The Libyan/Trans-Mediterranean Slave Trade, the African Union, and the Failure of Human Morality

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Abstract
In this article, I argue that the recently exposed slave trade in Libya involving Black African migrants seeking opportunities in Europe is not merely a crime against humanity that has been justly condemned by the international community, but is also a serious indictment on the failings of the African Union’s leadership. It is a reflection of the duplicitous nature of Europe’s commitment to human rights and exposes the African leaders’ moral and leadership deficiencies. Through the use of the Hamitic hypothesis and the cultural racism theory, I discuss some causal factors that have led to the abuse of sub-Saharan Africans migrating to Europe and also the African response to the migrant crisis. Finally, I draw parallels between what I term the New Slavery and the evolving narrative of racism and conclude that poor African leadership is the Achilles’ heel in the restoration of African dignity.

Keywords
slavery, Libya, African migrants, Europe, leadership

Introduction
In November 2017, a CNN special report revealed that African migrants seeking to get into Europe were being sold as slaves by some criminal gangs in Libya, a failed North African state. This country has become the face of the new “Middle Passage” to Europe. The Security Council condemned the slave trading as “heinous abuses of human rights which may also account to crimes against humanity” and called upon “all relevant authorities to investigate such activities without delay to bring perpetrators to account” (Levenson, 2017). The shocking revelations led to international condemnation and demands by human rights groups for the United Nations (UN) intervention and the prosecution of the culprits. Worldwide protest marches condemned the Libyan slave trade as the UN announced that it would investigate. The Nigerian government started repatriating its nationals who had been rescued from their captors, yet clearly, the overall African response to the revelations was shockingly inadequate. The response was, to put it succinctly, reactionary and face-saving. For instance, it had to take a CNN investigation for the crime to be exposed while the African governments slept on their jobs.

The Libyan criminal syndicates involved in the slave trade seem to have been operating with impunity right under the noses of the weak Libyan government and the continental body, the African Union (AU). In 2017, between 700,000 and one million African migrants died at sea (Yousef, 2017). The question that then arises is why African migrants would take enormous risks making the voyage across the Mediterranean Sea via a lawless and dangerous Libya. Yousef (2017) explained that most of these migrants in Libya “are fleeing armed conflict, persecution or severe economic hardship in sub-Saharan Africa.” If most of the migrants are bona fide refugees fleeing from multifaceted sociopolitical and economic problems, the international community should respond to their plight in a more compassionate manner. The AU, by virtue of its immediate links with the member states from which the refugees flee, should have led the way in ameliorating their plight in Libya as soon as it began. Hence, the initial lethargic reaction to the unfolding crisis in Africa and the subsequent hostility toward the migrants in Europe point to a troubling moral declension in the world in general, and among African leaders in particular. It is as if postmodern society lacks the requisite moral foundations, which enable relevant strategies that respond urgently to developing calamities.

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Winter (1994, p. 4) argues that the postmodern society still has the ability to make sound moral judgments informed by a “radical insistence on contingency” which also reinvigorates “our understanding” of the deeper meaning of “the problem of values.” His view means that the widespread materialism and secularization of postmodern society does not equate to a kind of nihilism devoid of both human compassion and an awareness of attendant moral obligations. His view on postmodern morality is also shared by Lindholm (1997, p. 11) who believes that the existence of an arbitrary, unstable, and uncertain international universe still leaves us with the capacity “to know the right way to behave” even when we may not know where we are going. In other words, postmodernist understanding of morality has not affected our ability to decide on what is right and wrong. Yet, the whole idea of what should constitute morality is contested. There is subjective morality and objective morality—two apparently exclusive concepts. Cline (2018, p.1) explains that the distinction between these concepts of morality is that “objective judgments and claims are assumed to be free from personal considerations,” while subjective ones are “assumed to be heavily (if not entirely) influenced by such personal considerations.” Dorsey (2012) postulates that even when determining subjective morality, one still needs to examine objective facts about an issue before making a determination. Hence, to him, the “fundamental facts that determine whether we conform to our moral obligations or not are objective,” meaning that they are independent of the epistemic contexts of the “individual agents.” In view of the above perspectives, the objective facts about the sub-Saharan African migrants in the Maghreb are that they have been dehumanized through torture, rapes, illegal detentions, deportations, and slavery. These established facts should trigger a sense of horror in the global community leading to urgent necessary interventions as both torture and slavery have been outlawed in international statutes.

