.

Initially, the Europeans never set out to create such havoc in Western Africa but within their exploration it turned out to be nothing but exploitation of the African people. There is no hiding the number of slaves that were taken from Western Africa and took to various islands to work and to be enslaved. Families were shattered, populations depleted and lives scattered for economic gain. Fear and inferiority was also driven into the hearts and minds of Africans. From the raiding Africans were left in a state of chaos and fear for their families and the destruction of homes and entire villages. There was bloodshed, deaths and killings as a result of these many raids that the Europeans carried out. It was through trickery and bribery that many of the trading occurred. Europeans brought useless items to the chiefs in the West Africa for them to trade for their own people. This bred mistrust and betrayal

<https://assignbuster.com/the-impact-of-european-commecial-activities/>

in the hearts of African people. Chiefs became materialistic and selfish and became very interested in riches and gain that they forgot their people.

European commercial activities caused the African cloth industry to come to an end by their mass producing and heavy and stiff competition for the Africans. The cloth made Europeans, which copied African styles was created in bulk and was much cheaper thus running the African cloth makers out of business. In essence, the impact of the European commercial activities was very severe and hindered the development of Western Africa and its people it changed the mindset of the African man and crushed a thriving civilization and culture.