



Agriculture

The impact of slavery and colonialism

Alize le Roux and Jakkie Cilliers

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The impact of slavery and colonialism

Collectively, the indigenous, Arab, European and Transatlantic slave trades, from the mid-7th century to the 19th century, had a devastating impact on the African continent. **Slavery** meant that African societies remained more dispersed and mobile than others. On top of a high disease burden, poor soils and lack of access to technology, farming was challenging in a situation of low population density, lawlessness and violence. People constantly moved to avoid capture, often avoiding areas that offered easy access, such as along larger rivers. Once slaves had been captured and violently removed, it was the young, elderly or disabled who were left behind. Large parts of Africa were denuded of a productive labour force. Farming and herding could, therefore, not develop systematically, nor could social, political and economic systems mature to allow for technological and productivity improvements to track development seen in other regions of the world.

Despite the continuous drain of labour formally ending with the abolition of slavery by the mid-19th century, other forced labour schemes under the guise of imperialism and colonialism soon followed. In the decades that followed the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, where Africa was formally divided between various European states, the continent became an increasingly important source of raw agricultural products to feed the factories in Great Britain, Germany, Belgium, France, Italy, Portugal and Spain.

In addition, introducing foreign crops such as peanuts and sesame oriented to the export market replaced dietary staples such as millet and sorghum and reduced domestic food security. Population densities were low, and in many colonies settlers often designated large areas *terra nullius* (unoccupied land) and formal property rights were reserved for them and their European firms. European settlers steadily established themselves and the land was subsequently dispossessed. Much of the rest of the agricultural land was given ‘customary’ tenure, meaning it could be used but not owned, and that it was subject to seizure by the state.

Investment in road and rail infrastructure followed to allow raw materials to be transported from productive areas to the coast, from where products were shipped to Europe. Consequently, the rural and domestic agricultural sectors and regional trade were either destroyed or remained economically marginal. In this way, slavery, imperialism and colonialism fundamentally altered the development of agriculture on the continent. They effectively destroyed Africa’s burgeoning trade in food and displaced indigenous crops with commodities beneficial for the industrialising economies in Europe, which undermined food security at home.

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About the authors

Ms Alize le Roux joined the AFI in May 2021 as a senior researcher. Before joining the ISS, she worked as a principal geo-informatics researcher at the CSIR, supporting various local and national policy- and decision-makers with long-term planning support. Alize has 14 years of experience in spatial data analysis, disaster risk reduction and urban and regional modelling. She has a master's degree in geographical sciences from the University of Utrecht, specialising in multi-hazard risk assessments and spatial decision support systems.

Dr Jakkie Cilliers is the ISS's founder and former executive director. He currently serves as chair of the ISS Board of Trustees, head of the African Futures and Innovation (AFI) programme at the Pretoria office of the Institute, and is an extraordinary professor at the University of Pretoria. His 2017 best-seller *Fate of the Nation* addresses South Africa's futures from political, economic and social perspectives. His three most recent books, *Africa First! Igniting a Growth Revolution* (March 2020), *The Future of Africa: Challenges and Opportunities* (April 2021), and *Africa Tomorrow: Pathways to Prosperity* (June 2022) take a rigorous look at the continent as a whole.

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