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**Afro-European Relations: A Thorough Appraisal of the Activities of the Europeans in Africa
from Pre-Colonial to Colonial Era**

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Abstract: This paper starts with the assertion that the international system is a home to great and small, powerful and weak, developed and underdeveloped states/entities. It supports the notion that interaction or interrelationship is a major characteristic of the system due to the gregarious nature of states. The principal aim of the paper is to examine the nature and pattern of the intercontinental relations of Africa and Europe in pre-colonial and colonial times. In an attempt to realise the aim, the study employed historical-chronological research method, with data generated mainly from relevant textbooks, journals and online sources. The data used in the study were both qualitative and quantitative. Marxist as well as dependency theory was used in explaining the complex, but interesting subject of African-European relations. The paper concludes that the activities of the Europeans in Africa in the periods under consideration benefited the former more than it did to the latter; thus, the relations were never a partnership of equals, it was lopsided and parasitic.

Key words: Africa, Europe, Pre-colonial Era, Colonial Era, Partnership of Equals.

Introduction

Inter-state [or inter-continental] relations is one of the inevitabilities of the international system. States and non-state actors can hardly afford the costly game of seclusion, otherwise known as isolation. Isolation in the international system is nearly impossible due to the fact that states, just like humans, are quite gregarious in nature. This is evident in the interrelations of ancient Sumerian city-states, which, according to Barry Buzan and Richard Little in Awais (2020), dates back to 3500 BC. The inter-state relations of the papal era, the 1648 Peace Treaty of Westphalia, and the 1814/15 Congress of Vienna still reveal the importance and the inevitability of interstate relations (*see* Holsti, 2020). John Donne – a 16th century English poet – on the other hand, notes: *No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main*. Reasoning from these lines of thought, therefore, Afro-European relations become a norm.

The interrelations of Africa and Europe have endured for over six centuries now. It could be said to date back to the 15th century, which was the period European seamen began to explore the world greatly. The same century also witnessed the evolution of trans-Atlantic slave trade (Eluwa et al, 1996; Williams, 1944). The slave trade was chiefly between Europeans and Africans, at the expense of Africa though (Rodney, 1972). Some centuries later, in the 19th century precisely, a new era in Afro-European relations opened up. The era was that of colonial rule, with the colonial powers being the Europeans and the colonised, the Africans.

In essence, we shall examine in this paper the economic and political activities or relations of Africa and Europe in the period before colonialism and in the colonial era. This would be done with the utmost aim

of establishing whether the two entities had a cordial or a lopsided relationship.

Theoretical Background

There are numerous theories that are often used to analyse the activities of first world nations in the third world. These include world systems theory, structuralism, imperialism, and so forth (Chirot and Hall, 1982; Chenery, 1975; Smith, 1996). However, in this study, Marxist theory as well as Dependency theory was chosen as they were deemed more appropriate in explicating or explaining the nature of relationship Africa had with Europe in the periods under study.

Marxist Theory the Marxist Theory has been widely used by scholars to explain the subject of exploitation, which centres on taking undue advantage of others (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2001). The theory was predicated on the ideas of the widely celebrated German philosopher, Karl Marx whose thoughts were expressed in his 1867 publication titled *Das Kapital* (Garner, 2013). The theory was further enhanced, especially as it concerns explaining international processes – imperialism, via the thoughts and the writings and the actions of communist revolutionaries of the early twentieth century, such as Rosa Luxemburg, Rudolf Hilferding and Vladimir Lenin (Pal, 2018). The thoughts of Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), who developed the concept of hegemony, are also useful in explaining the domination and exploitation of some groups [of states] by others (Pal, 2018).

Dependency Theory – a mixture of both Marxist and world systems theories – on the other hand, stresses that the international system is composed of two sets of states, viz., the ‘dominant’ and the ‘dependent’. The

former manipulates the latter to its own advantage (Romaniuk, 2017). Raul Prebisch [a proponent of the theory] and his disciples assert that the economic activities of the richer countries often impair the economies of the poorer countries (Ferraro, 2008). Walter Rodney, in support, argues that Africa was a developed continent, with its own institutions, and peculiar political and economic systems. He argues further that exploitation generally hinders a region from getting to the peak [efflorescence] of development (Rodney, 1972).

