

The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: An Unrepaired Crime against Humanity

La traite transatlantique des esclaves : un crime contre l'humanité non réparé

Aziz MOSTEFAOUI 
University of Adrar / ALGERIA
azi.mostefaoui@univ-adrar.edu.dz

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Abstract

Fourteenth-century Europe was marked by the Renaissance, the large movement of European awakening that started in Italy and encompassed scientific, political, economic, social, and cultural fields. One of the results of this movement was an unprecedented wave of explorations of the lands outside Europe, pioneered by the Portuguese in the fifteenth century. These explorations allowed Portugal to create trading posts and build castles along the West African coasts and establish sugarcane plantations on the Atlantic islands which relied on African slave labor. However, the discovery of the Americas in 1492 dramatically increased the demand for African slaves.

This paper traces back the history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the atrocities committed against African slaves, and it attempts to highlight the wrongs done to them for centuries in the name of economic progress dictated by the capitalist system.

Keywords: slave trade – West Africa – New World – Middle Passage – crime against humanity

Résumé

L'Europe du XIV^e siècle a été marquée par la Renaissance qui a englobé les domaines scientifique, politique, économique, social et culturel. L'un des résultats de ce mouvement fut une vague d'explorations sans précédent des terres hors d'Europe au XV^e siècle, initiée par les Portugais. Ces explorations ont permis au Portugal de créer des postes commerciaux et de construire des forts le long des côtes de l'Afrique de l'Ouest et d'établir des plantations de canne à sucre sur les îles de l'Atlantique qui reposaient sur la main-d'œuvre des esclaves africains. Cependant, la découverte des Amériques en 1492 a considérablement accru la demande d'esclaves africains.

Cet article retrace l'histoire de la traite transatlantique des esclaves et des atrocités commises contre les esclaves africains, et tente de mettre en lumière les torts qui leur ont été causés pendant des siècles au nom du progrès économique dicté par le système capitaliste.

Mots-clés : traite négrière – Afrique de l'Ouest – Nouveau Monde – Passage du milieu – crime contre l'humanité

* Corresponding author: Aziz MOSTEFAOUI

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Introduction

An important part of Africa's modern history is dominated by the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the business of buying African able-bodied men, women, and children on the coasts of West Africa, mainly, to be shipped as slaves to the New World. However, when the Europeans first reached the West African coast in the fifteenth century, they had not intended to enslave its peoples, nor had they planned to rule over them. Their explorations were the result of the Renaissance movement and a manifestation of Europe's new-born interest in the world outside her own geographical boundaries. However, a series of historical events in Europe, Africa, and the Americas contributed to changing the Europeans' minds regarding their dealings with the African people for the following three centuries. The Europeans needed a cheap and reliable labor force for their American and West Indian colonies, and the African manpower seemed to meet their requirements. Accordingly, they initiated the cruelest form of the slave trade and the most dehumanizing form of slavery known to history. The trans-Atlantic slave trade would constitute the prologue of Africa's tragedy following her direct contact with Europe.

1- The Initiation of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade

Driven by both economic and religious considerations, Portugal embarked on a series of exploratory voyages throughout the fifteenth century under the patronage of Prince Henry the Navigator, son of the Portuguese monarch King John I. During their adventurous explorations of the West African coasts, while on their way to search for a direct sea route around Africa to reach Southeast Asia, the Portuguese initiated the Atlantic slave trade. *"It was the Portuguese,"* Rawley and Behrendt wrote, *"who first opened the Atlantic Ocean, started the Atlantic slave trade, and established the first European overseas empire"* (18: 2005). Nonetheless, they did not introduce a new practice as slavery and the slave trade had existed long before in Africa and elsewhere. Slavery was a widespread practice in the African continent and characterized social and economic life in many parts of it. The slaves were captives of inter-tribal wars, condemned criminals, debtors, kidnap victims, and mentally or physically deficient men and women (Fage, 267: (1995a); Isichei, 333: 1997). Despite their inferior status, the slaves were not a means to accumulate wealth. They were rather used as household servants, agricultural laborers, wives, and concubines; and in many instances, they still lived in familiar surroundings. They generally lived within the immediate households of their owners, and *"... they – and especially their children – could hope gradually to lose their marginal status and be absorbed into the families and society of their masters"* (Kolchin, 20: 1993).

