
A SURVEY OF THE TRANS-ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE -WEST AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

A recognized social institution in Africa long before the arrival of the Europeans on the coast of West Africa was known as slavery. This word, however, does not mean the same thing as the slave trade. To distinguish between these two terms, the former comprised captives taken in the tribal wars of pre-colonial Africa who were, thus, sometimes put to domestic service or labour in the fields. Also, it involved persons or people condemned in the courts of chiefs for crimes and bad conduct who finally found themselves reduced to a status equal to that of slaves. However, a general survey of slavery in old Africa reveals that it was void of undue hardship, unlike the slave trade. This term (slavery) can, thus, be termed domestic slavery. This means that the slave was to all intents and purposes regarded as a member of his or her master's family. Certainly a male slave could own property and was by custom and practice protected against extreme cruelty and injustice. A female slave could be fortunate to become the wife of her master. If she were so fortunate, she immediately ceased to be a slave and all her children would be considered and recognized as free-born. The male one (ie slave) could marry a daughter or a close relative of his masters. The third form of treatment given to slaves in old Africa was that if a slave offered good service and behaved well to his master, he could be declared a free man by his master in no time. Most of the slaves are therefore known to have succeeded even to the extent of acquiring property from their masters, even to the exclusion of the master's children. Admittedly the unfortunate ones remained obscure until their death and might have also suffered some injustice and indignity, like those captured in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. It is also too shameful to hear that the master's desire to make his slave a victim in human sacrifices was at times irresistible. According to the book of T.A. Osae and S.N Nwabara¹, West Africa suffered

from the slave trade at the hands of Europeans. But one should not forget that in other parts of the continent trade in slaves had existed earlier, before the coming of the Europeans. It is thus worth mentioning that for centuries North African merchants took African slaves from the western Sudan to North Africa and the Orient. Meanwhile the trans-Saharan trade routes that linked North Africa and the Sudan were strewn with skeletons of thousands of African slaves who had lost their lives during long marches made across the desert.

INTRODUCTION

The trans-Saharan trade, according to A.E. Afigbo, was not limited to the Sudan, but did play the role of an important historical force.² Hence, this same trade determined directly and indirectly the political and economic development in the forest. As a result, the merchant princes and kingdoms of the Maghreb are said to have succeeded in creating for themselves in this trade a so called "middlemen's monopoly". By so doing, their European customers and rivals were being preserved from making the attempt to follow them into the interior to carry out the Sudanese trade. Among the few Europeans who were successful in breaking through the middle men's cordon in order to get into the interior along these routes, were a merchant from Toulouse named Anselme d'Isalquier, who is said to have lived in Gao between 1405 and 1413, and a Genoese merchant who got to Touat in about 1447. European pioneer participants who were indirectly involved in the trans-Saharan trade were merchants known to have come from Italy, the Iberian peninsula and France. Having acquired knowledge about fabled cities of mineral ores like gold, diamonds and the like, they developed an interest in participating directly in this trade. The same interest and desire were the motivation of the Europeans, who were led by the Portuguese in the fifteenth century to invade West Africa by sea. The reason for the Europeans to reach this region of the continent was to be able to divert this trade³ towards the South to their incalculable advantage.

Thus, one can mention that the trans-Saharan trade accounted for the impulse which led to the creation of the trans-Atlantic trade, which at first competed with it but, lastly, stifled it. A brief survey of the trans-Atlantic slave trade demands that one should try to avoid any unduly hostile passion, or a historical anger towards the participants in this exceptionally cruel trade. It is such a simple thing for the world to understand. T.A.

Osaе and S.N. Nwabara have mentioned that the Europeans, who bought slaves from Africa for more than a couple of centuries after the Portuguese voyages of exploration, had a different view on the slave trade than progressive people now have.⁴

Certainly, everybody has to know that the period of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, was the era in which people might have created the idea of accepting universally the concept of humanity and human dignity. For example, even the world today is aware of the fact that in the countries supposed to be most advanced in western Europe, such as England, dreadful brutalities and the like were practised on nationals. Prisoners were brutally treated, women and young children were exploited and cheated in industries in most degrading ways. People who protested against such mistreatment were pilloried and flogged.

Moreover, merchants and plantation-owners were on the whole the people, who profited by the slave trade. According to these people, the slave trade meant merely another form of commercial enterprise. Owing to this view on the slave trade by its "profit-makers", slaves were therefore considered as an ordinary commodity and the property of their owners. For this reason, it appears that the owners were almost deaf to any censure, while the old-established Christian churches and some other organisations (till the late 18th century) gradually lost their feelings to back the slave trade. They were sometimes, however, worried about its rigors and the suffering of its victims.