Scope and Methodology

The scope of this study is limited in nature, as only two continents – Africa and Europe – were mainly under study. The economic, political and socio-cultural relations of the two entities between the periods of 1400s and early 1900s also fall within the scope of the study. The methodological framework relied upon, in achieving the lofty objectives of the study, is both qualitative and quantitative (numerical). Data were thus generated from books, journals, online articles, encyclopedia, and monographs. The Marxist-Dependency Theory was adopted in explaining and justifying the argument that Afro-European relations in the past were not purely rooted in the principles of ‘partnership of equals’ or mutual benefit. The activities of the Europeans in the continent were rather geared toward exploitation and alteration of the ways of life of the African people.

Literature Review: Afro-European Relations

Scholarly writings on Afro-European relations can be clearly divided into pre-colonial (Rodney, 1972; Ball,

2000; Babacar, 2006; Williams, 1944; Domingues da Silva, 2017 etc) and colonial times (Folayan, 1974; Birmingham, 1974; Afigbo, 1980; Tamuno, 1980; Chenntouf, 1993; Uzoigwe, 1985; Boahen, 1985 etc.).

Walter Rodney, in his 1972 controversial book titled *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Chapter three precisely), examined the intercontinental relations of Africa and [Western] Europe in the pre-colonial time. The kind of relationship that existed between the two entities, as he pointed out, was basically of trade, trade that witnessed the ‘transfer of wealth from Africa to Europe’. In addition, Rodney argued that the internationalisation of trade in the 15th century benefitted Europe the most as it led to exploitation of gold in the Gold Coast in the 16th and 17th centuries. It also triggered transfer of labour from Africa to the New World. Williams (1944) and Domingues da Silva (2017) conducted studies similar to that of Rodney. The findings of their works still validates Rodney’s assertion that trade, Atlantic slave trade precisely, was the major activity between Africa and Europe in the pre-colonial era. The trade, as their works suggest, strengthened European economy more than it did to Africa’s.

The early years of colonial Africa were full of resistance by Africans, especially by uneducated Africans who were not incorporated in the government and were denied the privileges of ‘Special Citizenship’. The crisis between the indigenous Libyans and the Italian colonists (Folayan, 1974; Chenntouf, 1993); the crisis between Kabaka Mwanga and the British authority in Buganda in the 1890s (Atanda, 1974); the Brassmen crisis with the Royal Niger Company in the 1890s, the Afikpo and Umunneoha – British conflict of 1903, and the Women’s Roit of the 1920s – all in Eastern Nigeria

(Ayandele, 1980; Afigbo, 1980; Afigbo, 1974); and the Franco-Maghrebi-Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia crisis of 1930-40 (Chenntouf, 1993) were some examples of the resistances against the European colonists on African soil by the colonised peoples of Africa.

Table 1: Summary of Afro-European Relations Literature

PERIOD COVERED	STUDY	AREAS OF CONCENTRATION
Pre-colonial	Williams (1944)	Capitalism and slavery
	Domingues da Silva (2017)	Slave trade in West central Africa between 1780 and 1867
	Babacar (2006)	The socio-political and economic effects of slave trade on Africans
	Inikori (1992)	Slave trade and its impacts on the economies of Western Europe and North America
	Ball (2000)	Atlantic slave trade and slavery
Pre-colonial & colonial	Rodney (1972)	The effects of the pre-colonial and colonial activities of Europe on Africa
Colonial	Folayan (1974)	Libya under Italian colonial rule

	Birmingham (1974)	The colonial activities of the Portuguese in Angola
	Chenntouf (1993)	The Second World War and the Horn and North Africa
	Afigbo (1980)	Colonial rule in Eastern Nigeria
	Tamuno (1980)	British colonial administration in Nigeria in the 20 th century
	Atanda (1974)	British colonial rule in Buganda
	Afigbo (1974)	Indirect rule and warrant chief system in south-eastern Nigeria
	Uzoigwe (1985)	The scramble and partition of Africa by European powers
	Boahen (1985)	Colonial attempts and the responses of Africans

Empirical Results and Discussion

Pre-colonial Africa and European Activities

History has shown that Africa is, more or less, the world’s centre of attention/attraction, the cynosure of all eyes. Its geographical position is of great strategic importance, especially to the entirety of Western powers (Alford, 1981). Its strategic significance is predicated on the availability and abundance of human and material resources in it. It is also naturally blessed

with prodigious landmass and stupendous coastline (Smiley, 1981). It is on the basis of this that the Europeans swoop down over the continental Africa.

