

Who is to be blamed for The Transatlantic Slave Trade in Africa? A Focus on the Role Played by Africa in the Trade

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Abstract: This paper examines the Trans-Atlantic slave trade with a special focus on the role that Africans played in the trade to determine the extent to which a party in the trade can be blamed for the trade that has now been seen as a forgotten crime against humanity. The paper employs the qualitative research methodology, using the desktop review approach, to peruse and analyze secondary materials on the topic under study. The paper establishes the distinct nature of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade that distinguished it from the Trans-Saharan slave trade and other forms of slavery experiences in Africa and elsewhere. The paper also establishes that, Africans played a very significant role in the transatlantic slave trade, as they voluntarily played the role of suppliers of slaves to European slave buyers. The paper also acknowledges the instances where Africans were coerced by their European trading partners into slavery or slave trade, but establishes that Africans traded in equal terms with the Europeans and sometimes dictated the terms of trade, as they aimed at benefiting from the lucrative trade. The paper also indicates how Africans exchanged slaves for fire arms which they needed badly to protect themselves from invasion by neighbours. The paper argues that the slave trade was a trade between two parties – Africans and foreigners and both parties benefited from the spoils of the trade and cannot be exonerated from any blame that may arise from the consequences of the trade.

Key Words: Slavery, Slave Trade, Transatlantic Slave Trade, Profit, Role, Blame, Africa

I. INTRODUCTION

Arguably, slavery is said to be as ancient as the first large civilizations and has been in existence in almost all human societies. It is public knowledge that, the institution of slavery existed in Africa just like in other areas, from time immemorial. It is also historically known that slave trade was very prevalent in Africa, especially in the Trans-Saharan trade era, where captives of wars and other forms of slaves were sold to North African and Arab merchants. Despite the historicity of slavery and the enormity of slave trade in Africa prior to the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, there is no gainsaying that the Trans-Atlantic slave trade was distinct due to its uniqueness and peculiarities which have attracted significant public attention.

The Trans-Atlantic slave trade has been described variously by scholars from diverse backgrounds. For example, David Eltis, describes the Trans-Atlantic slave trade as “the largest long-distance coerced movement of people in history and,

prior to the mid-nineteenth century, formed the major demographic well-spring for the re-peopling of the Americas following the collapse of the Amerindian population”.¹ Saunders, describes it, as “the trade that was responsible for the forced migration of between 12 – 15 million people from Africa to the Western Hemisphere from the middle of the 15th century to the end of the 19th century”.² Similarly, Hubbell described it as the violent transportation overseas of millions Africans as well as the death of many millions more, by Hubbell Andrew.³

The multifaceted descriptions of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade are clear indications of its distinctions from the previous forms of slavery and trade in slaves that existed in Africa prior to the arrival of the Europeans. Some of the notable features of the Transatlantic slave trade that made it peculiar from the past slavery experiences included the magnitude of the trade, as it is estimated that “about 12.5 million Africans” were enslaved and taken to the Americas between the turn of the 16th century and the mid-19th century.⁴ Apart from the demographic figures of Africans exported, the homogenous nature of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade is also one of the factors that has set it apart from indigenous slavery in Africa. There is no denying there fact that African slaves were exported to the Muslim world years before the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. However, the number of Africans transported across the Atlantic, was unprecedented in world history. As Luis Angeles, aptly puts it, “Africans constituted the overwhelming majority of the world’s slaves, and at the height of the trade about 9 out of 10 slaves coming out of Africa were bought by western Europeans”.⁵

¹ David Eltis: A Brief Overview of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: sailor. Available at

<http://www.slavevoyages.org/tast/assessment/essays-intro-01.faces> Accessed on 15th Noember, 2017.

² A.C. de C. M. Saunders, *A Social History of Black Slaves and Freedmen in Portugal, 1441-1555*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 59.

³ Hubbell, Andrew. 2001. “A View of the Slave Trade from the Margin: Souroudougou in the Late Nineteenth-Century Slave Trade of the Niger Bend.” *Journal of African History*, 42: 25–47.

