

## *Review paper*

# **Economic Reasons Rather than Humanitarian Reasons Attributed to the Abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade**

**Muhammad Zayyad Umar**

Department of Remedial Studies Hassan Usman Katsina Polytechnic Katsina, Nigeria.

\*Author E-mail: [muzayyad555@gmail.com](mailto:muzayyad555@gmail.com)

Received 5 May 2020; Accepted 23 June, 2020

**ABSTRACT:** Slavery has long existed in human societies, and it has been a commonly accepted fact of life since before the written records began and has lingered in some parts of the world until the present time. The institution of slavery was primarily to provide inexpensive labour and in some societies to promote group wealth and identity among the enslavers. Among the major crimes that have marked human history was the Atlantic slave, the Europeans establish a trade for African captives across the Atlantic Ocean from the middle of the 15th century until the end of the 19th, which led to the devastation and depopulation as well as the economic underdevelopment of

Africa, and on the other hand, contributed to the wealth and economic development of Europe. The transatlantic slave trade is unique in terms of the destructive impact it had on Africa. How the Atlantic slave trade came to be abolished has been the subject of ongoing historical debate among Historians. The focus of this paper is to discuss the major points that support the argument that Economic reasons rather than Humanitarian reasons attributed to the Abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade.

**Keywords:** Economic, humanitarian and abolition of Atlantic slave trade

## **INTRODUCTION**

The institution of slavery extends back beyond recorded history. References to it appear in the ancient Babylonian code of Hammurabi. Slavery is an institution based on a relationship of dominance and submission, whereby one person owns another and can exact from that person labor or other services by force. Slavery was not unique to African societies only. Various forms of human bondage existed from early times. The Sumerians in Mesopotamia relied on slave labor before 3000 BC, as did the ancient Egyptians. China had slavery during the Han dynasty 206 bc-ad 220, and the societies of classical Greece and Rome made heavy use of slave labor from the 6th century BC through the 5th century AD. (*Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*) In Greece for example one of the world greatest philosophers, Aristotle, taught that certain people were born to be slaves and others to be masters. According to him, it was the duty of the slaves to serve and that of the master to rule. He was not, however, saying something new because it was the

view held in Greece about the position of slaves in Greek society of his day (Fage, 1969). The main objective of this article is to undermine the argument that humanitarian reasons were responsible for the abolition of transatlantic slave trade and established that Britain spearheaded the movement on the account of economic motives.

## **SLAVE TRADE A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Africa's history is intimately connected with slavery. The continent has experience four large slave trades, all of which date back at least to the mid-fifteenth century. The oldest of the slave trades, the trans-Saharan, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean slave trades, all date back to at least 800ad. During these trades, slaves were taken from land south of the Saharan desert, inland of the Red Sea, and inland of the coast of Eastern Africa, and were shipped to

Northern Africa and the Middle East. The largest and most studied of the slave trades is the trans-Atlantic trade slave trade (M'Baye, 2006). The Institution of Slavery varied greatly from one ancient society to another, Slaves in Africans and European societies were obtained through warfare and raids which was the most common method. Prisoners or Captives were usually enslaved and sold or put to work. People were also enslaved as punishment for crimes or religious offenses. As the slave trade grew, slavery became a more common punishment. Others became slaves voluntarily. In traditional African societies slavery was practiced largely to help African communities produce food and goods or for prestige (Fage, 1969).

In African system slaves were at the bottom of the social scale. But they had rights, rights which their owners could not override by customs. Dr. Elias tells us in his book titled: "*The Nature of African Customary*" that nowhere was there a legal right in the master to kill his innocent slave, although masters sometimes abused their powers (Ogoni, 1978). It is important to note that, in some West African states slaves could purchase their freedom either by cash payment or by long, loyal, and satisfactory service. While in others states of West Africa slaves automatically became free at the death of their owner. Slaves could inherit their owner or appointed to high offices because of their special intelligence abilities.