In December 2017, the CNN also reported that some European criminal syndicates were recruiting African migrants for exploitative labor on Italian farms. Some of the immigrants told the CNN that they were forced to work on those farms to survive in a hostile environment. The farmers simply exploited their unfortunate circumstances by using them as cheap labor for selfish economic advantages. On the contrary, the Italian government ignored the exploitative wages as it saw these as a deterrent to those migrants still dreaming of a future in the country (see Yousef, 2017). The fact that the governments of the host European countries allowed the exploitation of immigrants is an indictment of their lack of commitment to the human rights of African migrants. Be that as it may, ultimate blameworthiness for the refugee problem must lie with the African leaders in the source countries, while Libyan and European racial prejudice must be blamed for the slave trade that resulted. Apart from complaining about the culpability of the West in the lawlessness of Libya because of its involvement in the overthrow of the late Muamar Gaddafi, and calling for an official investigation, African leaders have been unconvinced in their response. According to the Migration Policy Centre (MPC), sub-Saharan Africans constituted the demographic group most affected by criminal violence, detentions, and deportations in Libya. It also says that “they were in the most dangerous position being threatened by Gaddafi’s forces and the opposition” (MPC-Team, 2013, p. 6). Furthermore, the MPC states that the situation of these migrants was worsened by the failure of their countries’ governments to help them. Consequently, the migrants were left “stranded in overcrowded transit areas in countries bordering Libya” (MPC-Team, 2013, p. 6). According to the MPC, 62,058 sub-Saharan migrants were deported from Libya in 2013.

The U.S. Department of State (2017) states that the Libyan government registers migrants from seven nationalities as refugees, specifically those coming from Syria, Somalia, Ethiopia (Oromo), Sudan (Darfur), and Eritrea. The Department of State also reports that “treatment of detained migrants depended upon their country of origin.” These revelations expose the inept sub-Saharan African governments whose nationals were left to face illegal Libyan detentions, rapes, arbitrary beatings, and enslavement on their own. The migrant crisis must surely be one of the worst human disasters to ever afflict Africa since the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and colonization. Article 4 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights declares the following: “No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.” Article 5 says that “no one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment” (Henry, 2018). Therefore, this study examines how in a world that has designed such lofty standards of human rights, and in a continent that has not only experienced slavery, but has also suffered from colonization, the degrading scourge of slavery should again be manifested. It attempts to answer the following questions: Is the dehumanization of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa through exploitative labor in southern European countries like Italy, and the subsequent slave trade in Libya following the Italian government’s deals with Libyan warlords explainable through the Hamitic hypothesis and the cultural racism theory? Do the African leaders’ failed economic policies carry most of the blame for the migrant crisis and the resultant slave trade?

**International Migration and the Human Rights of the Migrants**

International migration is one phenomenon that is part of the human experience in the 21st century. In recent years, political conflict has been the key driver of migration from the war-ravaged countries to host nations that hold the promise of peace, stability, and social advancement for refugees. During the so-called “Arab Spring,” the Middle East and
North Africa were the major sources of migration to Europe. The migration involved millions of migrants fleeing conflict in countries affected by political upheavals. Countries such as Syria, Libya, Egypt, and Tunisia experienced political upheavals during the Arab Spring when people demanded democratization and progressive political systems. In Syria’s case, a civil war that sucked in major world powers like Russia, the United States of America, Iran, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and France either on the rebels’ or on the Assad regime’s sides forced hundreds of thousands of people to flee to neighboring countries and to Europe. The emergence of the terror group Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) only worsened the deadly conflict and forced millions from the Middle East to flee to Europe. The massive migration has caused social tensions in the host nations like France, Germany, and others while depriving the source nations of the economically productive segments of their populations. More worryingly, neo-Nazi groups and far right parties have exploited the migrant-related fears of European citizens and exacerbated xenophobic reactions that have heightened racial tensions. Gutteridge (2015) notes that the migrant crisis has seen Europe swing to the right. Consequently, the continent’s extremist politicians have exploited the situation to build their support among electorates that are wary of refugees. The hostility of European citizens toward African immigrants and indeed those from the Middle East has some elements of racial bigotry and xenophobia. Thorleifson (2015) observes as follows:

In response to growing economic and social crises, the radical, far right and populist social movements are experiencing a remarkable surge in support. Across different European contexts, citizens cast their votes for parties with xenophobic roots, rhetoric and policies. This is evident in countries like Greece, France, Hungary, the UK and Sweden, where the radical right form the spearhead of larger renationalization processes directed at forces seen as threatening their “national culture and values.”

She also mentions the problem of cultural exclusion of migrants in countries like Hungary. This development is itself a form of cultural racism, the intent of which is nativist as it seeks to protect the cultural values and identity of the indigene from the “adulterating” presence of the foreigner. Thus, this article regards the European xenophobic response to the migrants as being both a political expression of cultural exclusivity and an overt racism.

The “othering” of migrants in Europe has been reflected in violent actions and other forms of aggression and discrimination by right-wing political parties, which, unsurprisingly, have been making electoral gains in countries like Germany, France, and Belgium, to name but a few. The cultural racism theory seeks to explain covert forms of racism that have emerged since the end of fascism and subsequently colonialism. Cultural racism constructs the cultural outsider as an existential threat to a dominant ethnic group’s way of life.

