

The Abolition Act of 1807: between Humanitarian and Economic Interpretations

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Abstract:

The important human flow in the history of Africa, under the context of trans-Atlantic slave trade, decreased labour force and therefore the production of cash crops and minerals, which were of increasing demand after the advent of the Industrial Revolution. Under these circumstances, the British decided to prohibit slave trade by the Abolition Act of 1807, which generated divergent interpretations. While the official discourse stressed the humanitarian argument, others emphasised rather the economic reasons. The article attempts to find out the more determining factors to the reasons for the Abolition Act.

Keywords

Slave trade, Abolition Act, Humanitarian, Economic reasons, Great Britain

1. INTRODUCTION

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By the arrival of Europeans on the western coasts of Africa by the mid fifteenth century and the discovery of the New World few decades later, a new economic activity emerged, that is, trading in human beings. This hideous economic activity grew up steadily during the sixteenth century to reach its peak in the mid eighteenth century because of the increasing demand for labour in mines, and sugar, cotton and tobacco plantations in the New World. Then, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, slave trade began to decline after the ratification of the Abolition Act by the British Parliament in 1807. The paper examines the two major interpretations that explain the British decision to prohibit slave trade to find the more determining factors as to the reasons of this decision. The first interpretation as expressed in the official discourse of the British government focused on the humanitarian and philanthropic considerations, whereas the second interpretation advocated by some politicians and historians such as Brigadier de Cunha Matos, Deputy of Nina Gereas, in Brazil and the Ghanaian historian Adu Boahen, relates to economic reasons.

2. Background

The journey of Mansa Musa to Mecca and the economic consequences, particularly in Egypt, stirred the European ambitions about exploring Africa to look for the source of gold, and therefore avoid dealing with the North African intermediary merchants who used to impose high prices on the gold brought from West Africa. Furthermore, Mansa's pilgrimage brought the Empire of Mali to the attention of European cartographers. Mali had been shown, for the first time, on a European map in 1339. Three decades later, another map of the world showed a road leading from North Africa through the Atlas Mountains into the

Western Sudan. In 1375, the Majorcan cartographer Abraham Cresques completed his Catalan Atlas in which he showed the king of Mali seated in majesty upon his throne holding a nugget of gold and a sceptre, while the merchants of North Africa march towards him⁽¹⁾.

A few years later, the Portuguese launched their first expeditions led by Henry the Navigator along the western coasts of Africa⁽²⁾. Within the four centuries, which followed the first direct contact between the Europeans and the Africans of West Africa, the whole continent witnessed major events, which have had deep social, economic and political consequences. The most important of which were trans-Atlantic slave trade and the partition of Africa, which was followed by the establishment of colonial rule, the exploitation of the African resources and economic dependency. The establishment of direct contacts with the peoples of West Africa for commercial purposes at the beginning developed into trading in human beings under what is known as the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The latter had lasted for three centuries causing a loss of about twelve million Africans all trans-shipped to be sold in the Americas to work in mines and plantations⁽³⁾. After the abolition of slave trade, the Europeans adopted a new strategy based on an intensive exploitation of the African resources. Then, in the last phase of the European presence in Africa, they decided its partition and the establishment of colonial rule.

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Until the mid-fifteenth century, African commodities reached Europe through the North African intermediary merchants. The Europeans showed discontentment from the unfair deal of the North African traders and decided to establish direct commercial contacts with the Africans. In the beginning, they set forward two objectives. First, they wanted to set up direct access to West Africa to avoid the high taxes imposed on gold by North African intermediaries, and ultimately establishing a direct sea-route to Asia by circumnavigating Africa. Second, they aimed at creating an alliance with the Christians ⁽⁴⁾ in East Africa, especially in Ethiopia to surround and attack Muslims in North Africa.

The fifteenth century is known as the period in which most of the explorations and geographical discoveries took place. Light is shed on the European exploration, led by the Portuguese, on the Western Coasts of Africa in the fifteenth century focusing on the reasons of these explorations and their immediate and ultimate consequences on Africa and the Africans. The research starts with a brief description of the situation of trade in the world before the fifteenth century, in other words, how Europe was commercially linked to the rest of the world, with a special reference to the different trade centres in the Far East and the two major trade routes that linked them to the trade centres in Europe, on the one hand, and the trade centres in west and east Africa and the trade routes that linked them to Europe, on the other. Then, there will be an attempt to understand the internal and external factors that motivated the Europeans to undertake these explorations. In the

context, the economic, religious and political objectives of these explorations will be examined. The last part of the research will be devoted to the immediate and ultimate consequences of these explorations on Africa and the Africans, with a special reference to the beginning of slave trade and the reasons of its abolition.

