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# ARE WE NOT FREE ?

THOUGHTS ON THE  
EVOLUTION OF THE  
FREEDOM STRUGGLE  
IN AFRICA

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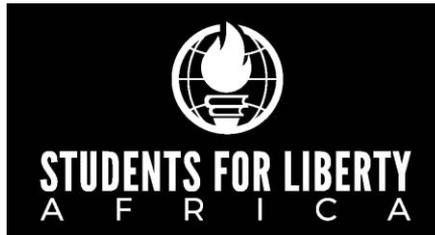


# ARE WE NOT FREE?

(Thoughts on the evolution of the freedom  
struggle in Africa.)

By

**Feyisade C. ADEYEMI**





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***"The greatest threat to freedom is the absence of criticism"***

**– Prof. Wole Soyinka**

## **Foreword**

Mr Adeyemi in this piece succinctly summarizes the major tenets of (classical) liberal thought. He explains the importance of human freedom and more importantly links the struggle for human freedom with traditional African cultures.

This piece explains what freedom from a liberal standpoint means and the importance of limiting external interference in the private activities of free humans.

This is an important material for anyone interested in exploring liberal values and how to connect them with developing African societies.

**Olumayowa Okediran**  
**Founder of African Students for Liberty**  
**Author of Navigate: A propection of**  
**Nigeria`s future to 2030**

## **Introduction**

The first time I told one of the student volunteers in my team about the African Students for Liberty, she responded by asking "are we not free?", in other words, "are we in bondage/slavery?".

Simple as it may seem, liberty is a revolutionary idea for many African students today. Grasping it requires the expansion of the scope of their conceptualization of freedom. It requires helping them to rise above the narrow confines, where freedom is defined merely as the absence of physical constraints such as prison walls and slave chains.

African students are familiar with the struggle for freedom in the context of slave trade and apartheid/colonial rule but not as familiar with the struggle for freedom in the context of free enterprise, open borders, property rights, free speech, non-aggression principle, limited

government, intellectual humility and respect for individuality in organizing society and enacting public policy. The statist education that creates this situation is topic for another day but now, let us take a walk down memory lane from slavery to liberty in Africa.

### **The Transatlantic Slave Trade**

During the transatlantic slave trade era between 1526 and 1867, millions of Africans were forcibly taken away from their homes and families and then shipped under the most barbaric conditions to Europe and America.

Until its abolition, slave trade was a legal business to the extent that the Royal African Company for instance came to limelight in West Africa as a slave trading company.

Humans were sold as property and the buyer had property rights over the slaves. In other words, a slave was a commodity like a shoe. The owner could sell it to another person, the

owner could destroy the property i.e. kill the slave in the same way he can burn his shoe. A slave owner could also transfer the ownership of his/her slave via donation, sale, collateral for loan, debt repayment, forfeiture etc.

At the Badagry Black Heritage Museum in Lagos, one can still see exhibits of old newspapers from England that reported a raffle draw in London, where the first prize was a horse and the second prize was a black slave. Apparently, the horse was more valuable than the black man and whoever owns either, is at liberty to transfer ownership, destroy the property etc.

Now a property does not have property rights and as such, cannot own another property. Thus, the black man in slavery, loses his property rights while becoming someone else's property. All the things that the black slave may manufacture or acquire are an extension of his

owner's property. If a black slave gets pregnant and delivers a child, the child became a new property of the mother's owner.

**Free speech, Open borders, Property rights, Free association and Free enterprise**

Many times, slaves were not allowed to speak, this was to the extent that their lips were drilled with hot iron and subsequently padlocked (no free speech).

Slaves were not free to move around, even when they worked in plantations, they were usually chained to one another and they certainly could not cross the borders of their slave-owners land, much more, be free to travel out of the country and back to their homeland, Africa. The borders were totally closed to slaves (no open borders).

Slaves being property were definitely not allowed to do business (no free enterprise). What will a slave sell? His owner's property?

Remember, a slave owns nothing (no property rights). Even if a slave invented a machine as many slaves did in America, that invention was credited to his owner and slaves of course could not voluntarily cooperate to form associations or hold meetings except as dictated by their masters (no freedom of association) who sometimes even held Christian church services for the slaves.

In order to justify the ill treatment of black slaves, it was taught in Europe and America that black men were not human, that black men were some advanced monkeys and as such do not qualify for human rights (no human rights). This was not just the position of the law, it was the belief of many people and the teaching of many scripture-quoting religious leaders.