The cultural “other” is regarded as a suspect and therefore an undesirable presence in the indigene’s physical space. In his definition of cultural racism, Blaut (1992, p. 290) sees the phenomenon as a learned cultural practice in which the racial category used in profiling people is “substituted” by the cultural one so that the concept of a superior culture replaces the biological concept of a superior race. In this reasoning, non-Europeans are “rather culturally backward in comparison to Europeans because of their history: their lesser cultural evolution” (Blaut, p. 293). Thus, the conflictual nature of the relationship between some European citizens and the migrants of Middle Eastern stock has in recent years been exploited by terrorist groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda. These groups see in the culturally excluded migrants fertile recruitment grounds for suicide bombers operating as terrorist cells. ISIS-linked terror cells have already shocked the world with their attacks in Paris, Berlin, and the Belgian capital Brussels (see also Schmid, 2016). Consequently, these violent activities by terrorist groups seem to be directly linked to the cultural exclusion of immigrants in the host nations and the deep sense of resentment and grievance among the radicalized cultural outsiders. The same problems of xenophobia and racism are pertinent in this article’s discussion of the Libyan slavery and other forms of abuse of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa. According to the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL; 2016), the majority of migrants that it interviewed in Libya were from the sub-Saharan African countries, namely, Eritrea, Somalia, Guinea, Cameroon, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Sudan. The migrants reported to UNSMIL that they had been regularly subjected to beatings, starvation, denial of food and water, gang rapes, and the renting out of women to armed men for sexual abuse. Hence, the article argues that sub-Saharan migrants traversing Libya while seeking Europe’s shores have been subjected to worse treatment than those from other regions of Africa.

The second wave of migrations to Europe has originated in sub-Saharan Africa where poverty, poor governance, failed states, and conflict have been the major push factors. The question then arises: Are scholarly arguments that war, disease, and poverty have historically been the main drivers of massive African migration to Europe, true? The fact is that most of sub-Saharan Africa’s migration has mainly been intra-African, in the form of rural-to-urban migration or across national borders. The people migrate to get to the relative safety of refugee camps or more stable host countries. Typical examples of regional destinations of African migrants fleeing from conflict include the Somali refugee camps in northern Kenya and South Sudanese refugee camps in Tanzania and Uganda. In the case of refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Rwanda in the Great Lakes region, Zambia, South Africa, and Tanzania have been the key destinations. In southern Africa, there has been a lot of migration from conflict-ridden states like Lesotho and Zimbabwe to South Africa by political refugees and economic migrants. Flahaux and De Haas (2016) argue
that research has demonstrated that the notion of desperately poor, starving, and undocumented African migrants fleeing in Exodus-type proportions to Europe because of war, violence, poverty, and hunger is misplaced and stereotypical. They assert that studies reveal that there is nothing exceptional about African migration and reject the notion of irregular and illegal mass exodus targeting Europe as an El Dorado. They point out that African migration, while being mainly regular and intra-African by migrants holding travel documents, passports, and visas, is also directed to Asia, Australasia, and the Americas. The migrants’ mobility is influenced by the need for a better education, family, joining a spouse, and finding a job, as is the case with migration elsewhere in the world. While accepting that violence is a driver of African migration in regions like the Great Lakes, they argue that it only accounts for a fraction of the overall causes of migration as most of the drivers are “mundane processes that drive mobility like education, a spouse or a better life” (Flahaux & De Haas, 2016, p. 3). They further observe as follows:

The idea that much African migration is essentially driven by poverty ignores evidence that demographic and economic transitions and “development” in poor countries are generally associated to increasing rather than decreasing levels of mobility and migration and that the relation between development and migration is fundamentally non-linear. (Flahaux & De Haas, p. 3)