As the Portuguese explorers advanced southwards along the West African coasts in the fifteenth century, they established trading posts and castles wherever they could find commercial opportunities in order to manage their dealings and exchanges with the local people. As early as 1444, Portuguese merchants captured more than two hundred Africans and sold them in Lisbon to be used as servants and laborers in the newly-reconquered and thinly-populated areas in the southern parts of the Iberian Peninsula (Blackburn, 102: 1997). The Portuguese merchants were more interested in trade and making profits than in Henry's exploratory voyages which were not that lucrative, they believed. Sugar plantations had been established on the islands of Madeira, the Canaries, and São Tomé where slave labor was used. Thus, the Portuguese merchants realized the potential wealth they could achieve by acquiring slaves on the West African coasts and selling them

in Europe and the Atlantic islands. As a consequence, between five hundred and a thousand African slaves were shipped annually toward Portugal and the Atlantic islands during the second half of the fifteenth century (Curtin, 217: 1990).

The discovery of the New World in 1492 by the Genoese mariner Christopher Columbus, under the sponsorship of the Spanish monarchs, changed the course of history and set the stage for the expansion of the slave trade. While the Portuguese had been primarily concerned with trade throughout the course of their progress toward the Indian Ocean, the Spanish expeditions in the New World were intended to conquer lands and people. As a result of the land acquisition, plantations and mines were to be established, and the native people were to be used as laborers (Blackburn, 129: 1997).

To meet their needs in the labor force, the Spaniards had recourse to the native Americans (or Amerindians) who were used in the mines and large plantations established in the conquered territories, but who were soon to prove to be unreliable. Capturing native Americans was arduous, and keeping them challenging; besides, they were unfamiliar with agricultural routines (Klein, 17: 1999). Great numbers of them died during the European conquests while many others could not bear the intensive work they were compelled to accomplish in the mines and the plantations. Moreover, large numbers of Amerindians were annihilated by diseases brought from Europe, such as measles, smallpox, plague, typhus, yellow fever, and influenza, against which they were not naturally immunized (Manning, 30-31: 1990). In the end, the Amerindians did not, and could not, meet the European settlers' continuous need for labor.

To meet the huge shortage in manpower, the Europeans had to look for new alternatives to replace the depleted native one, especially that sugar and tobacco plantations in particular required a great number of workers during the harvest seasons. The demand for the labor force was steadily increasing as the plantations and mines were constantly growing in size and number, so an urgent solution was necessary. Eventually, this situation made the European settlers and plantation owners turn to African slave labor, a decision enhanced by some factors. First, the Africans' immunity system was more resistant to the general range of Afro-Eurasian and tropical diseases (Curtin, 221: 1990). This meant that their chances of survival in the New World were higher than the European immigrants'. According to Blackburn, "... *immigrants from Europe had a mortality rate about twice as high as did Africans in the first year or so following their arrival in the Caribbean...*" (315: 1997).

Another factor that justified the profitable exploitation of African slaves was the Europeans' belief that the practice did not contrast with Christian ethical ideals as the Africans were pagans. Therefore, the "*Blacks ... could be handled with more rigid methods of discipline and could be morally and spiritually degraded for the sake of stability on the plantation*" (Franklin and Moss, 32: 1994). Additionally, African slaves were always readily available on West African shores, and the Portuguese merchants, who had been trading in them for years by then, were able to obtain them in the desired numbers and ship them across the Atlantic. According to Fage, "... *winds and currents made the voyage from West Africa to America relatively easy for the sailing ships of the period ...*" (64: 1995), and the European planters found that it cost them less to buy an African slave than to maintain a white servant. The African slaves were "... *more self-reliant – better able to build a hut suited to the climate, and more adept at cultivating a garden*"

(Blackburn, 320: 1997). Finally, it was much easier to apprehend African slave runaways because of the black color of their skin which distinguished them from the Europeans.

It was mainly due to these factors that black African slaves became the main labor force upon which the New World economy was built. A variety of European products, such as textiles, spirits, iron bars, trinkets, glass beads, and muskets, were traded on the West African coasts for slaves, who were later traded in the Americas for sugar, rum, rice, indigo, ginger, tobacco, and cotton (Woodruff, 47-48: 1998). It should be noted, however, that the trans-Atlantic journey, commonly referred to as the Middle Passage, was a traumatizing experience that affected the African captives both mentally and physically, thereby constituting an episode of the slave trade that is considered to be one of the most inhuman.