⁴ Whatley, W. and Gillezeau, R. The Impact of the Transatlantic Slave Trade on Ethnic stratification in Africa, *American Economic Review Papers & Proceedings*, 101 (3), 571-576. (2011b),

⁵ Luis Angeles: On the Causes of the African Slave Trade” American press (2014)

Another feature was the mode of supply which included capture and dangerous voyage to the coast and across the Atlantic. The desire to tap the benefits of the slave trade intensified wars in Africa as bands of African slave-raiding armies engaged in wars not for the sake of territorial expansion *per se*, but to acquire slaves. This development turned Africa into a continent in turmoil as wars for slaves became prevalent. As Lovejoy vividly pointed out, Africa in the era of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade was a continent, “where wars were increasingly fought with the sole objective of obtaining slaves, which is sharply opposite of the previous situation in African slavery where slaves were by-products of wars”.⁶ There were also other modes of captures such as “smaller operations, slave raids and kidnappings, which multiplied in Africa, during the transatlantic slave trade, setting it apart”.⁷ Muhammad contends that the Trans-Atlantic slave trade was a forgotten crime against humanity, even in those countries on both sides of the Atlantic that actively participated in it.⁸

II. LITERATURE

As a result of the notable features of the transatlantic slave trade, the topic has not only attracted public sentiments, but it has also significantly attracted a considerable body of scholarly literature. In fact, Abramova cited Daaku (The African Historian) of having said that: “There is no topic in African history on which so much has been written and yet so little is known, as the Atlantic slave trade”.⁹ There is therefore a host of publications on the subject of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade, who have written on various aspects of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, ranging from its causes, effects, nature to its abolition and reasons for the abolitions.

As far as the causes of the Trans- Atlantic slave trade are concerned, both African and non-African scholars generally share common views with few divergences. For instance, Hubbell mentioned the issue of European expansion to the Americas to mainly tropical and semi-tropical areas and the subsequent establishment of plantation farms there, as one of the major causes of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade.¹⁰ Other scholars differ from Hubbell. Scholars such as Frederick Bowser, Abdul Sheriff, Patrick Manning and Griffiths argued that slavery was already established in Africa as a cultural practice years before the European Advent as another cause of

the transatlantic slave trade as.¹¹ There is no doubt that, the institution of slavery was already existing in Africa before the arrival of the Europeans, but the point must be made that African indigenous slavery was very much different in nature and in practice as compared to the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. This notwithstanding, it is a moot point whether Africa resisted or even collaborated with European merchants in the conduct of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade.¹²

According to Hubbell, many of the items of trade that were either not known by the Europeans (like tobacco), or they were what was considered as luxury by the Europeans (like gold), or the items occupied a luxury niche in pre-expansion European tastes (like gold or sugar), were then in the control of the Europeans during the slave trade.¹³ This argument resonates so well with the observations made by Patrick Manning and Griffith who attribute the cause of the slave trade to the fact that “free European migrants and indentured servants never traveled across the Atlantic in sufficient numbers to meet the labor needs of expanding plantations and that convicts and prisoners – the only Europeans who were ever forced to migrate – were much fewer in numbers again”.¹⁴ In the view of Manning and Griffith, slavery or some form of coerced labour was the only possible option if European consumers were to gain access to more tropical produce and precious metals.¹⁵ Even though this view explains why Europeans quickly and gullibly engage in the mass shipment of Africans to the New World and the West Indies to work on their plantations, it fails to account for the huge labour demand at the plantations, since the red-Indians were dying rapidly. Some African scholars hold a contrary view, Hawthorne for example, argue that the Trans-Atlantic slave trade was caused by racism, discrimination and that it was a clear case of gross disrespect to the African humanity.¹⁶ The thrust of his argument is that, superiority complex by white supremacists, propelled the Europeans to see Africans as second-class citizens that only deserved to work under the hot sun. Undoubtedly, to engage in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade.¹⁷

On the effects of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, scholars have variously examined the issue on continental bases, especially on the continents that were directly affected by the trade, such as Africa, America and the Caribbean.