Drawing from the above argument, this article submits that the sensationalizing of the plight of African migrants who have suffered from enslavement plays straight into the narrative of the Afro-pessimism and the so-called “curse of Ham.” From a discourse analytical perspective, the use of disparaging rhetoric by leaders like the late Muammar Gaddafi who once described sub-Saharan African migrants as “swarms” invading Europe and threatening Europe’s social order through creating a “black Europe” amounts to stereotyping the migrant and degrading him as a lesser human (see the “Gaddafi wants EU cash to stop African migrants,” 2010). Such an alarmist narrative of a potential “Black Peril” threatening Europe’s cultural and racial makeup may amount to some form of cultural racism masquerading as concerns about “irregular” migration. The Hamitic theory explores the mono-dimensional interpretation of the biblical story of Ham, the youngest son of Noah, mocking his drunken father’s nakedness instead of reverently covering him with a garment like his older siblings Shem and Japheth. In the biblical narrative, Noah then cursed Canaan by declaring that he would be a servant of servants to his brethren. Racists and cultural supremacists have, over the centuries, used this “curse” to justify the abuse of Black Africans and, in some extreme instances, to even deny them their human dignity. According to the Hamitic theory, nothing of value in Africa originated from Black African communities (see Sanders, 1969). All that is valuable in Black Africa has a European or Asiatic origin. Thus, this article argues that this Afro-pessimistic view of Black Africa underpins the racism that has been exhibited against sub-Saharan Africans and continues to inflame anti-Black hostility in Arab North Africa. According to the BBC article “Gaddafi Wants EU Cash to Stop African Migrants” (2010), Gaddafi suggested that the EU “should pay Libya at least 5bn euros (£4bn; $6.3bn) a year to stop illegal African immigration and avoid a ‘black Europe.’” Italy subsequently began handing rescued migrants to Libya, thereby drastically reducing the number of migrants reaching its shores (Yousef, 2017). Hence, Gaddafi’s demand for cash from European nations in return for him stopping the flow of migrants was a racist-tainted economic blackmail—the deliberate creation of a looming African invasion for extortionist objectives. It was the construction of a mythical “Black Peril” that would coax Europe’s leaders into a financially advantageous deal for Libya. In a sense, the deal he wanted was tantamount to commodifying the migrants, turning them into negotiating chips and effectively dehumanizing them. This extortionist rhetoric set the stage for Italian cooperation with post-Gaddafi Libyan warlords on “cash for migrants” deals and the resultant slave trade, the motivating factors of which are financial and racist.

Blaut (1992) asserts that racism like all the other practices is “cognized by a theory, a belief system about the nature of reality and the behaviour which is appropriate to this cognized reality” (p. 289). He also posits that the practice of racial discrimination exists at all levels “from personal abuse to colonial oppression.” Perhaps more relevantly, he explains that the practice of racism has been essential in European society for several hundred years “in the sense that it is an essential part of the way the European capitalist system maintains itself.” The farmers in southern Italy realized the economic benefits of recruiting sub-Saharan African migrants as cheap labor in conditions akin to slavery, where the vulnerable migrants simply had to work for peanuts, or starve. The point is that no European farmer could have subjected a fellow citizen to exploitative working conditions without the risk of prosecution under relevant European Union (EU) labor regulations. Other than capitalist opportunism, possible racism, and creating a deterrent against future migration to Europe, it is difficult to find alternative explanations for the abuse of migrants in southern Europe’s farms.

**Libya, the Hamitic Hypothesis, and the New Slave Trade**

Oil rich Libya’s lawlessness is rooted in two related historical events: the end of Muammar Gaddafi’s dictatorship and Western political and military interventions. Both of these factors are linked to the competing interests of capitalism and nascent Libyan nationalist desire for global relevance. Libya has, in a sense, become a modern replica of the
Senegalese Goree Island, a new slave-holding post along the Mediterranean Sea. Its geographical proximity to southern Europe and its lawlessness make it an attractive launch pad for human traffickers cashing in on migrants hoping to get to Europe. Its colonial association with Italy makes it particularly attractive to Ethiopian and Somali migrants as a doorway to southern Europe. The same country once had a love–hate relationship with Europe’s capitalist powers. Its late dictator Muammar Gaddafi was implicated in the terrorist bombing of a passenger jet over Lockerbie in Scotland and became an international pariah thereafter. Libya was accused of sponsoring anti-Western terrorist groups. It also adopted a radical anti-Western and Pan-Arab nationalist stance while constructing its national identity on a more Asian Arab image and not as an African state.

It was only after Libya failed to assert its influence among the Arab League nations that it adopted a Pan-Africanist identity and using its leader’s charisma and oil wealth, courted friendship with sub-Saharan African nations (see “Raddington & Report,” 2017). Later, it supported South African President Thabo Mbeki in his African Renaissance and the New Economic Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) agenda, which sought to develop intra-African trade and eventually, through the AU, champion continental union. Gaddafi imagined himself as a future president of a United Africa and worked hard at winning popular support in sub-Saharan Africa through economic investments and other political initiatives. It later emerged that his family stashed stolen Libyan wealth all over Africa. Several billions of stolen dollars are said to be in South Africa’s banking system. According to a UN report on Gaddafi’s missing billions, “about $20 billion was believed to be held across four banks, while the rest was allegedly hidden in warehouses and bunkers around Pretoria and Johannesburg” (Chutel, 2017). In applying the Hamitic theory to Libya’s treatment of sub-Saharan Africa, one has to consider the changed nature of political realities in postcolonial Africa. These circumstances have distorted Arab North Africa’s relations with Black Africans by creating a tension-filled dichotomy of Pan-African brotherhood and race-based identity politics.

