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## **The Price of Freedom: How Slavery Hurt British Business in East Africa**

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### **Abstract**

The British empire is often celebrated as a moral leader in the fight against slavery across the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds. However, this article questions that narrative by exploring the economic and imperial motivations behind the abolition of forced labour in East Africa, with a particular focus on twentieth-century Tanzania. Drawing on a descriptive, analytical, and historical methodology based on secondary sources, the study argues that Britain's

emancipation policies were guided more by economic strategy than humanitarian concern. The findings show that abolition served to dismantle outdated, slave-based economies—such as those in Zanzibar’s clove plantations and Tanganyika’s cash-crop estates—and replace them with wage labour systems that aligned more closely with British capitalist and imperial goals. The argument builds on Adam Smith’s economic theory, which suggested that free labour is ultimately more efficient and cost-effective than enslaved labour, revealing the ideological tension between unfree labour systems and the British commitment to free-market capitalism. The article recommends further research into how formerly enslaved women and their children navigated the socio-economic changes brought about by emancipation, better to understand the human dimensions of this economic transformation.

**Keywords:** *Forced labour (Slavery), Tanzania, Britain, Zanzibar, and emancipation.*

## Introduction

For decades, the emancipation of forced labour by the British in East Africa had been widely celebrated as a moral triumph and as evidence of Britain’s commitment to humanitarian ideals. However, closer historical analysis suggests that economic interests lay at the heart of Britain’s decision to end the slave trade and forced labour systems in the region. Rather than being solely motivated by concerns for human rights, Britain’s policies were shaped by the economic imperatives of the 19th century, which demanded free labour markets, expanded trade networks, and an integrated colonial economy (Izhak, 1980). The case of Tanzania—a region where forced labour was central to plantation agriculture and inland trade—serves as a critical example of how British abolitionist policies were rooted more in economic realignment than in altruism.

In Tanzania, particularly in Zanzibar and the coastal regions, forced labour was closely tied to the production of cloves, ivory, and other key commodities. These industries depended on slave labour, but British officials regarded the system as inefficient and incompatible with the development of legitimate commerce. Slavery was perceived as a barrier to the establishment of a wage labour economy, which Britain considered essential to its long-term economic strategy in East Africa. The abolition of forced labour thus became a strategic move aimed at enhancing British economic efficiency, consistent with the principles of free trade and industrial capitalism. This transition was not merely about liberating

enslaved individuals; it was about restructuring the region's economic foundations to align with Britain's global commercial agenda (Walvin, 2023).

Moreover, forced labour systems in Tanzania and other parts of East Africa were viewed as impediments to economic diversification. The reliance on enslaved labour restricted innovation and sustained stagnation in agriculture and trade, thereby limiting the development of new industries and reducing local participation in formal markets (Gardner, 2023). According to Cooper (1980), forced labour was less productive than wage labour, as enslaved individuals had little incentive to innovate or increase output. By dismantling forced labour, the British aimed to create a class of wage labourers who would not only contribute to production but also act as consumers of British goods, thereby advancing towards a capitalist economy. This transformation allowed Britain to consolidate economic control over the region, ensuring that East African labour and resources were integrated into British industrial and commercial systems.

Another key driver behind the emancipation of forced labour was Britain's desire to expand and deepen its imperial trade networks (Liebst, 2024). The persistence of forced labour in Tanzania and neighbouring regions limited commercial participation, as enslaved populations were excluded from market activity and lacked purchasing power. Abolition thus served a dual purpose: it enabled the incorporation of East African economies into Britain's imperial trade circuit and transformed enslaved people into potential consumers of imported British goods. Simultaneously, it facilitated the extraction of raw materials for export (Izhak, 1980). This economic strategy not only reinforced Britain's colonial dominance but also ensured the region's full integration into the global capitalist system.

In this light, the abolition of forced labour in East Africa should not be viewed simply as a humanitarian endeavour but as a deliberate economic policy designed to serve British commercial and imperial interests. By shifting from slave-based economies to wage labour systems, Britain enhanced economic efficiency, expanded its trade reach, and reinforced colonial control over Tanzania and the wider region. This article critically examines the financial motivations behind British abolitionist policies, focusing on their impact on trade, labour structures, and the broader colonial economy.