Anglo Saxon England too kept numerous slaves. They were called "theows", defined as "the slaves who were outside the folk and therefore had no existence in law". By implication this meant that these slaves had no rights and no legal protection. (Ogoni, 1978). Therefore, if an innocent slave was killed, his murderer could not be interrogated or tried. The Export of slaves from black Africa to Europe had roots that preceded the Atlantic slave trade. Peoples in Western Africa had been selling slaves across the Sahara to North Africa before ad 700, what proved novel about the trafficking of slaves across the Atlantic was its scale: No other exporting of African slaves matched the massive, involuntary movement of people out of western and west central Africa between 1440 and 1880. Via the Atlantic.

### **Historical background of Atlantic slave trade**

The explorations of the African coast by Portuguese navigators resulted in the exploitation of the African slaves, and for nearly five centuries. The Atlantic slave trade was initially a small commercial system based on the exchange of African material or human capital, such as gold or slaves, with few European material goods, such as guns and silk. By the end of the sixteenth century, this trade became a large market that promoted the barbaric capture and transportation of millions of Africans to the Americas. The commerce started in 1441 when ten Africans were taken from the Mauritanian coast

and shipped to Lisbon. Three years later, 240 Africans from the same coast were brought to Lisbon (M'Baye, 2006). The trade became a lucrative and important business and was conducted with appalling brutality. The British, Dutch, French, Spanish, joined the Portuguese in the African slave trade (William, 1985). The first people to be enslaved by the Spanish and Portuguese in the West Indies and Latin America were the Native Americans, but, because majority of Native American slaves either revolted, escaped or died from diseases as smallpox, measles, as well as to such tropical diseases as malaria and yellow fever, this situation increased the demand for Africans to replace them, because the Africans were different, they came from an environment where those who survived into adolescence acquired some immunity to such "Old World" diseases (Saunders, 1982). The Africans lived longer than white laborers under the difficult conditions on the plantations; hence the European takes the African slaves as profitable laborers in the new world. The Europeans were taking only young men and women in good health. Approximately 12 to 15 million slaves left Africa via the Atlantic trade, and more than 10 million arrived the new world, and great number of African population died in the slave hunting wars (Anene and Brown, 1999). The slave trade moved in a triangle; setting out from British ports, ships would transport various goods to the western coast of Africa, where they would be exchanged for slaves. The slaves were then brought to the West Indies or to the colonies of North or South America, where they were traded for agricultural staples for the return voyage back to England.

The Africans who facilitated and benefited from the Atlantic slave trade were political or commercial elites generally members of the ruling apparatus of African states or members of large trading families or institutions. The European buyers paid for the slaves with commodities like firearms, liquor, mirror and decorative items that were useful to the sellers. The voyage from the African coast to the Americas was called the Middle Passage. For the human cargo of slaves, it was among the most difficult sea passages ever undertaken. The typical ocean crossing might last from 25 to 60 days, depending on destination, and winds. Slaves were kept in dark below the decks.

The slaves remained shackled, meals varied according to purchases at departure and sanitary facilities were inadequate (Davis, 2006). The Atlantic slave trade became the largest intercontinental migration of people in world history prior to the 20th century.

This transfer of so many people, over such a long time, had enormous consequences, for Africa the trade led to depopulation of African working class and decline of Africa's early useful local Industries and for Europe and America the trade led to their economic development and legacy of racism that many of those nations are still struggling to overcome (Zayyad, 2014).

### **Movement for the abolition of Atlantic slave trade**

For well over 300 years, European countries forced Africans onto slave ships and transported them across the Atlantic Ocean. How the Atlantic slave trade came to be abolished has been the subject of ongoing historical debate. The traditional view argued by British historians for much of the 20th century was that the abolition of the slave trade was the result of a humanitarian campaign spearheaded by a handful of prominent British philanthropists. This view was challenged in the mid-20th century by historians who argued that it was hard economics, not humanitarian concerns that ended the slave trade. According to this view, by 1800 colonial plantations were declining in profitability, while the spread of industry in Britain was becoming increasingly profitable, making the slave trade unnecessary (Roger, 1975). Yet it was not until the late eighteenth century that all of these forces combined to create a sustained attack on the institution of slavery itself, and not until the nineteenth century that the Atlantic slave trade, and then American slavery, were finally abolished.