One of the resounding activities of the Europeans in Africa in the pre-colonial times was their involvement in slave trade, trans-Atlantic slave trade. The history of Africa won't be properly and fully told without a mention of the trans-Atlantic slave trade championed by Europe. It should be noted, however, that slave trade was not new to the world and to Africa, before 15th century. For sure, Africa had witnessed the trans-Saharan slave trade before the aforementioned century. In the Roman Empire also, slave trade and slavery were never non-existent. But the size and volume of the trans-Atlantic trade, the continents it affected (Africa, Europe and the Americas) and the mode of its occurrence made it unique and worth studying (Inikori, 1992).

The foundation of the Atlantic slave trade was laid in 1441 when Antonio Goncalves [and Nino Tristao] – an experienced Portuguese Mariner under the service of Prince Henry the Navigator, kidnapped and took ten Africans as slaves back to his country (Eluwa et al., 1996; and Buah, 1982).

By 1450 and 1500 the number of African slaves taken annually to Lisbon (Portugal) increased and was estimated 700 to 900. With this, therefore, the number of slaves present in Portugal and Madeira Islands as at the beginning of the seventeenth century was estimated 100,000. The slaves were used as workers in Portuguese [and Spanish] mines, farmlands, and construction sites. They also served as soldiers, guards, domestics, couriers, stevedores, factory labourers and concubines (Harris, 1992).

This notwithstanding, the discovery of America, the New World, by Christopher Columbus in 1492 intensified the Atlantic slave trade (Inikori, 1992). The reasons for the increase in the number of African slaves traded by the Europeans were presented by Rodney. He argued that the indigenous Indians initially used in the gold mines and plantations of the New World by the Europeans could not withstand new European diseases [one of which was small-pox]. They could not also endure the toils of the plantation and the mines, as they were by nature fragile. In fact, an attempt to engage the Indians in the islands of Cuba and Hispaniola by the Europeans resulted in a complete genocide.

According to Eric Williams' analysis, many things triggered the coming of the Europeans to Africa to source for slaves. One of such was the need, just like Rodney postulated above, to get men and women of unquestionable natural strength (Africans) to till "the land stolen from the Indians in America", to work in the cotton miles and sugar plantations. The Spaniards, for example, noticed that one Negro was worth four Indians, hence the clamour for their replacement with Africans, in 1518 in Hispaniola. Prior to the massive stealing/kidnapping/trading of Africans and their shipping to the New World, the Europeans once resorted to using some convicts and poor [European] families to replace the fragile Indians. Williams (1944) writes:

The immediate successor of the Indian, however, was not the Negro but the poor white. These white servants included a variety of types. Some were indentured servants and "redemptioners" who had

already signed a contract at home to work for a stipulated time. Others were convicts sent out by the deliberate policy of the home government to serve for a stipulated period (p.9)

Giving the reason for such decision, Williams noted that the potentates wanted to put the poor amongst them to industrious and useful labour in the New World. However, discovering that the policy to use native Europeans as labourers in the New World would affect their population negatively, they thought it wise to enter Africa (p.16).

Considering the above and the fact that Europe had small population and thus could not afford to provide necessary labour needed to tap the wealth of the New World, as Rodney notes, the Europeans turned to Africa, the nearest continent, for the provision of the necessary labour (p.90).

Several estimates of the number of Africans that were victims of the transatlantic slave trade have been provided by several scholars. But for the purpose of this study, we shall go by the one provided by J.E. Inikori as it can be seen in Table 2 below.

Slave Exports & Imports	Period	Estimated Number of Slaves
British slave exports from Africa	1701-1808	3,699,572
Spanish slave imports	1521-95	73,000
Spanish slave imports	1595-1640	268,664

Spanish slave imports	1500-1810	1,500,000
Brazilian slave imports	1821-43	829,100
French slave exports	1713-92/3	1,140,257

(see Inikori, 1992)

Euro-African Relations in Pre-colonial Times, a Partnership of Equals?