## **Methodology**

This article draws on secondary sources, including scholarly monographs, peer-reviewed journals, and established academic websites. The methodology employed is descriptive, analytical, and historical in nature. The paper traces the evolution of forced labour regimes in East Africa, centring on Tanzania's experience from the early 19th to mid-20th century. Historically, it examines the timeline and key events surrounding British involvement, abolition efforts, and the subsequent transition. Analytically, the core method involves critically assessing the relationship between British economic interests—such as the demand for free labour, expanded markets, and alignment with industrial capitalism—and the decision to abolish forced labour. This analysis challenges purely humanitarian explanations by demonstrating how the emancipation of forced labour served broader economic and imperial objectives.

## **Historical Context: Forced labour in East Africa**

Foreign-based forced labour in East Africa is believed to have developed under Omani rulers as early as the 9th century and continued into the colonial period (Mapunda, 2017). Enslaved individuals were used for plantations and domestic service and were also sold and transported to other regions. Tanzania—particularly under Omani and later German control—emerged as a critical hub for plantation slavery in the 19th century. The clove plantations of Zanzibar and Pemba Island depended heavily on enslaved labour to meet the rising global demand for cash crops. Zanzibar, under Omani rule since the late 18th century, became the focal point of the East African slave trade, linking the African interior to markets across the Indian Ocean (Coulson, 1982). Mainland ports such as Bagamoyo and Kilwa Kisiwani played pivotal roles in transporting enslaved individuals from the interior to coastal regions for sale or transoceanic shipment (Mapunda, 2017).

The slave trade in Tanzania was deeply embedded in local economies, with entire industries constructed around the exploitation of slave labour. However, this system created rigid economic structures that hindered flexibility in labour markets. Enslaved individuals were confined to plantation work, obstructing the development of more diversified and efficient economic activities. In his article *Encounter with an Injured Buffalo: Slavery and Colonial Emancipation in Tanzania*, Mapunda (2017) explores the complex process of emancipation, emphasising the

tensions between British colonial authorities, local elites, and formerly enslaved individuals. The metaphor Injured Buffalo captures the disruption and resistance associated with annulment, illustrating that colonial emancipation was neither smooth nor entirely beneficial for the enslaved population. As Frederick Cooper (1980) observes in *Plantation Slavery on the East Coast of Africa*, The reliance on enslaved labour in plantation agriculture and trade constrained innovation and adaptability, impeding the broader economic potential of the region.

British involvement in East Africa intensified during the late 19th century, driven by both economic and geopolitical ambitions. Following the Berlin Conference of 1884–85, which institutionalised the partition of Africa among European powers, Britain expanded its influence in the region. Although mainland Tanzania was initially under German control, it became a focal point of British strategic interest, particularly in their broader ambition to dominate Indian Ocean trade routes and expand imperial influence (Mapunda, 2017).

The British regarded forced labour as incompatible with their political and economic objectives. Slavery's closed economic systems restricted the creation of consumer markets and obstructed the establishment of free labour systems, which were essential to British industrial capitalism. As Walvin (2023) notes, The persistence of forced labour in East Africa was fundamentally at odds with Britain's vision of a global capitalist economy, which required open markets and free labour.

By opposing forced labour, Britain sought to restructure Tanzania's economy to serve its imperial interests, facilitating the region's integration into the empire's broader economic framework. This shift reconfigured Tanzania's political economy, establishing structural preconditions for subsequent colonial transformations.

### **The Economic Disadvantages of Slavery to British Interests**

During the 19th century, British economic philosophy was strongly influenced by the principles of Adam Smith, which emphasised open markets, free trade, and efficient resource allocation. Slavery, with its closed, localised, and hierarchical economic systems, directly conflicted with these ideals. The slave-based economies of East Africa—particularly in Tanzania—were economically exclusionary, concentrating wealth and productivity within a narrow elite and thereby stifling broader market development and participation (Wolff, 1972; Alpers, 1977).

Slavery limited market expansion by excluding the majority of the population from both labour and consumer roles (Cooper, 1980). British administrators and economists increasingly viewed forced labour as a structural impediment to the type of economic integration and liberal capitalist development they sought to promote across the empire. Abolition, therefore, was not merely a moral or humanitarian undertaking but a strategic effort to dismantle barriers to market expansion and replace them with wage-based systems that could support industrial capitalism.

Plantation slavery in East Africa relied on coerced labour, which was inherently less productive, inflexible, and resistant to innovation compared to wage labour. Enslaved individuals had little incentive to increase productivity or improve output, rendering slave economies inefficient in the eyes of British industrialists and colonial planners (Gardner, 2023). By promoting wage labour, the British aimed to modernise East Africa's economy, cultivating a more stable, responsive, and efficient workforce to support the production of export-oriented cash crops and other commodities (Walvin, 2023).