### **The humanitarian reasons for abolition**

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, some Christians took leadership in the Abolitionist movement against the slave trade and slavery. Most Abolitionists in North America and Europe based their opposition to slavery on Christian beliefs. Yet if slavery was wrong, immoral, unchristian in 1807, why not in 1707? Scholars argued that the Roman Catholic Church along with the main Protestant denominations in Europe did not oppose the slave trade, but indirectly gave their blessing to the trade, because some churches benefited from the slave trade through financial contributions made by Christian traders whom had become wealthy as a result of their involvement in the trade (Christopher, 2006). The first whites to denounce slavery in Europe and the European colonies were members of the Society of Friends commonly known as Quakers. Unlike the prevailing idea of the time that blacks were inferior to whites, Quakers believed that all humans, regardless of race, were equal. These beliefs led them in the mid-18th century to take steps against slavery in Great Britain and the British colonies in North America, because of the barbarity associated with the institution of slavery. Great Britain had the strongest humanitarian abolitionist movement. The major turning point in its development came in 1787 when Evangelical Christians joined Quakers in establishing the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade led by William Wilberforce an Evangelical member of the British Parliament, and Thomas Clarkson (Davis, 2006). The society initiated petition drives, mass propaganda efforts, and lobbying in an attempt to end British involvement in slave trafficking.

Although opposed by English merchants, West Indian planters, and King George III who equated abolitionism with political radicalism the society nevertheless managed to achieve its goal. In 1807 the British Parliament abolished the slave trade and British, through diplomacy and the creation of a naval squadron to patrol the West African coast, began forcing other European nations to give up the trade as well. It is important to note that even with humanitarian sentiment; Britain only abolished slavery and the slave trade when the economic reasons for doing so were strong enough. The slave trade was an important source of wealth for Britain when it was at its most prosperous. This contributed to the reluctance to abolish it at that time. The response of the Prime Minister of Great Britain at a time when the trade in slaves, was at the peak of its profitability for the British shows this clearly. According to Eric Williams "Two petitions were presented to Parliament, in 1774 and 1776, for the abolition of the slave trade. A third, more important, was presented in 1783 by the Quakers. The British Prime Minister then, Lord North, complimented them on their humanity, but regretted that abolition was impossibility as the slave trade had become necessary to every nation in Europe" (Oldfield, 1999). These words of the then British prime minister show that at least the motives of the Quakers were humanitarian but Britain could not have abolished the slave trade because of its necessity. This necessity referred to by the then prime minister was an economic necessity. Thus undermines the argument that humanitarian reasons were responsible for the end of the slave trade.

### **The economic reasons for abolition**

Ending the Atlantic slave trade was a long process that involved changing economic circumstances in Europe, in the late 18th century; European economies began to shift from agriculture to industry, and this situation makes the system not being as profitable as it used to be for the European economy. The leading decline thesis historian, Eric Williams, argued that the abolition of slavery came about because the system of slavery no longer had the significance it used to, for the British economy, Britain took the lead in the movement for the abolishing of slavery and slave trade, because of economic considerations. There was rapid expansion in Caribbean sugar plantations in the late eighteenth century which led to over production and fall in the selling-price of sugar. The French in particular, with huge new plantations were flooding the market with cheaper sugar, which undercut their British rivals (Drescher, 1986). This reduced Britain profit-levels, still further, Plantation owners were no longer able to pay their debts to European bankers. The latter, who had previously invested heavily in sugar and the slave trade, now found it more profitable to invest in new manufacturing industries at home. The Industrial