All the practices that held slaves in captivity, were done with full legal backing of American

and European states at that time in conjunction with African states (local chiefs sold their own people in exchange for guns, breakable plates and umbrellas) and with the support of many religious leaders who cite verses in their scriptures to prove that slavery was good. Assuming you had been around at that time, do not be too sure that you would not have been a slave owner or a supporter of slave trade.

Many people who considered themselves religious and moral saw nothing wrong with slave trade. Just as today, a lot of people who consider themselves morally upright and religious, see nothing wrong with the murder of gays and lesbians. In some cases, such molestation is backed by legislation and as such, are really not considered molestation but as part of social justice; except this time, it is social justice over a “victimless crime”.

Similarly, today, a lot of religious “upright” people do not consider persuasion to be a more just, loving and effective way of dealing with deviant lifestyle issues. They support criminalization of personal lifestyles that they disagree with. This is reminiscent of how everything about slave trade was legal as far as human legislation up till 1807 was concerned. That indeed made it a “trade” but luckily, that era ended effectively in 1867, sixty years after the abolition treaty was signed. Yet it was succeeded by the era of colonial rule.

So, when we say a person is a slave or that a slave is not free, what we mean is that the person/slave has no property rights, no rights to free speech, no freedom of movement (closed borders), not free to do business and is denied of self-control among other basic human rights.

## **Missionary led development by voluntary cooperation**

The abolition of slave trade with the passage of the abolition act by the British in 1807 was a major milestone of progress for humanity (even though some slave ships operated till 1867).

The abolitionists were a special group of freedom fighters who fought to see to the end of the slave trade and the restoration of human rights and dignity to black slaves.

Slaves were freed and some returned to Africa. Several settled in a West African town that came to be known as Freetown. Freetown is the capital of modern-day Sierra-Leone in West Africa.

As a 12 years old boy in 1821, Ajayi Crowther was one of the earliest freed slaves who was captured and sold into slavery by Fulani slave raiders, freed by British abolitionists led by Captain Henry LEEKE of the British Royal Navy from Portuguese slave merchants and released before his ship could leave for

America. He was taken to Freetown where he was brought up by the Anglican Church Missionary Society, studied languages and became an Anglican Bishop. From Freetown, he later returned to Nigeria where he settled at Badagry and completed the first translation of the Bible to an African language, Yoruba. He designed the Yoruba alphabet system that is used till this day, based on his native Oyo dialect. He also developed the Igala alphabet system and the basis for the alphabet system and bible translations in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa. Through his translation of the Bible into Yoruba, he gave us the modern Yoruba that became the language of the elites throughout what we now know as the western parts of Nigeria.

Bishop Ajayi Crowther also wrote the first Igbo Bible translation. As a missionary, he trekked from Badagry to Igbo land and then, to Igala land, spreading literacy and Christianity, using the local languages. Most of Africa's

advancement in literacy, education and Christianity rested on the foundations laid by Bishop Ajayi Crowther and other early missionaries such as Mary Slessor. This in turn helped many Africans to liberate themselves from oppressive local chiefs and later, colonialism. Mary Slessor particularly, was instrumental in restoring the right to life of twins who were hitherto destroyed at birth in certain parts of Africa. The abolitionists and missionaries led the real development of Africa by voluntary cooperation with locals. They built schools and hospitals, taught skills and built communities without forming any government, without using any form of force or coercion, without extracting natural resources and without collecting taxes. Many villages were transformed into towns this way. If only the orientation could be restored to the masses - that the free market based communal model of development remained feasible till this day (Communal is different from communistic), the

road to sustainable development, may be smoothed.

Unfortunately, while the good-natured missionaries were sowing good seeds on African soil, some of their country men who just got weaned off slave trade, were sowing some kind of invasive weed - colonialism.

## **The Colonial Rule**

After the abolition of slave trade, Lord Lugard was drafted to West Africa where he raised the West African Frontier Force to protect British interests in the hinterlands of Lagos colony and environs, against French invasion. This was the beginning of colonial rule. In Nigeria, colonial rule officially started in 1901 and ended at colonial independence in 1960.

During the colonial rule, slave trade had ended but in most parts of Africa, the people lost their traditional rights of land ownership which is part of their property rights. They came under heavy state control, under foreign powers. Artificial borders were created across Africa and these borders were closed so that people of the same ethnicity suddenly found themselves in different countries and were prohibited from crossing to the next village as they used to do, because the next village is now in another country.