In addition to economic inefficiencies, forced labour in East Africa generated significant geopolitical challenges for British colonial interests. The dependence on enslaved labour engendered social unrest, resistance from enslaved individuals, and friction with local elites who sought to preserve the slave economy. These dynamics undermined British efforts to establish stable colonial governance and posed threats to long-term imperial control (SAHO, 2017). Abolition, in this context, functioned as a tool for both economic restructuring and political consolidation. By ending forced labour, the British aimed to pacify local populations, diminish the power of entrenched elites, and strengthen their administrative and geopolitical dominance in the region.

### **Abolition as an Economic Strategy**

One of the key economic strategies pursued by the British after the emancipation of forced labour was the introduction of wage labour systems. Unlike coerced labour under forced labour, wage labour provided greater efficiency in resource extraction and allowed for the development of essential infrastructure. By replacing forced labour with paid labour, the British were able to mobilise a workforce that could be directed toward large-scale projects critical to colonial economic goals, such as building railways, ports, and roads. These infrastructure

developments were instrumental in facilitating trade and integrating East Africa into the global economy (Pyndiah, 2018; Nesiah, 2023).

The emancipation of forced labour also allowed former slaves to participate in the market economy as free individuals, creating a broader consumer base for goods and services. Under forced labour, most enslaved people were excluded from market activities, as they had no purchasing power and were limited to subsistence living. As free labourers, however, they could earn wages, save money, and engage in trade, thereby contributing to economic growth (Gardner, 2023).

James Walvin, in *Britain's Slave Empire* (2023), emphasises the economic potential unlocked by the liberation of enslaved labour: The liberation of labour created new opportunities for economic growth, both for Britain and its colonies. Former slaves became part of the market economy, fostering demand for imported goods and stimulating commerce (Walvin, 2023). This expansion of consumer markets was particularly advantageous for British industries, as it increased the demand for manufactured goods exported to East Africa.

Abolishing forced labour allowed the British to restructure and expand trade networks in East Africa, aligning them with global markets. Under the slave-based economy, trade routes and systems were focused primarily on the movement of enslaved individuals and a few select commodities, such as ivory and cloves. The region's economic potential remained underutilised due to this limited focus, while its trade dependencies perpetuated reliance on a system facing escalating moral condemnation and political challenge (Clark, 2021).

With forced labour abolished, the British shifted trade networks to focus on commodities like coffee, sisal, and cotton, which were produced using free labour. This restructuring not only diversified the regional economy but also ensured that East Africa could meet the demands of global capitalism (Nwulia, 1975).

## **The Broader Economic Transformation in East Africa**

One of the most significant impacts of the emancipation of forced labour in East Africa was the large-scale infrastructure development initiated by the British to support economic activities. Britain's investments in railways, port facilities, and telecommunications aimed to maximise colonial trade efficiency, transforming infrastructure into tools of economic extraction. These projects not only improved the



movement of goods and resources but also integrated Tanzania more effectively into the global economy (Wolff, 1972).

The emancipation of forced labour also paved the way for a transition to cash-crop agriculture in East Africa. The collapse of forced labour—the foundation of export economies such as clove plantations—compelled British authorities to develop alternative agricultural systems, countering newfound economic vulnerability. Crops such as coffee, sisal, and cotton became the cornerstone of the colonial economy, with free labour systems replacing reliance on coerced labour (Gardner, 2023).

### **The Role of Humanitarian Rhetoric in Economic Policy**

While the British employed abolitionist rhetoric that points to morality and humanity, this narrative often served as a façade for their underlying economic motives (Rai, 1978). The emancipation of forced labour in East Africa was represented as a moral crusade to end human suffering, but it also justified British interventions aimed at restructuring the regional economy to align with their commercial and colonial interests (Folarin, 1975).

Frederick Cooper reveals this duality: Britain strategically used abolitionist rhetoric to validate interventions rooted in economic self-interest, casting itself as a liberator while forcibly restructuring colonial economies to advance imperial objectives (Cooper, 1980). By framing their actions in humanitarian terms, the British gained support for their policies both domestically and internationally while advancing their economic agenda in East Africa.