⁶ Lovejoy, P. E. *Transformations in Slavery. A history of slavery in Africa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (1983).

⁷ Luis Angeles: *On the Causes of the African Slave Trade* American press (2014)

⁸ Muhammad, Esq., Patricia M. “The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A Forgotten Crime Against Humanity as Defined by International Law.” *American University International Law Review* 19, no. 4 (2003): 883-947.

⁹ S. U. Abramova: Ideological, doctrinal, philosophical, religious and political aspects of the African slave trade: The African slave trade from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century: *The general history of Africa: studies and documents*: UNESCO, 1979 p16

¹⁰ Hubbell, Andrew. “A View of the Slave Trade from the Margin: Souroudougou in the Late Nineteenth-Century Slave Trade of the Niger Bend.” *Journal of African History*, 42: 2001 25–47.

¹¹ Frederick P. Bowser, *The African Slave in Colonial Peru* (California, Stanford University Press, 1974).

¹² Abdul Sheriff, “Localisation and Social Composition of the East African Slave Trade, 1858–1873,” *Slavery & Abolition*, 9 (1988): 131–145.

¹³ Hubbell, Andrew. “A View of the Slave Trade from the Margin: Souroudougou in the Late Nineteenth-Century Slave Trade of the Niger Bend.” *Journal of African History*, 42: 2001 25–47.

¹⁴ Patrick Manning and W.S. Griffiths, “Divining the unprovable: Simulating the Demography of African Slavery,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 19 (1988): 177–201.

¹⁵ *Ibid*

¹⁶ Hawthorne, Walter. 2003. *Planting Rice and Harvesting Slaves: Transformations along the Guinea- Bissau Coast, 1400–1900*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

¹⁷ *Ibid*

Nunn, examining the impacts of Africa's slave trade in the long-term, found that the over-400 year's old slave had serious long-term consequence economic and social development in Africa.¹⁸ This view is shared by other scholars including Walter Rodney, who attributes the general economic underdevelopment of the African continent to the twin effects of Trans-Atlantic slave trade and European colonization.¹⁹ Chanda, Redam and Luis observed from the works of Bockstette, Chanda, and Putterman Chanda and Putterman, that "there is a relationship between a country's history of state development and subsequent economic performance suggests that these effects of the slave trade may be important for current economic development".²⁰

On the contrary, other scholars including Herbst, have blamed Africa's previous and current state of underdevelopment on the shoulders of state failure, originating from Africa's weak and unstable precolonial political structures.²¹ However, considering the nature of the slave trade which also significantly affected political structures in the continent, one can argue that Africa's weak states system today can as well be blamed on the slave trade. From the above arguments, one thing is clear, the impact of the transatlantic slave trade on Africa are multi-faceted, as they range from socio-cultural, socioeconomic and political spheres of things.

Koelle, Northrup and Lovejoy have all taken turns to describe how the trans-Atlantic slave trade also contributed to political instability by causing the corruption of previously established legal structures.²² McEvedy Colin and Richard observed that in many cases, it became common to obtain slaves by falsely accusing others of witchcraft or other crimes, causing conflicts not only among families and clans but also within the entire community as well as inter-community conflicts, as a result of betrayal and mistrust.²³ In a similar way, Klein stated that "communities began enslaving their own. Judicial penalties that formerly had taken the form of beatings, payment of compensation or exile, for example, were now converted to enslavement."²⁴

Northrup and Lovejoy have delineated the effects of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade on Africa and argued that it caused insecurity in African societies.²⁵ The scholars have indicated that the most common manner in which slaves were taken was through villages or states raiding one another "where groups of villages had previously developed into larger-scale village federations, relations between the villages tended to turn hostile" this point has been rehashed by several scholars like Inikori, and Hubbell.²⁶ Consequently, the "ties between villages were weakened, which in turn impeded the formation of larger communities and broader ethnic identities".²⁷ Similarly, Kusimba, argues that insecurity was one of the effects of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade on Africa. According to him "insecurity confined people within ethnic boundaries constructing spheres of interaction." He further blamed the current high rate of fractionalization in the African continent on the process and the practices that characterized the transatlantic slave.²⁸