The early Portuguese expeditions to the Western coasts of Africa were motivated by commercial objectives, that is, to secure direct access to African gold sources and to discover a new route to reach Asia to avoid the Italian brokers and Muslim intermediaries, who controlled trade between Western Europe and Asia. As a consequence of both the Portuguese and later on other European explorations in the Western Coasts of Africa, the course of trade changed southwards rather than northwards. The West African goods that used to be exchanged with the northern markets changed its itinerary as well. The most important commodity that took over trade in gold was slaves, which lasted for more than three centuries.

The first contact between the Portuguese and the natives (the Akan) on the coastal area took place in 1482. In the beginning, the contacts were limited to purely commercial purposes, and the Portuguese traders used to deal with the natives on board the ships. They used to exchange their manufactured goods such as cloth, beads, perfumes, alcohol, utensils, and guns for gold, ivory, pepper and kola nuts. To impose a firm monopoly over trade on West Africa, John II, then king of Portugal, decided to build a fort on the shore where the Portuguese traders could keep their goods, and as headquarters to control trade along the coast. The castle, which was given the name of Elmina ⁽⁵⁾, had been built under great tension between the Portuguese and the

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natives who opposed its building. However, the hostile attitude of the local people did not affect trade. Trade in gold, for instance, reached its peak in the early sixteenth century, the natives exported about 680 kilogrammes (24000oz), which represented about one-tenth of the world's supply. It is worth noting that slaves, as a new commodity, entered the list of exports from the Gold Coast for the first time when the Portuguese completed the first transatlantic slave voyage in 1526.

Subsequently, other European rivals entered the competition with the Portuguese for trade in West Africa. After the Dutch had broken the Portuguese monopoly, the French, Swedish, Danes, and English converged on the coast ⁽⁶⁾. During the eighteenth century, the Dutch, English, and Danish built some forts and castles, used as trading posts. The presence of the Europeans in the Gold Coast had a relatively positive economic impact on the local people. This significant presence created a growing demand for goods and services. This demand stimulated local people to produce more crops and crafts ⁽⁷⁾. They had to provide enough food to sell to about 1000 permanent workers for the West India Company⁽⁸⁾. Local craftsmen also provided the Europeans with small boats and containers used in transporting goods and commodities from and to the interior, and from ships to the shore. The list of imports included more than seventy different commodities, among which manufactured goods, raw materials and food such as olive oil, rye flour and beans. The long list of manufactured imported goods can be classified into five main categories: cloth, military supplies, alcohol, tobacco, and metal ware ⁽⁹⁾. The list of exports, on the other hand, included: gold, ivory and slaves, in addition to some agricultural products such as lime juice, dyewoods, wax, pepper, rice and gum⁽¹⁰⁾. Gold and

slaves represented the highest proportion in the list of exports. In fact, by the seventeenth century onwards, the value of slave exports exceeded that of gold exports. In his article, 'A Note on Relative Importance of Slaves and Gold in West African Exports', Van den Boogaart, estimated the price of a slave at £20, for the whole century, a period during which the average annual value of gold exported from the Gold Coast was estimated at £200,000⁽¹¹⁾. If we consider the figure of the average annual number of slaves exported during the same period, as suggested by Fage, who gave an estimate of 13000⁽¹²⁾, the value of slave exports will be £260,000, which is slightly higher than the value of gold exports.

Inter-tribal wars constituted the main source of slave supplies, which shaped the area into more than twenty separate political states, the most important of which, the Ashanti and the Fanti. Yet, the Portuguese rivals soon established themselves on the coast to trade with Africans, breaking the Portuguese commercial monopoly. Furthermore, the Dutch captured some of the Portuguese possessions in West Africa such as Arguin, Goree, Sao Thomé, Loanda, and all the trading posts in the Gold Coast. In fact, the Gold Coast forts were continually changing hands during the period between 1637 and 1720, because of the bitter competition between the European nations⁽¹³⁾. For example, the Cape Coast Castle fell under Swedish, Danish and Dutch control before finally falling under British control in 1664. The new circumstances compelled the Portuguese to withdraw southwards to Fernando Po, in the Gulf of Guinea. The islands showed favourable conditions for growing sugar, which was of great demand in Europe. However, the Portuguese faced the problem of adequate labour, therefore they developed trade with the mainland

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to secure slaves' supplies for the sugar plantations.