People had to quickly adjust to doing business along the lines dictated by the new foreign powers and this often meant restrictions to free enterprise as well as to free speech in form of criticism of the suddenly imposed foreign policies.

## **Apartheid regime in South Africa**

After a lot of freedom struggles, around 1960, most African countries became politically independent but South Africa remained under foreign rule till 1994. Under that apartheid regime, black South Africans did not have the right to sit on some “white only” seats in the public spaces of South Africa. They did not have the rights to enter several public buildings and did not have the right to enter some public buses or even live in certain cities. At some point, blacks were relocated to purpose built black shanty towns like Meadowland, in order to create exclusively white towns - by getting rid of the blacks who nevertheless were moved to and fro by train to do menial jobs every day.

Even in America, blacks faced similar discriminations, leading on to the Martin Luther King Jnr. led black rights movements and his famous “I have a dream” speech.

The discrimination in South Africa birthed the freedom struggle that was led by Nelson Mandela and that got him imprisoned for 27 years from 1962 till 1990 when he was released and eventually made the first black president of a politically liberated South Africa. With that, every African country came under self-rule.

This was yet another major progressive milestone for humanity but the freedom struggle continued.

## **The Tragedy of Self-Rule**

Self-rule in most of Africa has been characterized by military coups, civil-wars, sit-tight rulers, corruption, cronyism and mass poverty amongst the citizenry while the political leaders amass wealth.

One of the most intriguing accomplishments of self-rule is the appropriation of the achievements of missionary led communal developments by the central government. This applied especially to missionary built schools in Nigeria for instance. Instead of building additional schools, a government pronouncement was made and by fiat, literally hundreds of missionary and community-built schools became government schools in one fell swoop. In no time, these schools were run aground and with it came the great fall of education in Nigeria from which the country is yet to recover. Poor education soon became the norm and a new generation of badly educated citizens is unleashed on the society.

Suddenly, our society produces barely literate graduates who have been too poorly educated to properly grasp the underhand dealings of government, let alone question them. Yet, some of these barely literate graduates are charged with the training of sub-subsequent generations.

Worse still, a lot of these barely literate “elites” either seized power or got elected (more like selected) by a badly rigged system that was created under the afore-mentioned circumstances, guaranteed by mass illiteracy and grossly defective education system. This creates a seemingly perpetual and intractable loop of bad leadership, corruption, cronyism and mass poverty.

Only very few Sub-Saharan African states like Botswana have managed to stay above board.

## **The 21<sup>ST</sup> Century Freedom Struggle**

Today, many African countries have been under self-rule for up to 50 years. Yet, the struggle for property rights (especially land related), gender equality, free enterprise, open borders, free speech, moderate state control etc. is far from over.

Some African countries have remained under the same despotic ruler that appropriate public property to selfish ends, several decades after colonial rule. Even in countries that have had various leaders, most African states are still struggling to build free societies.

In many parts of Africa today, a female child has no right to inherit property. In South Africa, you need a license to watch television. In Sudan, it is against the law for men and women to sit together without a chaperone. Until freedom fighters successfully pushed for an amendment in 2014 in Morocco, a judge could force a rape victim to marry her rapist. It

is illegal to take pictures in Chad without obtaining a photography permit and you cannot leave Eritrea unless the Eritrean government gives you an exit visa. Drinking, selling or transporting beer in some parts of Nigeria can be punished by the cutting off of your arms. Recently in modern America, the police and society had to be reminded that "black lives matter". How free then is the world in which all of these happen?

In effect, the struggles of humanity have evolved from the bestiality of the 15-19<sup>th</sup> century when the black man was considered as sub-human and legitimate property that can be traded; to a 21st century struggle where the world seeks to end discrimination, inequality before the law, oppression, aggression and injustice which are the real causes of poverty and hunger that the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals seeks to end.

***As it was during the struggles for abolition of slave trade and apartheid regimes, individual property rights, and access to land, moderate state control, transparent governance, free enterprise, free speech etc. are the key components of this new struggle for sustainable development and free humanity.***

The more we remain ignorant of these issues, the closer to slave chains we revert. Hence the need for advocacy and enlightenment towards further advances in these aspects of liberty, that promotes self-control and responsibility.

### **Freedom with Responsibility**

*“Where there is no law, there is no freedom” –  
John Locke*

Freedom should never be misconstrued with irresponsibility, which unfortunately is quite a popular misconception.