2- The Middle Passage

There is a great deal of literature about the Middle Passage, and there are many historical reports about the horrendous conditions under which slaves were transported across the Atlantic Ocean after their capture. In this respect, Oliver Ransford claimed that *"It is quite impossible for the most hardened person to read about the stretched out horrors of the Middle Passage without recoiling"* (Ransford, 85: 1971). The slave trade era reflected the mercantile spirit which prevailed in Europe, especially during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In fact, from about the mid-seventeenth century onwards, merchants from almost all European nationalities competed fiercely among themselves for a share in the trans-Atlantic slave trade which proved to be very lucrative business and constituted one of the most important sources of European wealth at that time (Franklin and Moss, 37-41: 1994). As a result, many European chartered companies and a great number of individual merchants – mainly from England, France, the Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden, Denmark, and Brandenburg – began to engage in the business of buying slaves on the West African coasts and selling them in the New World, especially that the demand for slaves in the Americas and the West Indies tended to be always higher than the supply (Fage, 68: 1969).

As the slave trade became a highly competitive business, the African captives' comfort on board the slavers was the least of the slave traders' concerns. Rather, the slave traders were more concerned about sailing with the greatest number of slaves they could fit into the lower decks of their ships to make the most profits out of them. Oliver Ransford qualified the slaves' conditions aboard the slave ships as worse than those of the prisoners in the Nazi concentration camps, quoting the famous British abolitionist William Wilberforce who stated that *"... never can so much misery be found condensed into so small a space as in a slave-ship during the Middle Passage"* (Ransford, 85: 1971). Such a statement testifies to the atrocious conditions that the slaves endured during their forced crossing of the Atlantic Ocean.

According to historians, direct shipments of slaves from the African continent in the direction of the New World started in 1532 as the previous slave destinations had been mainly Portugal, Madeira, and São Tomé, as mentioned earlier (Iliffe, 130: 1999; Fage, 64: 1969). When boarding the ships, the slaves were usually shackled in pairs by the ankles and were crammed together to fill any available space in the lower decks. In his Description of this situation, John Reader wrote: *"The bodies [of the slaves] lie in tightly packed ranks, more like corpses than living beings, their positions showing more respect for the demands of geometry than for the needs of people"*

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being transported across an ocean” (380: 1998). The slaves slept on bare wooden platforms, each one lying in a space smaller than a coffin, and had to endure this position for weeks on end. Raymond Cohn claimed that during the eighteenth century a slave voyage from West Africa to the Americas lasted at least two and a half months while this period was reduced to two months at most in the nineteenth century (Cohn, 689: 1985).¹

The length of the trans-Atlantic journey and the crowded conditions aboard the slavers increased the mortality rate among the slaves, mainly because of poor nutrition, thirst, epidemics, and diseases, such as ophthalmia, smallpox, scurvy, and dysentery. The slaves were also prone to ‘fixed melancholy’, a disease characterized by moroseness, moodiness, mutism, and negativism. They often became completely unresponsive, staring into space, and refusing food (Kolchin, 21: 1993). The atmosphere in the lower decks was filthy because the slave holds were not ventilated and the toilet facilities were reduced to some large conical buckets. Furthermore, the air inside the ships was so fetid because of heat, perspiration, excrement, vomit, and the smell of unwashed bodies. In his description of this condition, Olaudah Equiano, who was enslaved as a young boy in West Africa, stated in his autobiography:

“The first object which saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast was the sea, and a slave ship... These filled me with astonishment, which was soon converted into terror when I was carried on board... I was soon put down under the decks, and there I received such a salutation in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life: so that, with the loathsomeness of the stench, and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat, nor had I the least desire to taste any thing [*sic*].” (24-25: 2007)

Furthermore, Antonio T. Bly wrote that: “... the vile stench of the slave vessels ... could be recognized at a distance of five miles away, in a strong gust of wind...” (180: 1998). Unlike the Europeans, the African captives suffered more from seasickness which frequently caused the death of many of them, especially the female slaves.

Many scholars tried to provide estimations by analyzing available data from different countries which had been involved in the slave trade; however, no accurate figures of the loss-in-transit (death percentage on the voyage) and mortality (death percentage per month on the voyage) rates among the slaves during the Middle Passage are available (Cohn, 688: 1985). In fact, the number of the slaves’ loss differed from one period to another and was closely connected to a number of factors, such as conditions on board the slavers, the number of slaves transported, and the voyage length. However, estimations vary between 10% and more than 20%.² Similarly, numerous studies have been conducted on the number of Africans exported from Africa between the fifteenth century and the end of the nineteenth, but the results have been inconsistent, as shown in the table below.

Estimates of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1450-1867 (Lovejoy, 496: 1982)

Source	Imports	Exports (10% loss at sea)	Exports (15% loss at sea)	Exports (20% loss at sea)
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1- It should be noted, however, that the length of the trans-Atlantic slave voyages depended largely on weather conditions, the sailing ships’ design, and the slavers’ starting point in Africa.