On the other side of the Atlantic, the European entrepreneurs were active in both minerals and agriculture. At first, they relied on the natives to work in mines and on plantations. Nevertheless, they soon realised that they could not achieve their objectives relying on the local labour. Some of them died during the conquest, others because of the hard work, or the white man disease brought by the Europeans. The Spaniards, in particular, faced a labour shortage in exploring the important reserves of silver and gold in Mexico and Peru. They also needed labour to grow sugar in the West Indies islands, which was a very lucrative commodity in Europe. They thought about bringing the Africans, who were familiar with hard work, and had a high immunity against diseases related to tropical zones, like malaria and yellow fever. They were also familiar with the new climatic conditions, which were similar to those in West Africa. For these reasons, the demand for African labour arose and opened the doors wide to a long era of trans-Atlantic slave trade.

3. The Economic Objective

The idea of getting richer got the Europeans interested in world exploration, by trading in Asian luxury goods such as silk, precious stones, ivory, sugar and spices. However, in the fifteenth century, there was an obstacle to this trade because it was entirely controlled by Moslems who controlled the trade routes between the Far East and Europe. Goods were transported by Moslems either via Asia Minor crossing thousands of miles overland from China, Ceylon and Malaya to the Mediterranean ports namely Genoa and Venice, or in small ships from India to the Red Sea and

then crossed the desert to the Nile River to sail down to the Mediterranean ports where they were sold to Genoese and Venetian merchants. Thus, by the time the Asian goods reached Europe, they had passed from hand to hand and from ships to caravans and back to ships along the journey to Europe under high risks of loss or damage, in addition to being taxed by the states and kingdoms they pass through. Consequently, they reached Europe in smaller quantities and at higher prices. Moreover, the Asian goods were sold exclusively to merchants from Genoa and Venice who enjoyed special privileges from which the other European sea powers were deprived. This situation urged the Spanish and the Portuguese to look for ways of bypassing the Moslem territories so they could trade directly with the Far East merchants. To achieve this objective, new sea routes to the East had to be explored.

Similarly, the Portuguese and the Spanish were complaining about the unfair dealings of the North African merchants. They knew from the echoes left by the famous journey of Mansa Musa to Mecca for pilgrimage in 1324-25, and which reached the southern part of Europe which hitherto had not yet established direct contacts with the negro states and kingdoms in West Africa that gold was brought from somewhere in Africa by the north African intermediaries. These intermediaries themselves used to deal with the intermediate Jewish merchants who controlled the trans-Saharan trade, which linked West Africa to Europe⁽¹⁴⁾. The caravan of Mansa Musa was loaded with 80 tons of gold, in the context, Bovill states:

“He rode on horseback preceded by 500 slaves, each carrying a staff of gold weighing 500 mithqals or

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about 6 pounds. In his baggage train of camels were 80 to 100 loads of gold each weighing three kantars or about 300 pounds”⁽¹⁵⁾.

Tindall and Shi summarized the factors, which stirred the European interest in the rich Far East markets, and the dream to find out direct sea routes to these markets in the following: first, the stories of the famous Venetian explorer about Asia, second, the rise of national states under kings and queens who showed interest in sponsoring explorations. Third, the rise of a new class of merchants which was highly motivated to contribute to these explorations for the pursue of profit spurred largely the explorations. Fourth, the call of the Pope to free the Holy Land in Jerusalem and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and to defend the suffering Christians of the East had also advanced the process of international trade and exploration⁽¹⁶⁾.

The Portuguese and Spanish did not have enough skills and experience in navigation to undertake the adventure of exploring the Atlantic Ocean to discover new sea routes to the source of gold in West Africa and the commodities of the Far East markets. To overcome this problem, Henry the Navigator, son of King John of Portugal and Prince of Ceuta, founded a school of navigation to which he called highly skillful mariners from Genoa and Venice, to train the Portuguese sailors. Besides, Prince Henry established a shipbuilding company to build new caravels. With these new ships and well-trained seamen coming from his school, he sent out his first expedition to map the western coast of Africa in 1422⁽¹⁷⁾.

