

The Significance of Introducing Subjects on the History of Slavery and Slave Trade in African Higher Education Curricula¹

This article suggests the significance of introducing subjects on the history of slavery and slave trade in the African higher education curricula. The premise of this proposal is the belief that, in any society, social conflicts are partly long-term consequences of history. Retrieving traumatic pasts, therefore, is fundamental to overcoming some contemporary challenges. This is more urgent in Africa, as its continental history constitutes a palimpsest of human history. Nonetheless, until today, the debate on the lengthy history of slavery and slave trade are not explicit, and, in some contexts, they even constitute a taboo. As Jamaican intellectual, Anne Bailey stated,

Here and on the other side of the Atlantic, in fact wherever people of African descent are to be found, there is a deafening silence on the subject of slavery and the Atlantic slave trade. All that remains are fragments which, like the scattered pieces of a broken vase, do not represent the whole. Under the silence are palpable sighs of regret, pain, sorrow, guilt, and shame (2006, p. 1).

For Bailey, in societies where oral narratives of the past are crucial, it is fundamental to resolve the silence regarding the centuries of slavery and slave trade that affected the African continent. In line with that ideology, we suggest that the introduction of subjects on slavery and of slave trade in higher education

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curricula is the appropriate step to handle this delicate topic, with the overall aim of reconciling Africa with that episode of its past. To accomplish this objective, historical approaches should explain the various sociological phenomena derived from past slavery in Africa, especially the shame among the descents of those who were enslaved, and the guilt or pride in the descendants of those who indulged in human trading or who incorporated slavery as a practice. Besides, reasoning and explanations should consider how deeply slavery and the slave trade transformed African social institutions, to the point that, during the nineteenth century, domestic slavery became associated with the most intimate rituals of African local leadership (Bailey, 2006).

Added to surpassing internal blockages of the Africa slavery past, historical curricula should also confront European paradigms imposed on African historical accounts: transatlantic slavery in Africa ended with the beginning of European colonialism, who justified their intervention on the immorality of the existing slavery in Africa.

That argument omitted historical facts showing that the Europeans were the ones who stimulated and profited from most transatlantic modern human trafficking (Inikori, 1992; Rodney, 1982). Consequently, slave trade ended with a heavy moral burden on Africa, which impeded a meaningful liberation from that social practice in those regions where by that time was part of African indigenous way of life. Simultaneously, the Europeans introduced their educational system appointing slavery as a sign of barbarism, backwardness and ignorance, opposing it to the pretended civilized way of life promoted by colonialism.

This complex transition between the period of slavery and the imposition of colonial education may in part explain the omission of treating slave trade explicitly in African societies and from educational curricula in particular. As Mamdani analyzed,

The main problem in the exercise that sought to decolonize curriculum was that its historical vision was limited to that of the colonial period. Ironically, those who criticized the colonial period came to share its time horizon. Studies in political economy treated pre-colonialism more as a point of departure than as an object of study (2008, p. 5)

thus, excluding slave trade long-term history as an integral part of African history.

Undoubtedly, such infamous institutions left strong sociological footprints in the continent, expressed tacitly or explicitly, for instance, in the social hierarchies of surnames, ethnicities, stereotypes, regional identifications or practices associated with former slaves or former enslavers. Those hierarchies need explanation by historical research, as well as open debates on educational contexts, since they have affected and continue to affect the healthy and egalitarian development of social relationships in Africa. Assié-Lumumba (2006, p. 82) explains with wariness the emergence of violence and secret societies even on African higher education campuses and adds that Tanzania's former president and pan-African thinker Julius Nyerere foresaw situations of the kind, since the international forces of former colonial powers would continue manipulating internal contradictions to destabilize African societies. In that sense, it would be relevant to confront the violence and segregation among students by disclosing the omitted roots of slavery in those current social divisions.

