The transition from the slave trade to the colonial invasions was a complex one. But an African trade unionist, J.H. Mphemba, looking back in 1929, believed that the essentials of the story, from an African standpoint, could be comparatively simply stated:

First, the white man brought the Bible. Then he brought guns, then chains. then he built a jail, then he made the native pay tax.

The saying passed into African folklore. When the whites first came, it was said, They had the Bible and we had the land. After a while, we found that things changed round. Now they have the land and we have the Bible. "The Ethiopian emperor Theodore made much the same point when, facing British invasion, he said: "I know their game. First, it's traders and missionaries. Then it's ambassadors. After that, they bring the guns. We shall do better to go straight to the guns.”

The missionaries may have begun the process, but scientific inquiry came first. One June evening of 1788, at a meeting of the Saturday's Club – a scientific society that was also interested in geographical questions - the members decided to form an Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of Africa. The task proved long, but by the 1870s the Asation's successor, the Royal Geographical Society, knew a great deal about the principal topography of Africa, even if much detail had still to be explained.

The explorers followed African trails, and the missionaries came after them or, like Livingstone, took part in the work of geographical research. Great numbers of missionary societies were founded in France between 1816 and 1870, while Portugal and Spain, as well as Italy, Germany and the Scandinavian countries, launched many others. Saving the Africans from themselves became something of a popular craze in those high evangelical times.

The driving inspiration, as we can now see, came from a perverse interpretation of the history of the slave trade. Europeans had initiated and promoted the Atlantic slave trade, but this was forgotten. Following the line of pro-slaving apologists of earlier times, it was held that the trade was only an extension of what was mistakenly believed to be the ever-present practice of slavery inside Africa itself. European must therefore help Africans to liberate themselves. And by now, of course, the argument had some colour of truth, for the slave trade had indeed extended the condition of slavery inside Africa.

Geographical exploration and missionary zeal combined in the work of **“liberation”**. Financing an expedition up the Niger from the sea in 1832, the British government ordered it “to make treaties with the native chiefs for the suppression of **this horrible traffic**; and to point out to them the advantages they will derive, if, instead of the wars and aggressions to which it gives rise, they will substitute an **innocent and legitimate commerce**.”

But soon it appeared that exploration and missionary zeal were not the only forces at work, for now the European coastal traders came in with large demands. They were particularly active along the coastland of the Niger Delta. where an "innocent and legitimate commerce” in palm oil – much needed in nineteenth century Europe for soup and lubricants - had taken the place of slaving. The Europeans had obtained a monopoly on the sea, and were now determined to achieve a monopoly on land as well, which meant that firm action would have to be taken against African producers and traders. In 1861, the British seized Lagos Island and proclaimed it a colony. Step-by-step invasion of the mainland duly followed.

(from The Story of Africa by Basil Davidson)

1. What is the writer’s attitude to the 19th century missionaries?
2. What was perverse about the European interpretation of the history of the slave trade?
3. Why does the word “liberation” have inverted commas?
4. Why is “innocent and legitimate” commerce in inverted commas?
5. What is meant by this “horrible traffic”?
6. What were the reasons for Britain proclaiming Lagos Island a colony?