4. The Political and Religious Objectives

Besides, the economic objectives already mentioned, Prince Henry aimed at converting the pagan and animist peoples in West Africa into Christianity. Furthermore, he planned to build an alliance with the Christian kingdom in Ethiopia to attack the Moslems in North Africa from two sides at once ⁽¹⁸⁾. Besides, He aimed at bringing back more detailed information about the new lands to be analysed in his school of navigation to help to improve further explorations, because his ultimate objective was to reach the Far East markets to establish direct sea routes with Asia. J. D. Fage summarises Henry's objectives in the following:

“Henry hoped, therefore, that his ships might outflank the area of Moslem rule in north-western Africa and establish direct contacts with the Negroes of West Africa. The people of West Africa might then be converted into Christian allies for the assault against Islam, while their valuable trade would be diverted to Portugal” ⁽¹⁹⁾.

5. Achievements and Consequences

The Portuguese explorations on the western coasts of Africa were officially launched by Henry the Navigator by 1314. They reached the Azores and Cape Blanco in 1439 1441 respectively. Then, they arrived in Arguin in 1443, and in the Cape Verde in 1444-45 under the command of Dinis Dias and Nuno Tristao. It is worth noting that at this stage something extremely important happened and which had serious consequences on the Africans for centuries, that is, a few Negroes were captured and taken back to Portugal as evidence that Henry's captains had passed beyond the territories controlled by Moslems, and to train them on Christian

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and western values. However, the Portuguese merchants looked at the captives with different eyes, that is, they realised that they could make a profit from capturing the Africans and selling them as slaves. This idea opened the doors wide for the era of slave trade, which lasted for more than three centuries.

After the death of Prince Henry in 1460, the explorations stopped, but they were resumed by Fernao Gomes, a Lisbon merchant in 1469. The latter signed a contract with the King of Portugal, which gave him the monopoly of trade on the Guinea Coast and beyond the Cape Verde Islands. In 1475, his captains Joao de Santarem and Pero de Escobar discovered the source of gold, an area between the mouths of the rivers Ankroba and Volta to which they gave the name of 'Mina' which means the mine, and which later the Europeans came to call, the Gold Coast. The discovery of the source of gold meant that the Portuguese achieved one of their important economic objectives.

The Portuguese continued their explorations on the western coasts of Africa under the command of Captain Diogo Gao who reached the Congo in 1482. Five years later, Captain Bartholemeu Diaz reached the farthest southern point in Africa, the Cape of Good Hope. The achievement of Diaz provided adequate conditions to Vasco de Gama to resume with explorations eastwards to reach the Far East markets. In 1497, de Gama reached India after he had crossed the Indian Ocean, and therefore achieved the ultimate objective set forward by Henry the Navigator.

The Portuguese exploration achieved the religious objective by converting thousands of African into Christianity. However, the political objective, that is, to establish an alliance with the Christian kingdom in East Africa, Ethiopia, to attack the

Moslems in North Africa could not be achieved due to the far distance that separates the two regions and the hard climatic conditions in the Sahara and the poor means of transport at that time⁽²⁰⁾.

Consequently, the European nations entered a keen competition for slave trade to meet the greatly increasing demand for slaves to supply the sugar plantations in the West Indies, and the mines of copper, silver and gold in Mexico, Peru and Brazil with required labour. Slave trade, then, flourished on the western coasts of Africa, which were divided into three spheres of influence under the control of the Europeans. First, Senegambia's two navigable rivers, the Senegal and the Gambia were controlled by the French and the English respectively. Second, Upper Guinea which extended from Gambia to the Bight of Biafra, on about 2000 miles. This area witnessed the presence of different European nations, among which, the Danish, the Dutch, and the English. Finally, Lower Guinea, a coast extending on about 1500 miles, from Calabar to the southern desert which was dominated by the Portuguese. In fact, the trans-Atlantic slave trade was seen as an economic enterprise; it enriched traders and supplied the West Indies Islands, and the colonies in the Americas with labour. The extension of the tobacco and cotton plantations in America brought the demand for slaves to its peak and gave slave traders large opportunities to make profits under the context of the Triangular Trade.