Barry has given a dimension of the impact of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade on Africa. According to him, the Trans-Atlantic slave trade disrupted and truncated the rapid growth of African settlements growing into very big cities, a process which had begun before European arrival and the introduction of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade.²⁹ However, this evolution stagnated soon after the arrival of the Portuguese in the 15th century.³⁰ Similar the Trans-Atlantic slave trade disintegrated and disorganized African kingdoms of Shambaa, Gweno, and the Pare states in the East Africa's Pangani valley.³¹ In another development, it was argued that the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, as evidenced by the events in Kongo, ruined African societies. Vasina referenced a letter that Affonso, king of Kongo, wrote to Portugal in 1526 in which he complained that "there are many traders in all corners of the country and that they bring ruin to the country since everyday people are enslaved and kidnapped, even nobles, even members of the king's own family".³² In another scenario, Inikori paints a picture of how the Trans-Atlantic slave trade led to a break-down of law and order and

¹⁸ Nunn, Nathan. 2008. "The Long-Term Effects of Africa's Slave Trades." *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 123(1): 139-76.

¹⁹ Rodney, Walter. *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. London: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, 1972.

²⁰ Chanda, Areendam, and Louis Putterman, "State Effectiveness, Economic Growth, and the Age of States," in *States and Development: Historical Antecedents of Stagnation and Advance*, Matthew Lange and Dietrich Rueschemeyer, eds. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005).

²¹ Herbst, Jeffrey, "Responding to State Failure in Africa," *International Security*, 21 (1997), 120-144.

—, *States and Power in Africa* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

²² Northrup, David. *Africa's Discovery of Europe, 1450-1850*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

²³ McEvedy, Colin and Richard Jones. *Atlas of World Population*. London: Penguin Books, 1978

²⁴ Klein, Herbert. *The Atlantic Slave Trade*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

²⁵ Lovejoy, Paul E. 2000. *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa*. 2nd ed. New York: Cambridge University Press

²⁶ Inikori, Joseph. "The Import of Firearms into West Africa 1750-1807: A Quantitative Analysis." *The Journal of African History* 18, no. 3 (1977): 339-368.

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Kusimba, Chapurukha M., "Archaeology of Slavery in East Africa," *African Archaeological Review*, 21 (2004), 59-88

²⁹ Barry, Boubacar, "Senegambia from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century: Evolution of the Wolof, Sereer, and 'Tukuloor,'" in *General History of Africa: Volume 5, Africa from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century*, B.A. Ogot, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992)

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Ibid

³² Vansina, Jan, *Kingdoms of the Savanna* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966).

—, "Deep-Down Time: Political Tradition in Central Africa," *History in Africa*, 16 (1989), 341-362.

—, *Paths in the Rainforests* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).

disintegration states in Africa. In his own words, he said: “this break-down of law and order was partly responsible for the weakening and eventual fall of the once powerful state, especially that of the many other Bantu-speaking ethnicities, who had very stable states existing in earlier periods, but by the time the slave trades were brought to an end, even though a few ancient states remained”.³³

Lovejoy and Richardson, gave another dimension of the consequence of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade on African states. According to them, “the consequence of internal conflict was increased political instability and in many cases the collapse of preexisting forms of government”.³⁴ Giving further insight into the impact of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade on Africa, Richardson argued that in the “sixteenth century northern Senegambia, the Portuguese slave trade was a key factor leading to the eventual disintegration of the Joloff Confederation, which was replaced by the much smaller kingdoms of Waalo, Kajoor, Baol, Siin, and Saalum”.³⁵ In short, it was obvious, that disruption of growth and development as well as the expansion of communities in Africa are consequences of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade on Africa.