Partnership of equals, as used in the study, infers a mutual business relationship whereby parties involved make equal contributions and share their gains and losses equally. No one party swindles the other or exhibits narcissistic or avaricious tendencies.

As noted earlier, the interrelations of Europe and Africa in the pre-colonial times centred basically on trade. And in every trade, it's either the parties involved gain and none loses, or one gains and the other loses. According to Whatley and Gillezeau (2009), trading activities in Africa in the pre-colonial era was beneficial to the both parties – Africa and Europe. They argued that Africa benefited from Europe and vice versa. Their work, which centred on exchange of guns for slaves or “cycle controversy”, revealed that Africans were offered new, valuable European technology – guns – in exchange for slaves. Britain, as Inikori (1977) estimates, offered Africans more than 20 million guns between 1750 and 1807. The guns, however, triggered new problems in Africa. It caused militarisation in mostly Gold and Slave Coasts, Senegambia and Angola (Whatley and Gillezeau, 2009). It also precipitated internal conflict and security problems, ethnic fractionalisation, state fragmentation and the weakening of states, as it can be seen among the Balanta [of the modern day Guinea-

Bissau], the Minyanka [of the modern day Mali] and the Kabre [of Northern Togo] (Nunn, 2006).

On the other hand, some studies criticised the Europeans for their activities in Africa. In the pre-colonial Euro-African transactions, Africa happened to be the unfortunate loser (Obiwuru, 2020:50). The Europeans engaged in copper and gold exploitation and trade in pre-colonial Africa. The Portuguese, for example, were very notorious in the search for copper and gold in Africa. They amassed copper in Limpopo, “in order to free themselves from dependence on the European producers of this metal” (Niane, 1984). In the 16th and 17th centuries, the Portuguese, together with some other Europeans, were able to secure for themselves gold in some parts of West Africa, in eastern Central Africa and most especially in the Gold Coast (Rodney, 1972).

In terms of slave trade, the Europeans exchanged Africans for horses. Quantity-wise, a horse was given in exchange for six African slaves (Devisse and Labib, 1984). In some instances, the Europeans benevolently offered the gullible Africans, in exchange for their productive and reproductive young brothers and sisters, European items of “no commercial value”, such as old sheets, cast-off uniforms, technologically outdated firearms, and lots of odds and ends. Dutch linen, Spanish iron, English pewter, Portuguese wines, French brandy, Venetian glass beads and German muskets, which had become unsalable in Europe [and which Dr. Kenneth Dike referred to as ‘meretricious goods’] were also used in obtaining African slaves (Rodney, 1972; and Ajayi, 2002). Apart from the meretricious items “gained” by the Africans from their European counterparts, the transatlantic slave trade cost Africa approximately 12.5 million people, according to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database,

and as many as 20 million people, as could be found in other estimates presented by some institutions and scholars.

Monetarily, Africa lost a lot to the trade. Enormous gains were made by the Europeans from the slaves and the copper and gold they amassed in Africa. For each trip made by European slave merchants, a total profit of about £5000 to £100,000 was made at the beginning of the 19th century as they only used goods worth as low as £25 to pay for an able-bodied, young African slave (Onwubiko, 1977). The Portuguese alone made as much as 60 million Portuguese reals in the 1480s, 200 million reals between 1491 and 1521, and 279.5 million reals by 1534 from engaging in trade with the gullible Africans (Malowist, 1992). Looking at all these losses, some groups of Africans in the 1990s and early 2000s, for example, pushed for reparations totalling 777 trillion dollars (according to a Truth Commission in Accra in 1999) and 100 trillion dollars (according to Daniel Tetteh Osabu-Kle in 2000) (see Chutel, 2020).

Colonial Africa and European Activities in the Region

The genesis of European rule in the continental Africa can be traced to the Berlin Conference of 1884/85. Prior to the date, Europe, through extensive exploration, had already gained good knowledge of Africa and the opportunities that were within. Hence in the 1870s, the European powers started indirect competitions for territories in Africa. For example, the Duke of Brabant – Leopold I, as cited by Uzoigwe (1985:28), with the intension to explore and acquire the Congos, declared his interest in the 1876 Brussels Geographical Conference, and finally set up the African International Association and employed the services of the experienced explorer, Henry M.