2- For more details about the slave losses during the Middle Passage, see, for example, Cohn, 685-692: 1985; Lovejoy, 497 [footnote 89]: 1982; Curtin, 277-279: 1969.

Owen	15,520,000	17,244,000	18,259,000	19,400,000
Dunbar	13,887,500	15,431,000	16,338,000	17,359,000
Kuczynski	14,650,000	16,278,000	17,235,000	18,313,000
Deerr	11,970,000	13,300,000	14,082,000	14,963,000
Curtin	9,566,100	10,629,000	11,254,000	11,957,000
Inikori	13,392,000	15,400,000		
Rawley	11,345,000	12,606,000	13,348,000	14,181,000
Lovejoy	9,778,500	11,642,000		

During the Atlantic crossing and in favorable weather conditions, it was common practice to require slaves to exercise on deck to avoid catching diseases, such as scurvy which was a very common affliction among sailors while on the high seas. As a matter of fact, it was then believed that making the slaves dance to the sound of native African drums and xylophones was a prophylactic treatment. Despite the fact that the practice was very painful for the chained slaves, the omnipresence of the cat-o'-nine-tails (*a type of multi-tailed whip*) dissuaded them from refusing such an 'invitation' (Ransford, 90: 1971). Acts of indiscipline, obstinacy, and disobedience were not tolerated aboard the slavers, and severe corporal punishments, such as flogging and thumbscrewing, were inflicted upon those who dared to engage in such behavior. The thumb screw was an iron device with two circular holes into which the thumbs were put, and then great pressure was exercised on them by means of a moving bar, causing unbearable pain (Ransford, 93: 1971).

The African slaves' sufferings were not only physical but psychological as well. In his *The Pan-African Movement*, Imanuel Geiss stated that "*For Africans, deportation into slavery was a psychological catastrophe of the first order. The sudden decline in status from that of a free person to that of a slave was in itself a sufficient cause of deep shock ...*" (22: 1974). Very often the slaves did not know the European slave traders' intentions toward them and feared the fate which awaited them once off the African coasts. Some of them had never seen large ships, the ocean, and such 'strange-looking' white men who spoke incomprehensible languages totally different from their own. Much of the slaves' anxiety was caused by widespread rumors which associated the Europeans with cannibalism (Mustakeem, 20: 2016). In this respect, John Iliffe wrote:

"The moment of sailing was traumatic.... The anguish was in part because many West Africans believed that Europeans were sea creatures, cannibals from the land of the dead, whose black shoe-leather was African skin, whose red wine was African blood, and whose gunpowder was burnt and ground African bones." (136: 1969)

The impact of the Middle Passage hardships on the slaves' psyche was such that madness among them was a common phenomenon as some of them could not bear the conditions of their trans-Atlantic journey. The treatment reserved for the unfortunate slaves who lapsed into insanity was either severe flogging on deck, or simply dumping overboard in case the 'therapy of the whip' did not succeed (Ransford, 88: 1971). Consequently, to put an end to their sufferings, some slaves frequently had recourse to suicide as an extreme practice by refraining from food, jumping into the sea, or simply holding their breath (Bly, 181-182: 1998; Ransford, 88: 1971).

While the male slaves remained shackled in the lower decks of the slavers, the females who were usually fewer in number were usually allowed to move about in the ships during the day.³ This, however, was not an indicator that their situation was better because their sufferings were even greater as they usually became prey to the sailors' passions. In describing the female slaves' conditions, Ransford wrote: "*In some ways the experiences of the female slaves exceeded in anguish those of the men during the Middle Passage*" (90: 1971). Often, the crewmen exploited the women's fragility and defenselessness to abuse them and satisfy their desires, and any resistance to their advances was punished by flogging. Additionally, some ships comprised pregnant female slaves who did not benefit from any special treatment, and even bore their babies on board the slavers in inhuman conditions, sometimes by the side of, or shackled to, dead bodies. A captain of a ship gave a concise description of the conditions on board the slavers when he said: "*Once off the coast the ship became half bedlam and half brothel*" (as cited in Ransford, 90: 1971).⁴

3- Calls for Reparations

A paper of this scope does not allow a complete depiction of the wrongs done to the Africans through enslavement and the trans-Atlantic slave trade, a topic about which a considerable amount of scholarly works has been produced to date. Nonetheless, what has been mentioned is enough evidence that the slave trade is indeed a crime against humanity that caused the forced displacement of millions of African men, women, and children, and the death of great numbers of them during capture, transport, and enslavement in the New World.