The emancipation of forced labour also strengthened Britain's moral authority on the global stage, allowing it to position itself as a leader in humanitarian efforts. This enhanced reputation provided Britain with significant diplomatic leverage, enabling it to negotiate favourable trade agreements and assert greater control over international markets (Sherwood, Hamilton, & Salmon, 2013).

By championing annulment, Britain not only consolidated its influence in East Africa but also used its moral narrative to challenge rivals such as France and Germany, who were simultaneously expanding their colonial empires. As Cooper (1980) observes, The British used the rhetoric of abolition to claim the moral high ground, creating opportunities for political and economic gains that extended beyond East Africa. The strategic invocation of humanitarian ideals demonstrates that



emancipation functioned as a vehicle for advancing broader economic and geopolitical interests.

## **The Aftermath of the Abolition of Slavery**

The study of post-slavery in contemporary Africa examines the enduring impacts of forced labour on African societies, economies, and political structures. Although formal forced labour was abolished, its legacy continues to shape labour systems, social hierarchies, and economic inequalities across the continent. The introduction of wage labour and capitalist economies did not always equate to greater freedom; in many instances, exploitative labour conditions persisted under both colonial and post-colonial administrations (Lecocq & Komlavi, 2015).

A key aspect of post-slavery studies involves understanding how formerly enslaved populations adapted to new socio-economic realities. Many faced systemic marginalisation, lacking access to land, education, and political representation. In several regions, social stigmas against descendants of enslaved individuals have persisted, adversely affecting their economic opportunities and social mobility (Lecocq & Komlavi, 2015).

Economically, post-slavery transformations were frequently driven by European colonial powers seeking to replace slave-based systems with models that aligned more closely with their commercial interests. The shift toward cash crop agriculture, wage labour, and restructured trade networks reinforced colonial control rather than fostering genuine economic autonomy for African workers (Lecocq & Komlavi, 2015).

Slavery had been perceived as an obstacle to free trade and capitalist expansion, prompting British authorities to replace it with wage labour systems that better served their colonial objectives. However, the transition from forced labour to free labour was neither smooth nor wholly liberating. Many former slaves encountered systemic social discrimination, economic marginalisation, and continued exploitation under newly established labour structures.

Local elites and plantation owners, particularly in Zanzibar and coastal Tanzania, resisted annulment due to their dependence on enslaved labour for the production of cash crops. British authorities faced considerable challenges in enforcing emancipation policies, often resorting to compromises that allowed former slaveholders to maintain economic and social power (Mapunda, 2017). Moreover, forced labour

practices endured in various guises, underscoring the reality that freedom was frequently limited and conditional.

Although the emancipation of forced labour aligned with broader British economic goals, its long-term consequences for local communities were complex. While the introduction of wage labour systems and the expansion of cash crop economies generated certain structural changes, they also produced new forms of economic disruption and inequality. Many formerly enslaved individuals struggled to adjust to the recently developed economic order, encountering exploitative working conditions and limited avenues for upward mobility.

## **Conclusion**

The British use of humanitarian rhetoric to justify the emancipation of forced labour reveals the dual nature of their colonial policies. While they presented themselves as moral leaders in the global campaign against forced labour, this narrative often concealed the underlying economic and geopolitical motives. Abolition served as both a tool for restructuring colonial economies and a diplomatic instrument that enhanced Britain's international reputation and reinforced its imperial authority.

In the case of East Africa, particularly Tanzania, the emancipation of forced labour marked a significant turning point in colonial history. However, it was far from a purely humanitarian undertaking. Rather, it constituted a strategic economic realignment designed to replace an outdated and inefficient system of coerced labour with wage-based labour practices more compatible with British industrial capitalism. This transformation enabled Britain to integrate East Africa into the global capitalist market, by increasing the efficiency of labour markets and expanding trade in a way that served its imperial interests.

Although annulment offered certain benefits, such as the creation of new consumer markets and expanded infrastructure, its consequences for local communities were complex and often detrimental. Former slaves entered the labour economy as nominally free individuals, but many faced exploitative conditions, social marginalisation, and limited opportunities for advancement. These contradictions highlight the critical need to interrogate historical narratives that frame colonial endeavours in purely moral terms.

Ultimately, while the language of liberation played a significant role in justifying British actions, the emancipation of forced labour in Tanzania

must be understood as part of a broader economic strategy. It was a pragmatic move aimed at reshaping the region's political and economic structures to align with the demands of the imperial economy rather than a solely humanitarian effort. Acknowledging this complexity allows for a more nuanced understanding of the legacy of forced labour and emancipation in East Africa.

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