Though vast literature on the Trans-Atlantic slave trade exists, there is a paucity of literature on the role that Africans played in it. In other words, there is very scanty literatures that have critically examined the Trans-Atlantic slave trade to determine the specific role that Africans played in it and the extent to which they can be blamed for the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. As Beckles, pointed out, “though recent decades have seen an explosion in academic publications on the transatlantic slave trade, the topic of slavery is so broad and multifaceted that, there is always something new to explore”.³⁶ It is against this background that, this paper seeks to depart from the traditional approach to the study of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade; it seeks to chart a new path to determine the role and complicity of Africans in it.

The Role played by Africans in The Trade

The Trans-Atlantic slave trade was not a one-way phenomenon; it was a trade between two parties. Slaves were obtained from Africa and taken across the Atlantic Ocean to Europe and the New World. As supposedly with high demand for slaves, the Africans who served as suppliers of slaves ensured that slaves were supplied to the market. Given the two-tiered nature of the functioning of Trans-Atlantic slave

trade where Africans served as suppliers and the European merchants served as buyers, there is no debating the point that Africans did indeed played a very important role in the trade, interesting observation, to look at the role that Africans played in the transatlantic slave trade.

In what ways did Africans play a role in the infamous Trans-Atlantic slave trade? In the first place, Africans played the role of suppliers in the trade, where they consciously and actively traversed the interior of Africa for slaves and sold to the foreign slave buyers for onward shipment across the Atlantic Ocean. Luiz Angeles indicated that, described how so many slave trading posts were dotted along the coast and patches of territories across Africa where slaves were brought from inland Africa by Africans themselves and sold to Europeans.³⁷ Detailing the complicity of Africans in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade Luiz Angeles, indicated that “slave capturing was essentially an African venture, with Africans playing the roles of enslavers and enslaved”.³⁸ In another scenario, scholars such as Eltis, Lewis and Richardson described how European and Muslim buyers would meet African slave providers in trading posts and market towns to buy slaves of their choice and only rarely engaged in slave capture themselves.³⁹ In short, Africans themselves played dual role in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade – enslavers and victims of enslaving.

Furthermore, African craving and demand for guns and gun power from European merchants served as a catalyst for the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. It should be borne in mind that, European guns flowed into the African continent in great numbers, for commercial purposes without any expressed ill-intention of selling them to Africans to influence the magnitude of slaves captured for the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Nevertheless, the European importation of European guns and gun power in Africa, the brisk sale of those items on African markets and the high Africa demand for those European weapons were significant to the magnitude of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. The guns and gun powder significantly promoted the expansion of slave captures, and it was quite probable that slave trading would have been smaller in the absence of guns. This is because, those European guns were given in exchange of slaves. According to Luiz Angeles, Africans were in need of guns and gun power for protection and they were very ready and willing to exchange a good number of slaves for them.⁴⁰ He observed how European guns induced an arms race among African nations, whereby their acquisition by a rival group led to an understandable urge to do likewise, hence they supplied a lot of slaves to the

³³ Inikori, Joseph. \The Struggle Against the Transatlantic Slave Trade: The Role of the State.” In Sylvia Diouf (ed.). *Fighting the Slave Trade: West African Strategies*. Athens. Ohio University Press. 2003. Pp. 170-198.

³⁴ Lovejoy, Paul and David Richardson. \Anglo-E_k Relations and protection against Illegal Enslavement at Old Calabar, 1740-1807.” In Sylvia Diouf (ed.). *Fighting the Slave Trade: West African Strategies*. Athens. Ohio University Press. 2003. pp. 101-120.

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Hilary McDonald Beckles: *SLAVE VOYAGES The Transatlantic Trade in Enslaved Africans: (ED-2002/WS/3?)* University of West Indies (2002)

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Luiz Angeles, “On the Causes of the African Slave Trade.” *American Press* (2014)

³⁹ Eltis, D., Lewis, F. D. and Richardson, D. (2005), *Slave prices, the African slave trade, and productivity in the Caribbean, 1674 - 1807*, *Economic History Review* 58 (4), 673-700.

⁴⁰ Luis Angeles: *On the Causes of the African Slave Trade” American press* (2014)

Europeans for guns.⁴¹ The point must therefore be made that, Africans traded in equal terms with their European partners, as they traded according to their needs at the time, by supplying slaves in exchange of fire arms, therefore playing a significant role in the Transatlantic slave trade.