Accordingly, for the advancement of decolonization, it is a critical priority that Africa starts an open dialogue around slavery and the slave trade, breaking the taboo around this issue by propitiating dialogue on educational environment, attempting to curb the pain those memories might arouse. In this point, higher education plays a crucial role, for, as Mamdani asserted, higher education is the environment where leaders are engendered, where curricula is designed, and where ideas for a meaningful democracy are created (2008, p. 1).

In that sense, higher education may be the most suitable platform

to carve slavery and slave trade subjects, as it is a realm conceived to create new reasoning on the issues that impede autonomous, self-determined, and peaceful "development" of African societies. Alongside, as higher education is also the framework to train teachers, treating slave trade and slavery subjects in its curricula would plant a seed that would spread the debate around these issues into other areas and levels of education and society. This can also multiply in the creation of didactic materials, in the recovery of oral memories, or in using cultural practices side-by-side with African local populations to catalyze the suffering, hatred, and self-destructiveness derived from slavery memories.

Therefore, inclusion of the subjects of slave trade and slavery in African higher education curricula can contribute "to create a new mind that is free of the seeds of self-destruction and that can use knowledge for the construction of a solid African society" (2006, p.123), as Assié-Lumumba suggests. It will also adhere to Agenda 2063, aspiration 4, of nurturing a "culture of peace and tolerance in Africa's children and youth through peace education" (AUC, 2015, p.6).

Finally, how may Africa introduce these subjects into its curricula? Here, is interesting to note the accomplishments of the African Diaspora in South America, in creating and applying legislations to transform traumatic memories and correct stereotypes through new educational trends. Since 1990 within the framework of new Political Constitutions, the Brazilian and Colombian African Diaspora compelled States to promulgate laws that introduce their histories into educational curricula. They argued that African Diaspora nurtured the shaping of these

societies; hence, including their history would help to understand deep roots of what these societies are today. Brazilian Law 10.639 of 2003 and Colombian Law 70 of 1993 answered to these demands, enforcing the introduction of African and African descents subjects in all, private and public schools and universities, especially in the area of history.

In Brazil, a law passed in 2003 aroused multiple debates among teachers, educational authorities and the State regarding how to teach and who can teach African history to change effectively the framework of a Eurocentric curricula, which is largely ignorant of African history. Debates stimulated the promulgation of Law 11.645 of 2008, which actualized 2003 Law, putting as guideline the subject of African and African Diaspora agencies and responses to face slavery in America. Therefore, 2008 Law limited the scope of curricula trends, to avoid falling into Eurocentric visions of Africans merely as slaves, while stimulating representations of African descents as agents of their own history. Curricula renewal not only encouraged great academic production, didactic materials, conferences, children's stories, graduate research, and publications, but also started a transformation in the way African descents represent themselves and assume their role in Colombian and Brazilian societies. For instance, both societies started open debates about racism, which, until recently, constituted a taboo in daily conversations and in political agendas. It also aroused the recognition of slavery as an *indefeasible crime against humanity*³, being the teaching of a critical history of African descents, a fundamental action to correct this crime.



Those Laws also fostered recognition of African descents contributions to those countries national cultures. In fact, many current researches highlight that the maintenance of African cultural roots were part of the historical Diaspora's answer against slavery. This finding attests with Amilcar Cabral assessment that

If history allows us to know the nature and the causes of the imbalances and conflicts (economic, political and social) which characterize the evolution of a society; culture teaches us what have been the dynamic syntheses, structured and established by the mind of society for the solution of these conflicts, at each stage in the evolution of this same society in the quest for survival and progress (1974, p. 45).

Accordingly, the inclusion in curricula of the Diaspora responses against slavery in Brazil and Co-

lombia has become a fertile ground to recognize and reinvigorate the African inherited cultural expressions which synthesize their historical responses against slavery. The invitation is that African higher education curricula joins this path.

Notes

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3. Regarding the debate on reparation for the crimes of modern slavery and slave trade, I wish to thank jurist Dr. Christianne Silva Vasconcellos who gave relevant insights for this text.

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