There is no doubt that the trans-Atlantic slave trade remains one of the most abominable acts in modern history. It is a horrifying human tragedy whose effects continue to reverberate even today. Despite the abolition of this practice more than two centuries ago, the descendants of African slaves all over the world are still stigmatized by the painful past of their enslaved ancestors. In its World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance held in Durban (South Africa) in 2001, the United Nations recognized slavery and the trans-Atlantic slave trade as crimes against humanity. In the thirteenth paragraph of the Durban Declaration, under the heading *Sources, causes, forms and contemporary manifestations of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance*, it was stated:

"We acknowledge that slavery and the slave trade, including the transatlantic slave trade, were appalling tragedies in the history of humanity not only because of their abhorrent barbarism but also in terms of their magnitude, organized nature and especially their negation of the essence of the victims, and further acknowledge that slavery and the slave trade are a crime against humanity and should always have been so, especially the transatlantic slave trade and are among the major sources and manifestations of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, and that Africans and people of African descent, Asians and people of Asian descent and indigenous peoples were victims of these acts and continue to be victims of their consequences." ("World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance," 2001).

3- The number of male slaves exported to the Americas usually exceeded that of the females. The former represented about two-thirds of all slaves, and their price was generally 20 to 30 per cent higher than the latter's (see Iliffe, 132: 1969).

4- For more details about transport conditions, mortality rates and diseases among the slaves during the Middle Passage, see, for instance, Rawley and Stephen, 243-263: 2005.

This historic declaration rekindled the debates over demands of financial, material, and symbolic reparations for slavery and the slave trade, and which also were referred to in paragraphs 100-102 of the Durban Declaration. Although all efforts toward this end have come to a standstill up to now, calls for reparations for slavery and slave trade from individual activists, organizations, and even states continue to echo in the West as well as in Africa. The issue is very complex in terms of legal technicalities, the identity of the right holders, and the nature and/or amount of reparations. Despite this, attempts to obtain reparations for the harm caused by the trans-Atlantic slave trade reverberate every now and then in the world. Probably, the most serious proposals for reparations are those made in 2014 by the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Reparations Commission which had been created by the CARICOM heads of the member states in 2013. The Commission expressed the demands of reparations in a ten-point plan as follows:

1. full formal apology;
2. repatriation;
3. indigenous peoples' development program;
4. cultural institutions;
5. public health crisis;
6. illiteracy eradication;
7. African knowledge program;
8. psychological rehabilitation;
9. technology transfer; and
10. debt cancellation. (Moffett and Schwarz, 2: 2018)

It will be hard to predict whether the former countries involved in the trans-Atlantic slave trade or the international community will seriously consider such demands for reparations. Nevertheless, it is clear that the business of capturing Africans, transporting them across the Atlantic, and then selling them into slavery in the New World is today universally condemned as a horrendous crime. Severing all ties with inhuman practices at present is a real challenge in a world where racism, xenophobia, forced labor, and oppression are still commonplace in many countries in the world.

Conclusion

The trans-Atlantic slave trade which had supplied the New World plantations with African slave labor for centuries was not abolished until the nineteenth century, thus ending a protracted injustice committed against the Africans in the name of economic progress and racial superiority. This trade is a valuable historical lesson which shows that injustice will come to an end no matter how long it may last. Centuries of overexploitation, mistreatment, and discrimination bequeathed a heavy load of atrocities to the next generations committed by a race that considered itself naturally superior against another race deemed racially inferior and could, therefore, be sacrificed to build western prosperity.

There is no doubt that international law has gone a long way in the direction of enacting laws that consecrate justice for all, lift oppression against the weak, and stand against the commission of crimes against humanity for whatever reason; however, these laws did not wholly prevent human rights violations in many regions of the world. Yet, it should be noted that many perpetrators of genocides, war crimes, crimes against humanity and crimes of

aggression have had to answer for their acts before the International Criminal Court and have been tried and sentenced; additionally, many victims of such crimes have obtained reparations as compensation for their sufferings.

Acknowledging responsibility for the wrongs committed against Africans through the trans-Atlantic slave trade and expressing apologies to the descendants of slaves is a moral duty that will undoubtedly help pave the way for real healing from the trauma caused by hundreds of years of enslavement. Until that is done, the trans-Atlantic slave trade will remain a dark chapter of human history and a hideous crime that needs to be fully repaired.

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Author's Biography

Aziz MOSTEFAOUI is a Professor of African civilization at the Department of English, Ahmed Draia University of Adrar, Algeria. His research is centered on trans-Atlantic slave trade, Pan-Africanism, modern and contemporary African history, and African-American history. He has published a number of articles in books and academic journals on Pan-Africanism, slave trade, Ghanaian history, African American history, and African nationalism.