Again, all the sources for the acquisition of slaves dotted across the interior of Africa in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade were not European creation; they created by Africans for the enslavement of Africans. It should be borne in mind that some of these sources existed in African societies as they were part of their culture and patterns of social life prior to the arrival of the Europeans. Africans were practicing a system that made it possible for many people to become slaves. These slaves were then sold to the foreign buyers. For instance, the survey conducted by Koelle in the 19th century on Africans that were sold into slavery during the transatlantic slave trade revealed that, almost all the slaves were supplied voluntarily by Africans themselves for one one reason or the other.⁴² According to the survey, almost “20% of the slaves sampled were sold by relatives or friends” on the basis of trickery or family decision.⁴³ In addition, the established tradition in Africa where miscreants were sold into slavery was entrenched in Africa long before the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. By this tradition, Africans were said to have sold family or community members into slavery for various offences, including robbery, rape, adultery, fornication, among others.⁴⁴ The survey by Koelle recorded numerous accounts of individuals who were sold into slavery by family members, relatives, and “supposed friends”. At the height of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, even African political leaders were said to have used the judicial system as a source of slaves. Koelle observed that often, leaders themselves supported or even instigated this abuse of the judicial system.⁴⁵ He added that, in order to get themselves from raided by slaver raiders, some of the chiefs usually and frequently decided to pay slaves as tributes, and the slaves were often gotten through the judicial system of the Africans.⁴⁶ Explaining how African leaders abused the judicial system for slaves in Cassanga of modern day Guinea Bissau, Hawthorne indicated that where he narrated how “the chief of the Cassanga used the red water ordeal to procure slaves and their possessions.”⁴⁷ He

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Koelle, Sigismund Wilhelm. *Polyglotta Africana; or A Comparative Vocabulary of Nearly Three Hundred Words and Phrases, in More than One Hundred Distinct African Languages*. London: Church Missionary House. 1854.

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ Koelle, Sigismund Wilhelm, *Polyglotta Africana; or A Comparative Vocabulary of Nearly Three Hundred Words and Phrases, in More than One Hundred Distinct African Languages* (Church Missionary House, London, 1854).

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ Hawthorn, Walter. Strategies of the Decentralized: Defending Communities from Slave Raiders in the Coastal Guinea-Bissau, 1450-1815." In Sylvia Diouf (ed.). *Fighting the Slave Trade: West African Strategies*. Athens. Ohio University Press. 2003. Pp. 152-169.

explained that “those accused of a crime were forced to drink a poisonous red liquid, if they vomited, then they were judged to be guilty, if they did not vomit, they were deemed not guilty”⁴⁸ and that “for those that did not vomit this usually brought death by poisoning and their possessions were then seized and their family members were sold into slavery”.⁴⁹ One of the more notable accounts is the one given by Piot, about a slave that was sold into slavery after being “enticed on board of a Portuguese vessel” by “a treacherous friend”.⁵⁰ Piot, also cited another example of “the Kabre people of Northern Togo, who during the nineteenth century developed the custom of selling their own kin into slavery”.⁵¹ From the details given above, Africans established fecundities for enslavement and exploited them as sources for slaves in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade.

African involvement in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade was diverse. Akyeampong, narrated how a very popular drumming group was cajoled and tricked by their own people into slavery in Atorkor (Ghana) in the 1850s.⁵² According to him:

The chief of Whuti, who was also a slave trader, was jealous of the leader of a group of drummers, because the leader of the drummers fancied the chief’s wife. He then arranged with a slave merchant named Dokutsu, who had contact with European slave traders, for the entire group of 40 drummers to be sold into slavery. It was arranged with the Europeans that the group of drummers would be tricked on board the slave ship. The drummers were told that the Europeans on board the ship were interested in their drums and would like to hear them perform. The drummers were served rum on board the ship and became drunk. Before they were able to realize what was happening the ship had sailed off, headed for the New World.⁵³