Infringing on other people's rights is not freedom, it is nuisance or even worse, tyranny and either must be eliminated for freedom to be restored. Hence the need for the rule of law to deal with offenders who must face the consequences of their actions because their actions disturb the freedom of other people. Naturally, society will evolve into anarchy if people are not held responsible for their actions

Therefore, real freedom is the ability to face the consequences for any action, which naturally, is a requirement for learning. However, the consequences should be commensurate with the actions. Where the state has to mete out punishment, it should generally be because the offender has either hurt or endangered another or somewhat infringed on the rights of some other person.

This is why the rule of law applies and the truly free men are those who stand in the true

consciousness of their actions, thereby taking responsibility for its outcomes.

This is so true that even by spontaneous order, a person can enslave himself through indulgence to the extent that his will is no longer free but is being controlled perhaps by substance abuse for instance and in spite of human legislation, we see numerous examples of this in the society still - an indication of the limitation of human legislation. As such, the real rule of law, is the rule of natural laws, working through human legislation. The reliability of human legislation is a measure of its simplicity and agreement with natural laws. Natural laws here refer to spontaneous order; laws of attraction of homogenous species, sowing and reaping, balance, cycles e.t.c. Human legislation should be careful not to pass judgment and mete out punishment where a supposed offence has no victim such as happened to Copernicus and Galileo Galilei

who were punished for saying that the earth was spherical and not flat. Such “victimless crime” legislations are known to prevent innovation and stifle progress and prosperity. If the statements of Copernicus and Galileo were considered false, the right thing to do is to prove them wrong through contrary arguments and to persuade the people to listen and follow superior arguments. In that case, had Copernicus and Galileo been wrong, they would have faced the consequence of the exposure of their ignorance and the scorn of the masses but then they were right and they were punished by an unjust law.

## **A Constitutionally Limited Government**

After the abolition of slave trade, a lot of development happened through communal efforts throughout Africa, especially with the help of missionaries. Schools, hospitals, roads, markets, places of worship, libraries, sports facilities etc. were all built without any government contribution. This clearly demonstrated how development can happen through voluntary cooperation in the local communities and in fact, in many ways, government is often the stumbling block on the road to development in many communities. The data shows that besides security, administration of justice and perhaps a few other public goods, citizens can actually fix everything else by voluntary cooperation amongst themselves. This is however not to say that government is dispensable.

There will always be miscreants who want to take other people's property or even their lives. It won't be appropriate for everyone to be left

to defend himself, hence the need for an institution that is entrusted with the **monopoly of violence** in accordance with a set of principles that the people agree to - hence the formation of government that is guided by the rule of law.

Government and its monopoly of violence, is necessary only for the defense of the various rights of the citizens, maintenance of order, provision of security and arbitration in cases of disputes. Everything else, the people are capable of sorting out by voluntary cooperation and this has often been the case in spite of government.

Government derives its powers and rights from the God-given rights and powers of individuals in the society and so it logically follows that government should not have any powers or rights that the individuals do not possess. Specifically, the individuals have the rights to defend their own lives and property, hence they empower government to enforce these

rights (supposedly) more effectively on their behalf than they can personally do by themselves.

In setting up government for enforcing individual rights and ensuring that no individual abuses the rights of another, the government formed must be a constitutionally limited government. It must operate by the rule of law and must not do anything that the individuals in the society have no rights nor powers to do in the first place. Otherwise, the government readily becomes the oppressor and abuser of everybody's rights.

A government that exercises rights and powers that the individuals in the society do not possess is a government that is playing god and that can never go well.

Giving government unlimited powers is a sure recipe for disaster because that in itself creates a situation where control freaks and people with evil motives are attracted to power and since such people are usually more desperate,

they will easily displace good natured and selfless leaders who would typically withdraw when faced with unhealthy competition. By giving government unlimited power you create a system that favors the ascension of despotic rulers to start with and then when they get to power, they have all the powers to deal with everybody as ruthlessly as they deem fit. Little wonder that Africa is ruled by a series of despots and demi-gods who themselves are often victims of a bad governance system that has stemmed from a bad governance ideology, which gives absolute power that can only corrupt mere mortals, absolutely. If the powers of government are limited however, governance becomes less attractive and more genuine leaders aspire and emerge to lead the people to prosperity because ultimately it is the free people that develop their country using their God-given talents, not the big and mighty government.

## **Limitations to Freedom**

When is limitation to freedom justified? Having understood that freedom does not refer to irresponsible behavior and that everyone must face consequences of actions that harms others, one then wonders, is there any circumstance where limiting freedom becomes justified?