Sanders (1969, p. 521) argues that the Hamitic hypothesis is “symptomatic of the nature of race relations” and has changed its “content if not its nomenclature through time, and that it has become a problem of epistemology.” Thus, it suited Libya to suddenly discover its African-ness when its designs for political pre-eminence in the Arab world failed. Libya could successfully exert its influence and attain its hegemonic ambitions in sub-Saharan Africa where it calculated its chances would be enhanced by the comparatively weaker states. Hence, Libya’s masquerading as a committed Pan-Africanist champion only masked its years-old anti-Black African racism. Asser (2011) states that Gaddafi used to be known as the “Picasso of Middle East politics,” and that during the 2000s, he would “disrupt the normally stolid annual summits of the Arab League” by his antics which included “lighting up a cigarette and blowing it in the face of his neighbour, or tossing insults at Gulf leaders and the Palestinians” during his period as a Pan-Arab champion. Later, during his Pan-African episode, he would use the Arab League summits to declare himself “king of kings of Africa.” According to the “Raddington Report” (2017), Libya’s racism is “old established” and the slave trading in Black people that country “harks back to an age where subjugation and overt dehumanization of Africans was common place.” It cites the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) statement of 2000 condemning a wave of attacks targeting African migrants and also Human Rights Watch reports of 2006 and 2009 documenting attacks on Black African migrants by Libyan nationals. It concludes that the “roots of Libya’s anti-black sentiment lies with the myth of racial superiority” over sub-Saharan Africans. In terms of the Hamitic hypothesis, Libya’s historical cultural superiority complex is premised on the belief that a subgroup of the “more technologically superior” Caucasian race that settled in Africa created all valuable innovations. Clearly, the Pan-Africanism of Gaddafi’s Libya only masked the racism and what the “Raddington Report” (2017) terms “the Arabisation” campaign in Africa.

The “Raddington Report” (2017) cites Gaddafi’s racist rant in 2010 when he “warned that Europe could face being overrun by an ‘influx of starving and ignorant Africans’” while also adding that “we don’t know if Europe will remain an advanced and united continent or if it will be destroyed, as happened with the barbaric invasions.” His rhetoric sounds similar to Trump’s “shithole” categorization of the migrants from the continent and are echoed in Kemp’s analysis of the European leaders’ xenophobic attitudes toward sub-Saharan African migrants. The Gaddafi warning seems to have been taken seriously in Europe, hence the collaboration between the Italian government and the Libyan warlords on keeping the sub-Saharan Africans out of Europe through the payment of bribes. As has been mentioned earlier, this collaboration led to the slave trade once the profits of the human smugglers began to fall.

Since Gaddafi’s fall, the Western-backed regime in Tripoli has failed to establish control over the country leading to the terrorist group ISIS setting up camp in Libya. According to the UNSMIL and United Nations Human Rights (UNHR; 2016), “the breakdown in the justice system has led to a state of impunity, in which armed groups, criminal gangs, smugglers and traffickers control the flow of migrants through the country” (p. 1). Without central governmental control, the activities of criminal networks that have profited from human trafficking and the slave trade have been unabated. Unscrupulous traffickers have robbed migrants of money while promising to deliver them to Europe. Unseaworthy vessels have often capsized in the Mediterranean Sea and cost thousands of migrants’ lives. Such calamities have not dissuaded would-be migrants from attempting the dangerous voyage. Faced with political backlashes in their countries
over the issue of African immigrants, some European countries like Italy have entered deals with the Libyan authorities to keep the migrants in Libya and to jointly patrol the Mediterranean Sea. The anti-immigrant sentiment in Europe has been worsened by the unprecedented immigration of Syrian refugees into countries like Austria, Hungary, Germany, and France. After a string of ISIS-linked terror attacks in Belgium, France, and Germany, neo-Nazi groups and the far right parties became more robust in their opposition to migrants. The European response to the migrant crisis has been one of fear of minority “alien cultures, traditions and ways of life,” which often “fosters fear, a lack of trust, open hostility and, in some cases it results in xenophobia and racism against those regarded as different” (Guibernau, 2010, p. 5).

The anti-immigrant sentiment has forced European states like Italy and France to tighten their immigration laws and become more robust in their reaction to the human trafficking problem. They have recently been accused of involvement in controversial deals with the Libyans on curtailing the flow of both economic and political refugees from sub-Saharan Africa. According to Yousef (2017), the Italian government began “paying the Libyan warlords controlling Libya’s coasts to curb the flow of migrants early in 2017.” These payments to Libya’s warlords by the Italian government led to a drop “in the flow of migrants to Italy,” thereby creating “a backlog of customers for Libya’s smugglers, who have responded by auctioning off migrants for as little as $400.” In a sense, the Italian payments to Libyan warlords exacerbated the migrants’ problems and resulted in their commodification as human merchandise. Italy’s efforts have not yet been very successful as the determination of the migrants to get to Europe has far outweighed the deterrents mounted against their efforts. More have continued to fall into the hands of Libyan human traffickers and found themselves abandoned, stranded, and facing death in the Mediterranean Sea. Many stranded migrants have been rescued from dingy boats by European navies and the Libyan Coast Guard. The following questions then arise: How strong are the factors that force these migrants to leave their own home countries, risk their lives crossing international borders and the Sahara Desert, and surrendering themselves into the hands of greedy Libyan slave traders? What are the sub-Saharan African countries and the AU doing about the situation? To borrow Kemp’s (2017) question, why is the world ignoring the slave trade, Kemp (2017) postulates that it might be “because they’re Africans and have been written off as undeserving migrants.”