At the end, many slave owners and planters as well as traders, did not practice brutalities on their slaves. For the sake of humanity and at least in the interest of pure economics, they are said to have thought it wise to show interest in the welfare of their slaves.

Beginnings of the Slave Trade

The Portuguese within the twinkle of an eye after their arrival in Upper Guinea, began to buy African slaves. Thus the first slaves reached Portugal about 1442. They were employed in domestic service under fair treatment. But history still reveals that their first arrival in Portugal was very sad. T.A. Osaе and S.N. Nwabara have quoted Azurara as an eye-witness in his *Chronicles of Guinea* as follows: "What heart was that, how hard so ever, which was not pierced with sorrow seeing that company; for some had sunken cheeks and their faces bathed in tears, looking at each

other, others were groaning very bitterly... others struck their faces with their hands, throwing themselves on the earth; others made their loneliness in songs according to the customs of their country which corresponded well to the height of their sorrow.”⁵

The great trans-Atlantic trade had its origins in circumstances connected with the discovery of the “New World”. This project was carried out by Christopher Columbus in the year 1492, who was financed and supported by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain. The first and foremost attraction in the “New World” was gold and precious metals. But when these riches had been exhausted [even though for generation they seemed inexhaustible] by the fortune-hunters of Spain, soon [the latter] turned also to the rich soil of the West-Indian islands for tropical crops - such as sugar cane, cotton and tobacco respectfully.

One main difficulty faced by the Spaniards in their quest for wealth in the “New World” was labour, which they needed in order to exploit the natural resources. The Spaniards were reluctant to undertake any kind of physical work, to gain the wealth they were looking for. They thus decided to make use of the native Indians for both farming and mining, but the outcome was disastrous. For, these Indians were people who were recognized as an easygoing race who were absolutely not used to hard work, about which they were also ignorant.

Queen Isabella, the then ruler of Castile, disagreed with the idea of her Spanish subjects in the “New World” to enslave the Indians and to subdue them to forced labour. However, she was later compelled to accept it by the argument that the Indians needed to be compelled to work for them (the Spaniards in the New World), if they were to have contact with the Spaniards and become civilized.

The way the Indians were being treated by the Spaniards, under Spanish forced labour stimulated the pity of a Spanish priest named Las Casas who visited the “New World” after its discovery. Las Casas is said to have owned a plantation and some Indian slaves, whom he treated very well. But sooner or later their (Indian slaves’) misery and suffering were able to convince the priest that slavery was bad for them (the Indians). The priest’s effort to prevent the rulers of Spain from enslaving Indians in the “New World”, between 1515 and 1517 was fruitless. But he did not give up his fight to relieve the Indians from their suffering. The solution he

found was to look for a substitute for Indian slaves - and his suggestion was the importation of African ones from the coast of West Africa into the "New World".

Why should these slaves be brought from the west coast of Africa? Because, according to reliable sources, the African was regarded as being admirably fit and suited for the kind of labour that was required on the plantations and in mines in the "New World". The African was also seen as a race living in a climate similar to that of the West Indies. Hence, the African was believed to be able to do the work of four Indians. So, therefore, the notion of transporting African slaves across the Atlantic Ocean to the "New World", was proposed for these practical reasons.

Clearly speaking, Las Casas might have made out the suggestion in good faith, based on the fact that the Indians would be prevented from dying off like withered weeds, because of the hard labour they were enduring under the slave yoke of the Spanish. But very interestingly, Las Casas is said to have lived long enough to witness the plight of the African slaves also in the mainland of America. What is more interesting to ask is, did he regret his suggestion? History says yes⁶ he did but, there was no other means to curb the situation in which they (the African slaves) were being mistreated.

So, therefore, the discovery of the "New World" and the economic avenues which opened up there, led to the trans-Atlantic slave trade which lasted for three centuries and still remains as one of the greatest tragedies in the history of mankind.

The Organization of the Slave Trade

The Papal Bull of Demarcation which was later known as the "Treaty of Tordesillas", divided the new discoveries of the fifteenth century between Spain and Portugal. Thus, while the "New World" which required cheap slave labour to exploit its resources, both in the mines and agriculture, lay in the Spanish territory, the west coast of Africa, targeted as the zone where the slaves were to be produced, lay in the Portuguese sphere. The Portuguese, on one side, were not at all prepared to import African slaves into the "New World", and nor was the Spanish government which refused to make the least attempt to trespass upon the Portuguese-dominated West African coast.

On setting their feet on the soil of West Africa, the Portuguese decided to put their discoveries to their advantage. Their contacts for trade were drawn towards the regions of Senegal, Gambia, Ghana and Benin. In these regions they formed groups of adventurers, whose mission was to go inland to find the gold mines that supplied the trans-Saharan trade. By and by, missionary effort was introduced into the trade.