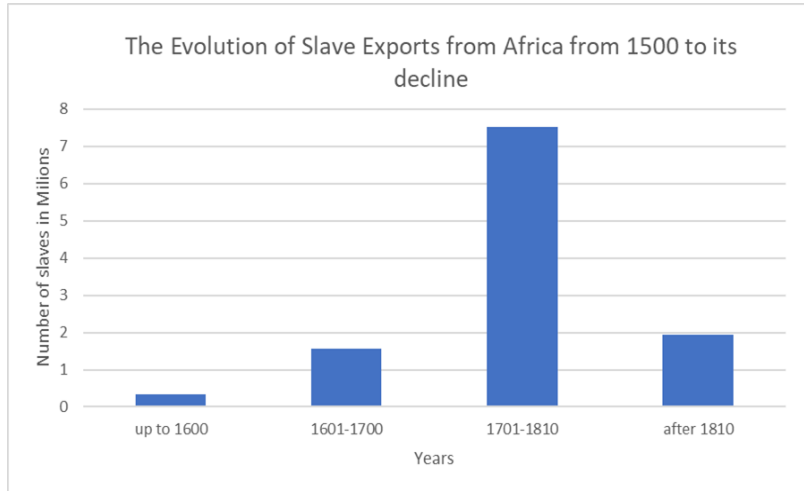


Figure One: The Evolution of Slave Exports from Africa from 1500 to Its Decline

Throughout the three centuries of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, it is estimated about 20 million Africans were uprooted from their homes and brought to the Americas. Curtin and Fage estimated the number of slaves who landed in the Americas at 9,300,000 and 11 million respectively ⁽²¹⁾, still it is not possible to give numbers with absolute certainty. This important human flow in the history of Africa, in general, and of West Africa in particular, affected labour and had a serious impact on the local subsistence economy.

In front of this situation marked by a frightening rate of slaves transported from Africa to the Americas under the framework of the Triangular Trade, the British decided to prohibit this activity through the Abolition Act of 1807. The latter generated divergent interpretations; in the official discourse, the British declared that the Act was adopted for humanitarian and

philanthropic reasons as stated in the official discourse. Other scholars and politicians gave it an economic interpretation. Brigadier de Cunha Matos, Deputy of Nina Gereas, for instance, had demonstrated to the Brazilian Chamber of Representatives in a series of debates that the British government intended to build a commercial monopoly behind humanitarian and philanthropic considerations. In the same context, Boahen argues that:

"The British industrialists who needed raw materials and markets contented that instead of enslaving and exporting the African, he should rather be encouraged to produce more raw materials and consume manufactured goods at home"⁽²²⁾.

In the same way, Batten says that:

"Industrial countries not only needed customers for their manufactured goods, they also needed many raw materials for their factories and also foodstuffs for their peoples"⁽²³⁾.

The British thought that it would be more profitable to stop the slave trade, and keep the Africans working on farms and in mines at home to supply agricultural and mineral products required by the metropolitan economy. In other words, the British decision came as a long-term consequence of the Industrial Revolution, which broke out, by the second half of the eighteenth century. The latter made the demand for raw materials in a steady increase, which led the British to take such a measure to secure a regular supply of raw materials from their colonies in Africa. Furthermore, they were forced to press the other European nations to comply with the new Act otherwise, their colonies would

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become uncompetitive. Therefore, the abolition of the slave trade was an unavoidable measure.

It is worth noting that the philanthropist groups led by Granville Sharp, Philip Quaque, William Wilberforce, and Thomas Buxton led an active anti-slavery campaign which had significant influence on the political scene. In fact, by 1783, the anti-slavery movement had already begun, and in its early years, the abolitionists achieved great success in raising public awareness through meetings and the distribution of pamphlets denouncing this immoral activity. These anti-slavery campaigns influenced, to a large extent, the public opinion in Britain and exerted more pressure on the British government which ended by the Abolition Act on March 25th, 1807⁽²⁴⁾. The Act banned all activities related to trading in slaves in the British Empire. It also urged the other European powers involved in this activity to join the Act. To ensure compliance with the Act, the British established naval patrols on the western coasts of Africa to intercept smugglers in slaves.

In 1833, the British Parliament passed the Slavery Abolition Act 1833 to expand the territorial prerogatives of the previous Act. The new Act included the territories under the control of the East India Company, Ceylon (present day Sri Lanka) and Saint Helena. It also made the ownership of slaves illegal within the British Empire.