To the question why is the world ignoring the slave trade, Kemp (2017) postulates that it might be “because they’re Africans and have been written off as undeserving migrants.” This supposition gains credibility when viewed against president Donald Trump’s labeling Africa and Haiti as “shit-hole” countries. This clearly racist slur has provoked international condemnation, more so given Trump’s declared preference for Norwegian immigrants. Kemp’s assertion that European leaders regard the African migrants as “swarms, plagues and marauders” and that there is “more European sympathy for the Syrian refugees” implicates Europe for harboring racial prejudices, a predisposition Trump evidently shares. Even the libelous verbiage used exemplifies the contempt for African humanity and echoes Gaddafi’s alarmist “swart gevaar” (Afrikaans for perceived Black danger to White people in South Africa) warnings of swarms and a “black Europe.”

For the African people to show a desperate desire to leave their countries at whatever cost, the conditions they face must be so dire that the potential risks are considerably surmountable. People seem to be prepared to risk death, robbery, and getting sold into slavery while attempting to reach Europe’s shores. During the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, the African slaves were forcibly taken aboard slave ships by their captors. In the Libyan Slave Trade, the African migrants seem to literally stampede their way into the Maghreb slave abyss en route to Europe. This fact alone feeds the narrative of a postcolonial African reality of unmitigated political and economic disasters that people have to flee from. It
also suggests that the NEPAD that Mbeki and other African leaders championed as a vehicle for the “African renaissance” has failed to deliver tangible economic and political benefits. Instead, some African states like Somalia, the DRC, South Sudan, and others have economically and politically regressed since the launch of these initiatives while Europe has further advanced. This fact is not lost on the ordinary people, hence their desperation to find economic advancement and peace in Europe. The refugee crisis has itself become an ultimate truism of the common people’s rejection of Pan-Africanism and its hopeless promises.

**Capitalist Exploitation, the African Leaders, and Cultural Racism Theory**

Chinua Achebe (2000) once wrote,

the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water or air or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership (p. 1).

From a cursory look, some Afro-pessimists and Eurocentric critics may be tempted to conclude that Africa is cursed with its leadership and to use Africa’s developmental problems to justify their racial bigotry against sub-Saharan African migrants who are categorized as biologically or culturally inferior. Achebe’s statement above problematizes Nigeria’s leadership failure and does not acknowledge any existential biological problem. Both the cultural racism theory and the Hamitic hypothesis have in them elements of religious profiling of the cultural outsider. Blaut (1992, p. 292), citing the contemporary Israeli expansionism in Palestine, asserts that theological arguments giving “overriding rights” to one group over the others is a form of religious racism. He explains that with the secularization of thought in the 1850s, it became necessary to sustain racist practice in different theories, thereby giving rise to manifestations of bigotry through cultural superiority ideologies. Hence, problematizing Africa’s leadership as the major cause of its underdevelopment to the exclusion of other causative factors like unequal international trade unwittingly confirms the cultural inferiority argument. Yet, the recurrent nature of failed leadership in many African states since decolonization, is an undeniable reality. The question is, should cultural inferiority be blamed for Africa’s failure to produce a type of leadership that is on par with its Western and Asian counterpart?

Cultural racism is not an unrelated belief or supremacist system of thought on an evolutionary trajectory; rather, it is a mutating phenomenon assuming different forms depending on existing sociocultural and historical dynamics. The development of supremacist theories has as its axis the European continent, and according to Blaut (1992), “the countries of European settlement overseas” (p. 295). Flowing from this perspective, the non-European world is located somewhere at the periphery of human civilization and technological innovation. One would logically assume that sub-Saharan Africa, the Black man’s world, is on the outer limits of the periphery. In terms of this assertion, the rest of the world receives “its culture in its entirety from the West” (Chukwu & Madubuko, 2014, p. 87). This reasoning enabled Gaddafi to warn of an impending African migrant threat to Europe as the world’s presumed cultural center. This echoes the Hegelian and Darwinist evolutionary theories that influenced colonial conquest and the cultural supremacist beliefs of early European travelers, anthropologists, historians, and colonial administrators in Africa during the 19th century.