Stanley (the “Breaker of Rocks”). All these efforts of Leopold led to the establishment of the Congo Free State (Middleton, 2021).

The Portuguese from 1876 onwards, and the British and the French from 1879 onwards were seen securing territories for themselves in Mozambique, Egypt, Tunisia and Madagascar (Uzoigwe, 1985:28).

In the momentous Berlin Conference chaired by Otto von Bismarck – the then German chancellor, a greater number of European nations [inclusive of Germany, France, Britain, Portugal, Spain, Italy and Denmark] were seen working assiduously for territorial gains. In the conference, the continental map of Africa was meticulously redrawn, and different parts of it indirectly assigned to different powers.

With the partition, the colonial powers started developing unique administrative systems with which to run their colonies. The Italians in Libya, while administering it from the provinces of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, made use of, first, “indirect rule” and, second, “direct rule” (Folayan, 1974). On the other hand, the Portuguese utilised full-fledged “assimilation” system – with the *Assimilados* (the few assimilated persons) being given some privileges and/or preferential treatments by the colonizers (Birmingham, 1974). The British and the French respectively used the indirect rule system, and the policies of assimilation and association in most of their West African and non-West African colonies (Tamuno, 1980; Afigbo 1974; Atanda, 1974; Eluwa et al., 1996). Paternalism, which was characterised with use of forced labour and oppressive taxation, was also used by the Germans and the Belgians in Tanganyika and Congo (Eluwa et al., 1996).

During the period of colonial rule, the Europeans engaged in a series of political, military and socio-economic activities in Africa. Based on the analyses of some African historians, the European colonizers initiated some policies which were not compatible with the natives and which eventually triggered political rivalry. The autocratic rule of the Germans in Tanganyika, for example, was responsible for the *maji maji* rebellion of 1905 (Eluwa et al. 1996:189). Same was also witnessed in Nigeria during the Women’s Riot of 1929 in Igboland, when it was rumoured that women were to be counted and forced to pay tax as it had already be done to their male counterparts by the British colonial government in 1927 and 1928 (Afigbo, 1974:21). In Egypt in the late 1890s and early 1900s, the nationalist – Muṣṭafa Kámīl – was seen busy fighting the autocratic government of Lord Cromer, the British Agent and Consul-General, who claimed that the Egyptians were incapable of ruling themselves. In his speeches, and articles in newspaper outlets such as *al-Liwā* (The Flag), Kámīl noted that Egypt deserves self-rule. His love for his nation is crystallised in his statement (documented by Ibrahim, 1985:72):

Had I not been born an Egyptian, I would have wished to become one... there is no sense in life when it is coupled with despair, and no sense in despair as long as there is life.

Socially, the Europeans entered the region with a good number of missionaries who emphasised the importance or the need for the African man to forsake his “barbaric” and “idolatrous” ways of life. Various denominations – Protestants and Catholics – sought to have people converted and brought into their fold

(Ajayi, 1989:778) King Leopold II of Belgium even claimed that his coming to Africa was to make the people drink from the majestic cup of European civilisation, and to assist them come out of their primitivity. Economically, the Europeans engaged in commercial activities (involving exportation of raw materials and importation of finished goods) with the locals, which later led to infrastructural development, monetisation of African economy and creation of banks (e.g. the Banque de l' Afrique Occidentale in 1901, the Bank of British West Africa in 1894, and the West African Currency Board in 1912) (Ake, 1981:34).

Euro-African Relations in Colonial Era, a Partnership of Equals?

To Ngugi wa Thiong'o, in Botwe-Asamoah (2005:38), relationship can be one of hostility, indifference, or mutual give and take. But to Kwame Nkrumah, Afro-European relations during the heydays of colonialism were one of hostility and exploitation, exploitation of the former by the later. He wrote:

In 1942...while I was a student in the United States of America, I was so revolted by the ruthless colonial exploitation and political oppression of the people of Africa, that I knew no peace. The matter exercised my mind to such a degree that I decided to put down my thoughts in writing and to dilate on the results of some of my research concerning the subject of colonialism and imperialism (see Botwe-Asamoah, 2005:40).