The first strong type of challenge to the Portuguese occurred from the 1590s from the Dutch, while English captains had been active from the late-middle 16th century. Moreover, between 1642 and 1647 the Danes and the Swedes, respectively, got involved in the competition for West African trade, and the English and the French, in the 1650s, followed up the trade. Lastly, the Prussians also appeared on the scene in 1682. At any rate, the trans-Atlantic slave trade with Europe reached its climax by the middle of the seventeenth (ie 1600-700) century. This trade (trans-Atlantic slave trade) thus, proved itself an important historical force in the West African forest. On the other hand, Spain made a resolution to issue a special form of licences to individuals, to feed her American colonies with African slaves. This method proved a failure for two or more reasons. Firstly, the licensed suppliers were incapable of satisfying the high demand for African slaves in the "New World". Secondly, the slave-supply business from West Africa to the Spanish-American colonies was regarded as very lucrative, and thus tempted unauthorised people called interlopers to get themselves involved in it. For example, the first Englishman, Sir John Hawkins, appeared in the trans-Atlantic slave trade as an interloper. His record was that in 1562 he arrived on the coast of Sierra Leone and took to America about three hundred slaves, whom he happened to capture by force - and he discharged his cargo clandestinely (at a huge profit) to Spanish colonists in America.

Certainly, this disappointment in the issue of licences to individuals (to supply Africans as slaves to Spanish colonies), paved the way for Spain to grant licences to foreign governments instead. This was a concession called the "Asiento". It was first offered to the Dutch and then to the French. Later, in 1713, Britain, under the treaty of Utrecht, got a contract authorising her "to supply the Spanish colonies in America with a total of 144,000 Negro slaves over a period of thirty years, with an added right to supply further slaves as and when they might be desired."⁷

The parties who made huge profits in the trans-Atlantic slave trade were:

- a) the colonists in America,
- b) the buyers and carriers of African slaves across the ocean and
- c) those Africans who obtained and sold slaves to Europeans on the Guinea Coast - these were chiefs and kings.

The general collection and sale of slaves along the coast of West Africa were well organized. For instance, in the Gold Coast, which is today Ghana, European merchants of different nationalities put up forts, which served as depots where the slaves were received and kept before the slave ship came to embark them for the "New World".

Meanwhile, the abundant creeks and lagoons around this area of West African Coast, provided sufficient protection to the slave merchants and thus facilitated their collection of slaves from centres guarded by African middlemen. The majority of the slaves were obtained from the interior. The transaction was carried out by African middlemen on the coast, between the slave traders and the European slave buyers. The trade in its early years was no doubt practised by Europeans in the form of kidnapping of unwary Africans.

However, the method was challenged bitterly by the local people. For example, John Locke of English origin is said to have kidnapped five men, whom he took away as slaves in the year 1554. His success in this act was favoured by some Africans, but proved dangerous to the English and their status as merchants in the area. The Africans decided not to make any sales in the form of gold to the English people - this reaction of the Africans compelled the other English merchants to prevail upon Locke to return his five men to wherever he had brought them from. So, after the return of the victims the English people regained the former respect, which the Africans had for them and thus permitted them (the English people) to carry on with their innocent way of trade.

Within a short time, the European merchants organized themselves to prevail upon the chiefs on the coast, to sell (to them) criminals and prisoners into slavery. The chiefs and kings, of course, were lured into the business of selling slaves, because they had come to realize that selling slaves was so lucrative. And so, the chiefs went to the extent of using all kinds of pretexts to increase their supply of slaves, who were mostly their helpless subjects. Those chiefs and other Africans, who were slave contractors on behalf of the Europeans, were also prepared to look for an immediate alternative to supplying the Europeans with slaves in certain

cases where local sources of supply had run out. They organized themselves to satisfy the demand of the Europeans, because they had acquired the taste for European goods in exchange for slaves - their own country people. So, as time went on, more demand for slaves provoked ruthless methods, in order to meet it. The most cruel and wasteful method was the introduction of slave raids. Armed gangs were used to surround poor villages, and youths and able-bodied people were transported away leaving behind them nothing more than ruin and misery. Captives from near the coast, had an easier lot before they were sold into slavery. But those captured at a more distant place, met disastrous treatment like the terrible march to the sea.

Furthermore, the captives were made to face situations like exhaustion, hunger, thirst and disease, which killed many of them before they arrived at the slave market and the depots. To this end, by definition the slave raids and actual wars are said to have been waged, with the purpose of making captives for the slave market. To recall the harm done by the slave raids on Africa, one can say that the whole society became absolutely dislocated, especially in wide areas in the interior of West Africa.