The Eurocentric narratives about a “dark continent,” a people without culture, history, government, and sophistication philosophically guided the racism and bigotry of the earliest colonial encounter between Europe and Africa. A typical example of such Afro-pessimist scholars is Hugh Trevor-Roper (1969, pp. 3-17) who stated that the African continent was “unhistoric” and that there was no African history to teach as “there is only the history of Europeans in Africa” with the rest being “darkness” which could not be “a subject of history.” Trevor-Roper (1969) also added the following:

The history of the world for the past five centuries, in so far as it has significance, has been European history . . . It follows that the study of history is and must be Eurocentric. For we can ill afford to amuse ourselves with the unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe. (p. 26)

The racist discourses like the one above have been developed within the Western culture and then practiced in interactions with members of so-called peripheral cultures. Van Dijk (1993, p. 92) refers to racist discourses whose underlying structures are based on principles of “positive self-representation and negative Other-representation” and which are observable “at all levels of discourse structures in text and talk.” The stark reality of Africa’s economic exploitation, the abuse of African migrants, and the continuing racist and patronizing Afro-pessimist discourses emanating from Western leaders like the French President Macron and his United States of America counterpart Trump are evidence of a mind-set of projecting the presumed European (Caucasian) racial and cultural superiority. Where Trump speaks of Africa as a “shithole,” Macron speaks of its “civilizational” (Mitter, 2017) crisis that made a Marshall Plan-type of intervention impossible.

The idea that sub-Saharan Africa is culturally inferior to the West or to Asia is as deeply flawed as earlier colonial notions of a cultureless and history-less continent. The patent ignorance in this idea, which fuels racism in all its forms,
including the Libyan slave trade, is even more abhorrent when one considers that there is no heterogeneous African culture in a common African cultural basket. In Appiah’s (1994) sociohistorical analysis of racial identity, he points out that where “a racial label is applied to people, ideas about what it refers to, ideas that may be much less consensual than the application of the label, come to have their social effects” (p. 78). The social effects of the modern slavery affecting sub-Saharan Africans in Libya and the European response to the migrant crisis where race is at the core of “contemporary identity politics” (Appiah, p. 79) highlight the scale of Africa’s socioeconomic crisis and the indifference that has accompanied it. Unfortunately, today, racial politics and the stereotyping of Africans are fueled by the inescapable reality of sub-Saharan African political leaders unwittingly contributing to the mass migration into the Maghreb (for the unexpected benefit of Libyan slave traders) through their failure to economically develop their countries. African leaders have laid the blame for the new slavery on the Libyan slave dealers, unscrupulous human traffickers, Europe and United States of America whose leaders they blame for creating a failed state in Libya. The human tragedy of the Libyan Slave Trade enhances the narrative of a hopeless continent of failed economies and abysmal governments.

On the causes of the Libyan Slave Trade, Kamara (2017) aversthat poor governance and high levels of corruption make Africa’s leaders unaccountable and therefore accomplices in the exodus of people fleeing from wars, poverty, and human rights violations. In addition to this view, Kamara also adds that the UN World Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that 33 million people in sub-Saharan Africa were hungry or undernourished in 2014-2016. Ewubure (2017) shares Kamara’s view that African leaders are to blame for the Libyan slavery. While some African states like Kenya, Ghana, Senegal, Rwanda, Botswana, and Tanzania have recorded impressive economic growth rates and with that political stability in the last few years, the same cannot be said of many others. Somalia, a major source of migrants seeking European shores, is both a failed state and the epicenter of political instability, Al-Qaeda-linked terrorist violence, piracy, and refugees in the Horn of Africa. It contributed 300,000 immigrants to the EU, Norway, and Switzerland in 2018 alone (Kruger, 2018). Attempts by the United States of America and the AU to restore order in the East African country have failed. Somalia is not an isolated case in sub-Saharan Africa. Many other countries have problems of political and economic instability that contribute to immigration. Furthermore, economic hemorrhage in Africa further compounds the migrant crisis.

According to the Global Policy Forum (2014), cash outflows from Africa far exceed the inflows from outside the continent. Total illicit outflows as well as remittances to western governments and international corporations amounted to a net loss of some US$58.2 billion. This alone debunks the racist “shithole” label which taken to its logical conclusion implies that Africa is a financial liability to the civilized world, and other arguments that the continent is indebted to the West for its economic survival. The Global Policy Forum (2014) adds that

the Global South is being drained of resources by the rest of the world and it is losing far more each year than it gains. Africa alone loses $192 billion each year to the rest of the world. This is mainly in profits made by foreign companies, tax dodging and the costs of adapting to climate change. Whilst rich countries often talk about the aid their countries give to Africa, this is in fact less than $30 billion each year. Even when you add this to foreign investment, remittances and other resources that flow into the continent, Africa still suffers an overall loss of $58 billion every year. The idea that we are aiding Africa is flawed; it is Africa that is aiding the rest of the world.

