

A Marxist approach to understanding the impact of the transatlantic slave trade in Ghana:

Anowa as an insight into the creation of the Bourgeoisie.

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The transatlantic slave trade brought the economies of Europe and West Africa into greater contact than ever before. Through the framework of Marxist interpretations of class structure and economic activity, we can see that the transatlantic slave trade acted as a driving force in an economic revolution within Ghana, creating a new Bourgeoisie class that was removed from traditional methods of agriculture. For the first time ever, there existed an economic class of Ghanaians who lived purely off the labor of others. Ama Ata Aidoo's play *Anowa* gives us a window into the world of this new Bourgeoisie class. Aidoo discusses their relationships with those that they enslave as well as their attempts to place themselves within the larger class community and look for belonging in a changing economic landscape. The transatlantic slave trade incentivized and funded the economic situation necessary to create a proto-capitalist economy where, for the first time, a small number of people were able to effectively control the economic output of a much larger group.

The limited economic exchange present before the beginning of the slave trade consisted mainly of textile imports from Europe and gold exports from Ghana. This trade economy was not a significant driver in a Ghanaian society that relied primarily on subsistence agriculture. These agricultural practices were not limited to poorer Ghanaians, in fact every strata of society participated substantively towards their own self sufficiency.

*"a large part of the economy was characterized by a household subsistence form of economic organization with a low degree of specialization and exchange, and a low level of material production. Each household was to a large degree an independent center for*

*production and consumption carrying on a wide range of agricultural, service, and manufacturing activities<sup>1</sup>."*

Unlike Europe, the capacity to produce a surplus existed but was not exploited. The Ghanains had the necessary agricultural technology to support higher population concentrations, but the egalitarian structure of land ownership prevented the creation and exploitation of a working class<sup>2</sup>. While Europe endured brutal feudal systems that squeezed out every possible surplus value from the labor of the Proletariat, Ghanaians enjoyed a comparatively better quality of life. Ghanaians valued generosity, and their measure of power was based upon the disbursement of wealth, not its acquisition.<sup>3</sup>

The increase in trade with European powers, as well as creation of the transatlantic slave trade put new pressures on the Ghanaian economy to develop more specialization and stratification. The slave trade created an economic incentive that allowed merchants to more successfully specialize and to appropriate the surplus labor of their slaves. As the expanding Bourgeoisie gained more economic power and political influence, the role of the state as a guarantor of security and as a source of slaves became paramount<sup>4</sup>. More merchant activity meant that the state needed to provide security to traveling caravans, and more income from tariffs meant that states became more powerful. This positive feedback cycle is seen clearly with the Ashanti and their efforts to build an economic and political empire<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Hymer, page 36

<sup>2</sup> H. G. Jones *The Earth Goddess, as cited in Economic Forms of Pre-Colonial Ghana*, page 34

<sup>3</sup> Daaku, page 247

<sup>4</sup> Hymer, page 42

<sup>5</sup> Hymer, page 43

Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa* presents a modern retelling of an archetypal morality play. The traditional story tells of a disobedient daughter who rejects her parents and marries an attractive stranger, only for him to be revealed as the devil in disguise<sup>6</sup>. Aidoo adapts this narrative by substituting an abstract devil in disguise with Kofi, a very real man who becomes caught up in the slave trade and joins the new Bourgeoisie class. The symbolism of Kofi emerges more fully when put into the context of the traditional folklore. While Kofi is an embodiment of the devil, his evilness stems not from a spiritual source, but from his economic activities. Aidoo's criticism of the slave trade is obvious from the start, but instead of focusing her judgment and anger on the European Slave traders, she chooses a Ghanaian man to embody the evil of slavery. The intentionality of this choice adds depth to the otherwise two sided narrative of the transatlantic slave trade. The evil of slavery is not only in the European creation of the trade, but also in Ghanaian Bourgeoisie participation, argues Aidoo.

The newly created Bourgeoisie class of Ghanaian merchants no longer perform manual labor or participate in the subsistence agricultural traditions. One of *Anowa*'s chief complaints is that her and her husband no longer participate in meaningful work<sup>7</sup>. *Anowa* is realizing that Kofi's place in the economic order is becoming something foreign and antithetical to her understanding of righteousness. Kofi joins a new Bourgeoisie class that does not provide self but only profits off the ownership of the labor of others. Traditionally, even the king's household was largely self sufficient and participated in the production of the goods they consumed<sup>8</sup>. The relation that *Anowa* has with her own labor echos Marx's writing on the value of productivity.

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<sup>6</sup> *Anowa introduction, page 97*

<sup>7</sup> *Aidoo, page 114*

<sup>8</sup> *Hymer, page 39*

Marx argues that people gain meaning, even the essence of their life, from productivity<sup>9</sup>. Anowa's new lack of productivity in a social class of idleness eats away at her spirit. Anowa's barrenness is seen as a direct result of her husband's ownership of slaves and is representative of Aidoo's criticism of the vacuity of life as a slave owner. Aidoo, through Kofi and Anowa, argues that a life of luxury provided by the uncompensated labor of slaves is not worth living. While Marx argues for the disassembly of the bourgeois class, Aidoo goes one step further and posits that such a life is not worth living at all. This is evident when both Kofi and Anowa commit suicide at the end of the play<sup>10</sup>. It is the weight of living idly off the labor of exploited workers that pushes both of them to suicide. In Kofi's last moments on stage, he is horrified by the peeping eyes of his slaves all around him. He sees them for humans for the first time and suddenly the reality of his economic success is revealed to him.

Although Europe and Ghana did not share the same pre-capitalist economic origins, they shared many of the same proto-capitalist economic features. Both regions saw a huge increase in a property owning class, deriving their wealth from the ownership of the labor of a Proletariat class. The economic revolution brought by the transatlantic slave trade forever altered the makeup of Ghanaian society. The traditional egalitarian land and labor practices were destroyed by the greed of the new Bourgeoisie. The weakening effect of this economic revolution on traditional political powers and the subsequent economic crash with the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade laid the foundation for future exploitation of Ghanaian labor by British imperialism. The relationship between the Gold Coast and the British colonial power closely mirrors that of Bourgeoisie and Proletariat. In this way, the entire nation of Ghana was made into

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<sup>9</sup> *Fromm, chapter 4.2*

<sup>10</sup> *Aidoo, page 126*

a Proletariat state by the effects of the slave trade. The intractable imprints of class hierarchy in a capitalist economy still affect inter- and intra- African relationships.

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