Yes and No. Yes, because private restrictions and temporary denial, such as lifestyle regulations etc. are necessary especially in parenting, schooling and during other forms of training periods which we all go through at some point in our development, individually and even collectively.

No, because while it looks on the surface like a denial of freedom, a closer look shows that limitations typically happens within the context of freedom in private families and groups that we associate with by voluntary cooperation, family ties, vocational/ educational training commitments or by professional obligation.

In these instances, the option of quitting the respective organization remains open to all adults, if he finds the environment too stifling. Hence the freedom remains intact in such private arrangements but for public situations, being a citizen of a country is not so voluntary that you can easily opt out of it, and pick up the citizenry of another.

Therefore, once the state begins to go beyond legislations that outlaw infringements on the rights of other people or beyond legislations that proscribe, causing harm to other people, once the state begins to legislate to limit our freedom of speech, association, enterprise, life style and so on in the public space, we must be very wary because that is too reminiscent of entering slave chains.

History has proven over and over that there is a spontaneous order that runs human societies like an invisible hand such that even if a person wants to be selfish, his selfishness is best guaranteed by ensuring the protection of other

people`s rights and interests. Similarly, even if we do not seem likely to be affected by a particular piece of unjust legislation, injustice to one is injustice to all and the less we care about injustice to other people, the closer we get to becoming victims of injustice ourselves.

## **Slavery as a Mental State**

When you begin to think more closely about these things, you come to realize what Bob Marley had realized, which led him to sing the redemption song:

*“emancipate yourselves from mental slavery,  
none but ourselves can free our minds,  
have no fear for atomic energy  
cause none of them can stop the time.  
How long shall they kill our prophets?  
while we stand aside and look,  
some say it`s just a part of it,  
that we got to fulfill the books,  
won`t you help to sing?  
this song of freedom.  
cause all I ever want,  
is redemption song,  
songs of freedom.”*

Especially in the post abolition era, the struggle for freedom is mostly an intellectual war. Kanye

West recently got a lot of backlash for his take on this subject, which he may not have conveyed too well when he stated that “slavery is a choice” but indeed, it takes a lot of gap in intellectual sophistication and will power for a people to enslave another and for so long. Even in the slave trade era, the Europeans would not have so readily enslaved Africans if slavery was not already a local culture. If the African people were already well grounded in upholding the values of individual liberty, slave trade may not have happened or if it did, the scale would be much less as it would have faced much stiffer opposition rather than the cooperation it got from local chiefs who themselves exchanged humans for gun powder, mirror and breakable plates. One way I console myself when confronted with the cronyism of modern African rulers is to think back to the tyranny of local chiefs during the slave trade era. The big umbrella which is today symbolic of chieftaincy in many parts of

Africa, originally represented much more immense power. The power to trade twenty able bodied men which was the price of an umbrella. At least, modern African rulers are not that bad, we are making progress.

## **The Libertarian Solution**

Given that the stumbling block en-route to liberty in our time comprises of mass ignorance, dis-orientation and a continuous production of poorly informed graduates from our higher institutions; to salvage the situation, organisations such as Students for liberty, African Liberty and Chale Institute are supplementing the existing statist education by providing global education which equips young people (regardless of their academic fields) with the right knowledge of their fundamental human rights, i.e. the interplay between their God-given birthrights, governance, economics, law and civil society such that they are better equipped to build a free, fair and prosperous society.

For those who see leadership as the beginning and the end of the African development crisis, the libertarian solution works on the premise that a people get the leader they deserve. If the people are sufficiently informed and given the

right orientation, they would attract and sustain good leaders and would repel evil rulers based on spontaneous order. Hence the focus on mass re-orientation and education. Students for Liberty helps to develop the leadership skills of young people, while providing resources for the empowerment of young people who are committed to the building of a free, just and prosperous society. Chale Institute focuses on market and policy research, advocacy and development education while African Liberty is an online news portal that reports specially, the struggle for freedom in Africa.

Ideas of liberty ultimately restores and reaffirms hope in the innate capacity of humanity to heal itself if only it would learn to be less meddlesome/coercive and more supportive of/cooperative with one another and especially with natural forces. However long it may take, natural forces eventually bring about

spontaneous order which is the real determinant of sustainability.

These were the thoughts I had in my mind when I was asked, "aren't we free?"

***“Freedom is not just the absence of slave chains and prison walls, it is the presence of unconstrained free will that can be productively and responsibly exercised for creative expressions and sustainable development”***, I said.

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## About the Author



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