The above reality of economic exploitation of Africa not only perpetuates the continent’s cyclical poverty, but also sustains the post-colonialist narratives of African exceptionalism in the areas of endemic poverty and economic stagnation. The conclusion that African poverty and unjust international trade policies skewed in favor of the developed world are inseparable realities is inescapable. For instance, Nigeria, another major contributor to the sub-Saharan migrant population in Libya, has had stalled economic development because of declining oil revenues linked to falling global oil prices. But then, Nigeria was ravished by successive military rulers who undermined democracy, looted state coffers, impoverished the country, and failed to diversify the economy while oil prices were still high. The democratization of the country a few decades ago has been a welcome change, yet economic development has been lopsided and has largely benefited a few elites while creating sociopolitical conflict in the oil producing Niger Delta region.

The policies of former Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan who was succeeded by current President Buhari attracted scorn as corruption and croniyism got entrenched. Meanwhile, during his tenure, Boko Haram’s threat in the East was met with indecisiveness. The same pattern of inept political leadership in countries like the DRC, Zimbabwe, the Central Africa Republic, Burundi, South Sudan, and many other countries that are joining the group of failed states is constant. Also constant is the AU’s obliviousness to the political transgressions of fellow African leaders. According to the article ‘Africa’s Hegemon’ which appeared in ‘The Economist’ (2006), only a few African leaders subjected themselves to the peer review that Mbeki’s African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) initiated. However, there have been promising economies like Rwanda, which after suffering a genocide ignored by both the West and the AU, has been a surprising economic miracle. After descending to the disastrous levels of human suffering and economic destruction when close to a million Tutsi and moderate Hutu people were killed in the 1994
genocide, the country’s impressive economic and political development demonstrates that with sound leadership and sensible economic policies, it is possible to move from a failed state to a middle income economy within two decades. Similar sensible political choices and economic programs in Ghana have led to notable economic growth. Uganda, after years of tyranny under the Idi Amin and Milton Obote regimes, was once on the right path to economic prosperity and political stability. Sadly, Museveni has now subverted democratic principles by seeking to extend his rule for an indefinite period in what Gafey (2015) terms “Africa’s third-term problem.”

The syndrome of life presidents and economic failure seemingly refuses to be eradicated in some African states like the DRC, Burundi, Ethiopia, Togo, Equatorial Guinea, and Cameroon. In Zimbabwe, this problem was only ended by a military intervention in 2017. Consequently, millions have fled from these countries to other parts of the world in the quest for peace and prosperity. Africa has abundant natural resources which if put to good use for the benefit of its people would see an improvement in the economic and social conditions of its inhabitants. Admittedly, poor economic policies and uninspiring leadership continue to hamper the continent’s progress. Therefore, we are likely to see more desperate Africans migrating to what they see as better countries where their economic and security prospects stand a better chance of fulfillment. In fact, it is the continent’s political and economic failures that perpetuate racism and stereotypical representations of Africa as the developed world’s problem child.

The Libyan/Trans-Mediterranean Slave Trade serves as a warning to African leaders that their work remains undone. Condemning the Libyans and the Europeans, pleading for the UN’s investigation of the slave trade, and bemoaning the end of Muammar Gaddafi’s regime are unhelpful diversions from the real problems of poor governance and economic planning in sub-Saharan Africa. Although it is true that racism and economic exploitation by multinational conglomerates from the developed world are major causes of Africa’s economic underdevelopment, it is also clear that poor political and economic policies by Africa’s leaders are to blame for what has happened to sub-Saharan African migrants in Libya. The continuing economic exploitation of Africa through the extraction of its material resources, the inhumane treatment of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa, and the use of supremacist discourses that label Black Africans as less than human are underpinned by the supremacist ideologies of cultural racism and the misguided notion of Ham’s curse. The fact that migrants from sub-Saharan Africa have been economically exploited as farm laborers in Mediterranean Europe and sold into slavery in Libya point to the failure of human morality in the 21st century. The Libyan slavery serves as a monument of disgrace that governments and civil society organizations worldwide should honestly and forthrightly confront.

Conclusion
Sub-Saharan African leaders should not pretend ignorance that the North Africans, the Libyans, in particular, do not see Black Africans as being equal human beings. The onus is on these leaders to restore the dignity of their citizens by implementing economic programs that socially uplift the people and give them reasons to hope in the future of their respective countries. Charity begins at home. Migrants first lose their human dignity in their home countries when their rights are violated through economic strangulation, political abuse, and denial of opportunities to prosper. Concomitantly, the proverbial elephant in the room that permeates and continues to shape the discourses on the migrant crisis in the Mediterranean region is racism couched in the language of cultural superiority. This discourse sustains the degrading and inhuman practice of slavery. Hence, it behooves the African political leaders to ensure that citizens benefit from membership to their countries and the resources that exist. African leaders must consider the creation of the necessary conditions for economic prosperity in their countries and the restoration of the human dignity of their people their foremost responsibility. This is only possible when they respect the fundamental rights of their citizens to live peaceably and productively in their countries with guaranteed meaningful employment, education, health care, and all that makes life comfortable.

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