Revolution produce Machine which replaced human labour which in effect lessened the economic importance of slave labour, Britain Industrialization was one of the main forces behind the abolition of slave trade (Roger, 1975). Britain industrialists wanted Africans to be left in Africa so that Africa can be a source of raw materials for their industries, market for European manufactured goods and a place for new investment of surplus capital in fact there was nothing called investment of surplus capital for the benefit of African economic development. The American Revolution also played a role in the economic decline of the British West Indian colonies, and thus hastened the end of slave trade. The Americans supplied the British West Indies colonies with food for the slaves and other products that sustained plantation life. Upon American independence, the U.S became a foreign country outside the British Empire, subject to the Navigation Laws. This made it harder, if not impossible, for the West Indian colonies to obtain vital American supplies. This hastened the downfall of the slave system (Richard, 2002). Another factor, often overlooked, was African opposition to slavery, both in the form of slave rebellions in the Caribbean and resistance within Africa itself. Africans had obviously opposed slavery from the first moments of enslavement (Isichei, 1978). There were rebellions and runaway slave communities on the African coast, shipboard rebellions and colonial slave revolts and. During the American Revolution, black slaves brought freedom suits against their masters, ran away in massive numbers, and fought to win their freedom. The 1791 slave revolt in northern French colony of Saint Domingue that escalated into the Haitian Revolution articulated a strong antislavery ideology and effected the first universal emancipation, and established of the first independent republic by former slaves called Hait (Davis, 1975). The revolt led to destruction of plantations, and economic lost which makes the plantation owners to give up the enslavement and think for a more profitable economic alternative than slave trade.

## Conclusion

We cannot ignore the role played by the humanitarians for the abolition of slavery. There is no doubt humanitarian reasons served as the impetus for some to advocate the abolition of slavery in Europe, From all the discussions it is clear that the Economic reasons against slavery had far deeper roots in the abolitionist movement than the humanitarian reasons it is clear that economic factors were responsible for the end of slavery and slave trade. When the slave trade and slavery were profitable for Britain, there was little opposite on to it. Vested planter interests crushed the opposition that did exist at that time. The decline in profitability of the West Indian colonies sparked by, among other things, the industrial revolution, American Revolution and slave revolt

necessitated the abolition of the slave trades. The abolishing of slavery and slave trade was thus, primarily motivated by economic interests, even with humanitarian sentiment, Britain only abolished slavery and the slave trade when the economic reasons for doing so were strong enough. The institution produced great wealth under the mercantilist system; it became unprofitable with the rise of industrial capitalism, the British abolition legislation of 1833 was followed by the gradual abolition of slavery in all lands under British control, principally by the device of invalidating the legality of slavery and removing its Legal safeguards, usually by recompensing the owners. Slave trade continued, with declining numbers, through most of the 19th century. The movement of African slaves across the Atlantic did not end until slavery was outlawed everywhere in the Americas. Cuba was the last to outlaw slavery, in 1888. Slavery and related forms of forced labor still exist today in many countries of the world. Women and children are more vulnerable.

## REFERENCES

- Anene JC, Godfery B (1999). *Africa in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century's*, Ibadan University Press.
- Christopher BL (2006). *Moral Capital* Foundation of British Abolitionism. University of North Carolina press.
- Drescher S (1986) *Capitalism and Antislavery in Comparative Perspective*. London: Macmillan.
- Elias TO (1953). *The Nature of African Customary Law*. Manchester University Press
- Eric EW (1944). *British Capitalism and British Slavery*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press,
- Page JD (1969). *A History of West Africa* Cambridge University press.
- Isichei E (1978). *History of West Africa Since 1800*, Macmillan Nigerian Education. Limited.
- Leslie BC (2006). *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism*. University of North Carolina Press.
- M'Baye B (2006). *The Economic, Political, and Social Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on Africa*. Kent State University.
- Ogoni FG (1978). *An Outline History of West Africa* Macmillan Nigerian Publishers Limited.
- Oldfield JR (1999). *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery*: University Press New Jersey.
- Richard NS (2002). *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Roger A (1975). *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 1760-1810*. London: Macmillan.
- Saunders AC (1982). *A Social History of Black Slaves and Freedmen in Portugal, 1441-1555*. Cambridge, UK, and New York.
- William P (1985). *Slavery from Roman Times to the Early Transatlantic Trade*. University of Minnesota press.
- Zayyad UM (2014). *Assessing the slave trade and the campaign for its Abolition against the background of the economic realities of Europe and America*. Unpublished M A Seminar paper Bayero University Kano.