Again he wrote:

The imperialist powers need the raw materials and cheap labour of the colonies for their own capitalist industries. Through their system of monopolist control they eliminate native competition, and use the colonies as dumping grounds for their surplus mass-produced goods. In attempting to legitimise their presence they claim to be improving the welfare of the population (ibid: 40).

Other atrocities were committed by the Europeans in Africa. The British liberal writer, J.A. Hobson, in support of the above statements of Nkrumah, argued that, *the South African (or 'Boer') War of 1899-1902 was waged in order that British-based capitalists could secure control over the region's gold mines*, for exploitation. In like manner, the British [though in an attempt to avenge the killing of few members of its force by the natives] destroyed and massively looted the kingdom of Benin in 1897. In the expedition, thousands of Benin artefacts –Benin Bronzes – were stolen and ferried to Europe where they were kept in museums and art centres (see Parker and Rathbone, 2007:64,94; BBC, 2021).

To add to the forgoing argument, Ajayi (1989), from his analysis, made us to understand that no matter the occupation the European man took up in the region of Africa, he had covert, hidden intention to work for his home government, to rip the Africa off its human and natural resources. He noted that even the missionaries

were part of the business. Starting with the explorers to the traders, Ajayi wrote:

Explorers were longer expected merely to satisfy scientific curiosity but were also encouraged to gather strategic intelligence and trade secrets. Missionaries were not just individual servants of God obeying a divine Call to evangelise but were regarded as organised national agents of acculturation, part of whose objective was to weaken the cultural and commercial exclusivity of their hosts. Traders were not just seeking profit but were preparing the way for their own nations to establish control (p.786).

In fact, Nkwazi N. Mhango, in the introductory part of his 2018 publication entitled *How Africa Developed Europe: Deconstructing the History of Africa, Excavating Untold Truth and What Ought to be Done and Known*, noted that everything done in Africa by the Europeans was done with clear eyes and mostly to their benefit. He noted that they wanted to cover their “atrocities” through the history they concocted. He wrote: “His-story epitomises Europe’s arrogance, animality, veristic idiocy, criminality and shamelessness if we underscore the crime against humanity Europe committed in Africa for many years without being brought to book”. But Europe, he continued, “will never fool all people all of the time as deconstructing his-story had already become *conditio sine qua non*” and because it is obvious today that

“Europe’s development came at the cost of the development of others, particularly Africa” (Mhango, 2018:3,4).

On the other hand, European activities in the region during colonial era benefited Africa in some ways. If not for any other thing, the Europeans indirectly stirred the spirit of nationalism and boldness in the region. In French Guinea and Ghana, for example, Ahmed Sekou Toure and Kwame Nkrumah were seen challenging the colonial authorities. Sekou Toure made it crystal clear to the French that his country, Guinea, preferred freedom in poverty to wealth in slavery while Nkrumah and his co-Ghanaian nationalists developed the following slogans: ‘We prefer self-government in danger to tranquillity in servitude’; ‘Seek ye first the political freedom, and all other things will be added to you’; ‘Workers, what will you lose in gaining self-rule? Nothing, but your chains’ (Buah, 1982:212).

Again, and as Ake (1981) made us to understand, the Europeans, in a bid to replace old currencies (such as gold dinars or mothballs, gold dust, cloth money, copper rods, iron, cowries and manilas) used in Africa in pre-colonial era, introduced modern money system as well modern credit system.

Conclusion

The Europeans’ activities in Africa in the pre-colonial and colonial eras benefitted them and their African counterparts, though in varied degrees. Their activities led to transfer of technology from Europe to Africa. They also introduced a new form of religion [Christianity] in the region, and facilitated the establishment and development of banking institution and money system. On the contrarily, the interrelations of the two entities exposed Africa particularly to a

number of issues: exploitation of human and material resources, and intensification of internal conflict and ethnicity problem. Their activities, in social aspect, suffocated the indigenous culture and religion, and nearly displaced African civilization. It also, to an appreciable extent, introduced and amplified racism on the long run as Africans faced issues of discrimination and segregation abroad and even on African soil (apartheid in Southern Africa as a case study) in pre-colonial and colonial times. In essence, Afro-European relations in the periods under study never reflected a partnership of equals; it was rather a lopsided and parasitic partnership.

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