Effects of the Slave Trade on West Africa

The three hundred years of the slave trade ended up with approximately fifteen to twenty million slaves, who had been transported from West Africa to the "New World" - this means the above number were those who arrived safely and in good health. A large number of most of the slaves were carried away from West Africa between, let's say, Nigeria in the North and Ghana in the South.

The same number as mentioned above are believed to have lost their lives at different stages (of attack), in the form of raids and wars which took place both in the interior and along the (Atlantic) coast.

The fact about this is that if a slave happened to arrive safely in the "New World", a fellow captive (of his) is assumed to have perished on the way. As a result, West Africa is believed to have lost a global number (of its population) ranging between thirty and forty million during the slave trade era, which lasted for about three centuries. This staggering figure reveals an average annual lost of lives between 100,000 and 130,000.

The worst aspect for West Africa was that the victims who were carried away, included mostly youths and able-bodied people who might otherwise have been expected to build or to have rebuilt her economy. Thus, quite apart from those directly enslaved, the effect of the slave trade on the population of West Africa, was incalculable misery which thousands of people were compelled to undergo over wide ranges of this region.

Moreover, slave raids brought about utter confusion in the areas concerned. Inhabitants had to leave their villages under duress, while life and property were being destroyed. The captivity of young men and women also had an effect on the economy and social life in vast areas of the interior which, thus, even scared fugitives from returning to their places of origin. Ceaseless raids and destruction misled natives both in the interior and the coastal areas, to abuse their planning and forward-looking policies. If both civilized and improved methods of living depend on stability, then it is relevant that slave raids strongly affected the basis of settled life of the people in the areas mentioned and, thus, utterly interrupted and destroyed the foundation for their progress. Also, the ruin caused by the slave raids and wars on agriculture could promote food shortages and famine.

The Africans themselves who took part in raids, wars and slavery finally became demoralized, despite all their material benefits in the traffic. Participants who acted with such ruthlessness, as the slave raids demanded, were likely to become brutalized in causing the misery that they consciously or unconsciously spread. Meanwhile, the brutalities and chaos of the slave trade distorted the African people and their proverbial culture of neighbourliness and fellow-feeling.

CONCLUSION

The Africans and their arts and crafts were destroyed by the slave trade. The slave trade was known to be a lucrative business, which lured the craftsman to abandon his skill for quick money-by accepting to sell his own people as slaves to the Europeans. Again, there was an unfavourable effect on the African home industries following increased trade with Europeans in all forms, including an influx of mass-produced goods. So African arts and crafts fell unavoidably into desuetude, for the fact that West Africa went on paying for European goods without any productive

activity by itself, but simply by indulging itself in the business of slave-hunting.

Some historians think that West Africa would have been in jeopardy, had her growing population not been depleted by the slave trade. I think this is a highly debatable point. For, this region of Africa has a vast and very fertile but uncultivated land. Therefore, there is now still hope to this extent, for West Africa to develop its agriculture to produce sufficient food to meet the need of her increasing population, which is no longer depleted by the slave trade. The slave trade is considered as one of the reasons for the emergence of certain states in West Africa. Truly speaking, states like Asante in the then Gold Coast, Dahomey (today Bénin), Benin State and Oyo (both in Nigeria) achieved a lot of wealth from the slave trade. Wealth helps to build and develop states, but one has to evaluate the relationship between the slave trade and the development of states on the Guinea Coast with great care. For, almost all the above states were already known to the world as states in this region of Africa, before the circumstance of the slave trade.

Hence, it is quite certain that these states which are thought to have emerged as a result of their participation in the slave trade, finally declined and subsequently disintegrated following their obsession with the “disprovable business” of the slave trade. It is, again, worth noting that if the slave trade did deal with these states with some fairness after all, it was at the same time a great nuisance to them from a broader point of view. The slave trade is at least the major cause of the retardation of the progress of West Africa.

ANNOTATIONS

1. Osee, T.A./ Nwabara, S.N., *A short history of West Africa*. 1986. P.163.
2. Omer-Cooper, J.D./Ayandele, E.A.J Afigbo, A.E./Gavin, R.J., *The Growth of the African Civilisation - The making of modern Africa*.p.112.
3. The trans-Saharan-trade.
4. Osae/Nwabara, p.163.
5. Osae/Nwabara, p.164.

6. Osae/Nwabara, p.166.

7. Osae/Nwabara, p.167.

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Omer-Cooper, J.D./ Ayandele, E.A./ Afigbo, A.E./ Gavin, R.J., *The Growth of African Civilisation - The making of modern Africa*, Volume I, 1972, and Volume II, 1974.

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