The abolition of slave trade left an economic vacuum, which was gradually filled by the promotion of agriculture. The latter witnessed radical changes. Foreign entrepreneurs with the help of missionaries introduced new technologies into the means of production to improve and increase the products. They, gradually, carried off with the existing subsistence economy and involved

local farmers in a cash crop one. The Danes, for instance, tried during the second decade of the nineteenth century to establish an agricultural export enterprise to produce maize, coffee and cotton⁽²⁵⁾. It should be reminded that the new system succeeded thanks to the favourable attitude of the local people. They were not aware enough of the ultimate consequences of such a system on their food self-sufficiency. Finally, it is consequential to remark the foreign entrepreneurs' intention to encourage the production of primary produce needed by their markets, which contributed to the establishment of a peripheral economy in the Gold Coast.

The measures adopted to fill this vacuum brought radical changes in the economy of the Gold Coast. The years that followed the abolition witnessed the development of legitimate trade that is, trading in local cash crop commodities like cotton, palm oil and kernel, groundnuts, timber, rubber, and coconuts. During the nineteenth century, the missions, namely the Basel Mission and the Wesleyan Mission worked hard to promote agricultural products in the Gold Coast. They encouraged farmers to produce commodities for export to replace the export of slaves. The Basel Mission, for instance, introduced cocoa into the Gold Coast in 1857⁽²⁶⁾. It also encouraged the plantation of palm oil and cotton. Similarly, the European merchants tried to adapt the crops to be promoted to the needs of the metropolitan markets. For instance, the wide use of machines, and the expansion of the railway mileage in the world made the demand for oil greater. At first, the main source of oil was whales, but as the demand grew, it became necessary to look for other sources⁽²⁷⁾. Those Europeans had to take into consideration some factors that could help the

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choice of crops to be promoted among which, first, the economic interest, second, suitable climatic conditions and an adequate soil, third, the three factors of production, (land, labour and capital) necessary for any business.

6. CONCLUSION

The Abolition Act enacted by the British Parliament in 1807 begot controversial interpretations as to its reasons. On the one hand, the British justified their decision by purely humanitarian and philanthropic reasons. This raises the question behind the late awakening of the British human and moral conscience. On the other hand, Boahen and Brigadier De Cunha Matos who support the economic interpretation of the Act provided sound arguments that the British decision was a reaction to the great bleeding of labour from Africa which threatened the regular supplies of cash crops and raw-materials to the British factories. Furthermore, some areas in West Africa became unable to produce even their food needs because the shortage in labour after extensive exports of slaves from the region. However, it cannot be denied that the anti-slavery movement played an important role in the Abolition Act 1807 ratification through anti-slavery public meetings to raise public awareness to exert more pressure on the decision makers. Finally, it can be assumed that the economic factors seem to be more determinant in the British decision as to the abolition of slave trade.

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- 4- The Portuguese were Catholics so they aimed at cutting any relation between Ethiopia whose people were Orthodox, and the Orthodox Church in Europe. Fage, op. cit., p.50.
- 5- F. W. H. Migeod, (1916), A History of the Gold Coast and Ashanti, Journal of the Royal African Society, Vol. 15, No. 59, p.236.
- 6- *Susan Blumenthal, (1974), Bright Continent: A Shoestring Guide to Sub-Saharan Africa, Anchor Books, New York, p. 90.*
- 7- *Harvey M. Feinberg, (1989), Africans and Europeans in West Africa, Vol.79, Part 7, The American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, p. 65.*
- 8- West India Company is a chartered company of Dutch merchants. Among its founding fathers was Willem Usselinx (1567-1647). On June 3, 1621, it was granted a charter for a trade monopoly in the West Indies (meaning the Caribbean) by the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands and given jurisdiction over the African slave trade, Brazil, the Caribbean, and North America. The area where the company could operate consisted of West Africa (between the Tropic of Cancer and the Cape of Good Hope) and the Americas, which included the Pacific Ocean and the eastern part of New Guinea. The intended purpose of the charter was to eliminate competition, particularly Spanish or Portuguese, between the various trading posts established by the

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- merchants. The company became instrumental in the Dutch colonization of the Americas.
- 9- Feinberg, op. cit., p.50.
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