

**Africa's alternate modernity without the trans-Atlantic slave trade: An
academic perspective¹**

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Abstract: The question of Africa's hypothetical global position had the trans-Atlantic slave trade not occurred invites a rigorous, historically grounded analysis. While counterfactual history requires careful methodological discipline, scholars have increasingly explored alternative trajectories for Africa to better understand the scale of demographic, economic, and institutional losses suffered between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries (Nunn, 2008; Rodney, 1972; Akyeampong et al. 2014). This article synthesizes historical evidence, economic modeling, and comparative civilizational analysis to project Africa's likely standing in the contemporary world had enslavement and subsequent colonial extraction not interrupted its civilizational development.

¹ Sumaila's Random Ideas Curiosity Driven AI-Assisted Brief Papers, #1: 24-12-2025. Papers are developed through an iterative process. I first identify a research question and prepare an initial outline and draft content. AI tools are then used to help refine arguments, improve clarity, and strengthen structure. All AI-assisted outputs are carefully reviewed, revised through multiple iterations, and validated against peer-reviewed literature and established sources to ensure accuracy, originality, and scholarly rigor before finalization. Remaining errors are mine.

Historical foundations and pre-slavery trajectories

Prior to European maritime expansion, Africa hosted multiple advanced states and knowledge centers. The Mali and Songhai Empires were hubs of global scholarship and trade, with Timbuktu's universities attracting scholars from across Afro-Eurasia (Hunwick, 1999). In West Africa, the Benin Kingdom developed sophisticated institutions, urban planning, and artistic traditions, while the Yoruba and Hausa city-states produced complex systems of governance and commerce (Falola & Heaton, 2008). Along the Swahili Coast, cities such as Kilwa and Mombasa were integrated into Indian Ocean trade networks, linking Africa to Arabia, Persia, India, and China (Pouwels, 2002).

These policies were not static or isolated; they were dynamic, innovative, and globally connected. Indigenous metallurgical traditions, agricultural systems, and philosophical frameworks, including communal ethics like Ubuntu, illustrate Africa's internal intellectual vitality (Samkange & Samkange, 1980). Evidence suggests that prior to the sixteenth century, Africa held a significant share of global GDP and population, comparable to Europe (Maddison, 2007).

Demographic and economic consequences of enslavement

The trans-Atlantic slave trade forcibly removed an estimated 12–20 million Africans, disproportionately young and skilled individuals, with cascading demographic losses of over 100 million through reduced fertility and compounded disruptions (Lovejoy, 2011; Manning, 2010). Nunn (2008) empirically demonstrates strong correlations between slave-export intensity and lower contemporary economic performance, institutional fragility, and mistrust in affected regions. This demographic hemorrhage hindered technological adoption, weakened state capacity, and delayed urbanization and industrialization.

Economic historians widely agree that Europe's industrial rise was significantly financed by coerced labor and colonial extraction (Williams, 1944; Inikori, 2002). Thus, Africa's relative underdevelopment is not the product of civilizational deficiency but of systematic depletion of human and material capital. Had Africa retained its population and internal productive systems, its development trajectory would likely have paralleled or exceeded that of Asia.

Counterfactual projection: Africa in the absence of slavery

In a no-slavery scenario, several macro-historical outcomes are likely:

1. Demographic growth and human capital development

Africa today could plausibly host 2.5–3 billion people, similar to Asia, benefiting from population momentum and knowledge transmission (Manning, 2010). Higher population density would have supported technological diffusion, urbanization, and specialization.

2. Consolidation of Indigenous States and Early Industrialization

Absent external military and economic disruption, empires like Kongo, Benin, Ethiopia, and Asante may have expanded and consolidated. With sustained control of gold, copper, and agricultural surpluses, Africa could have experienced endogenous industrialization in key regions, particularly West Africa, the Great Lakes, and the Nile Valley (Inikori, 2002; Austin, 2015).

3. Global economic standing

Africa would likely be one of the top three global economic blocs, leveraging mineral resources, trade corridors, and early intellectual centers. Port cities along the Atlantic and Indian Oceans could have become global financial and manufacturing nodes.

4. Knowledge systems and cultural influence

Without epistemic disruption caused by slavery and colonialism, African philosophical traditions, systems of jurisprudence, agro-ecological knowledge, and artistic forms would hold greater global prominence. Languages such as Swahili, Hausa, Amharic, and Yoruba might serve as international lingua francas.

5. Political power and international institutions

A pan-African interstate system or federation could have emerged earlier, comparable to the European Union or Indian federal union, positioning Africa as a leading architect of global governance.

Implications for contemporary Africa

This counterfactual exercise is not a romantic idealization but a reflection of documented potential interrupted by systemic violence. It highlights the enormous value of African intellectual and cultural capital and the scale of historical loss. Importantly, it affirms that Africa's future is not constrained by inherent barriers but shaped by institutional rebuilding, education, and equitable global partnerships.

Contemporary initiatives — including the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), Agenda 2063, and demographic-driven innovation hubs — echo the continent's historic trajectory toward economic dynamism and global leadership. Acknowledging the counterfactual past therefore provides a foundation for policies focused on restitution, capacity building, and global equity.

Conclusion

Had slavery not occurred, Africa would likely stand today as a demographic giant, an industrial and intellectual powerhouse, and a central axis of global economic and political systems. This projection underscores not only the catastrophic historical impact of enslavement but the enduring resilience and potential of the African continent and its people. Understanding this alternate trajectory strengthens contemporary commitments to African-centered development, epistemic justice, and global fairness.

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