The above quotation is a clear illustration of the role that Africans played in facilitating the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. It is obvious that, apart from raids and wars, Africans used other subtle ways, including trickery and abuse of the legal system, to acquire slaves to sell to European merchants engaged in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Examples of Africans’ use of trickery to acquire slaves abound in many parts of African societies. Amalda gives insights into some of the trickeries. According to him “tricking unsuspecting ‘strangers’ and then selling them to merchants was a common phenomenon in Africa in the era of the Trans-Atlantic slave

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ Piot, Charles. “Of Slaves and the Gift: Kabre Sale and the Kin during the Era of the Slave Trade.” *Journal of African History*, 37(1): 31–49. Platteau, (1996)

⁵¹ Ibid

⁵² Akyeampong, Emmanuel. “History, Memory, Slave-Trade and Slavery in Anlo (Ghana)”, *Slavery & Abolition*, 22(3): 1–24. (2001)

⁵³ Ibid

trade.⁵⁴ Noting the trickery the Biafra used to enslave unsuspecting Africans, Almada notes.⁵⁵

“These Beafaes are so smart, that if a yokel arrives from the interior, they pretend that they want to give him shelter, and they receive him into their homes. After a few days have passed, they persuade him that they have friends on the ships, and that they would like to take him and have a party. But when they go to the ships, they sell him. In this way they trick many yokels.”⁵⁶

As Nunn and Wantchekon, posited “the fact that slaves were often taken or tricked into slavery by others within the same community or ethnic group, suggests that the slave trade may not only have affected the trust of those outside of one’s community, but it may have also affected the evolution of trust in those closest to you, such as friends, neighbours, and relatives”.⁵⁷ In another scenario, Nunn and Wantchekon argued, “because historically it was often the case that chiefs were also slave merchants and traders, or they were forced to sell their own people into slavery, the slave trade may have also resulted in an evolution of mistrust for political figures, particularly local leaders”.⁵⁸ No matter how one sees it, there is no denying the fact, that, evidence of Africans of diverse social statuses played significant as suppliers of slaves in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Who is to Be Blamed for the Transatlantic Slave Trade?

The Transatlantic slave trade which was a very normal lucrative business, determined solely by the factors of demand and supply at its peak, became a 20th century evil and beyond. The United Nations and almost all countries across the world have now, labeled the Trans-Atlantic slave trade as a crime against humanity. Undoubtedly, the label was based on the negative effects of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, effects that have left behind them numerous problems, which African states are still grappling with in contemporary times.

The role of Africans in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade has already been discussed in this paper. It established that Africans played a significant role in facilitating the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. If Africans have played a role in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, can Africans be blamed for it and all its atrocities against Africans?

The discourse on who is to be blamed for the Trans-Atlantic slave trade has varied perspectives. From the point of view of

⁵⁴ Hawthorne, Walter, *Planting Rice and Harvesting Slaves: Transformation along the Guinea- Bissau Coast, 1400–1900* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003), page number.

⁵⁵ Hawthorne, Walter, *Planting Rice and Harvesting Slaves: Transformation along the Guinea- Bissau Coast, 1400–1900*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. (2003)

⁵⁶ Almada, André Álvarez de. *Trato Breve dos Rios de Guiné*. Translated by P.E.H. Hair. Liverpool: University of Liverpool. (1984)

⁵⁷ Nathan Nunn and Leonard Wantchekon: *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade And The Evolution Of Mistrust In Africa: An Empirical Investigation: Afrobarometer Working Paper No. 100*

⁵⁸ Ibid

the under-development of Africa in contemporary times, Walter Rodney blames Europeans for Africa’s development conundrum, blaming that on a number of European activities and policies including the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. However, other scholars have given a different nuanced perspective. In his book “*Ideological, doctrinal, philosophical, religious and political aspects of the African slave trade*” Abramova painted a picture of African willingness for slavery. He described how in 1441, an expedition headed by two Portuguese – Antam Gonsalvez and Nuno Trista, were assured by some African captives that they would be handsomely rewarded if their captors returned them to Africa.⁵⁹ According to him, when Gonsalvez shipped the captives back to Africa, “he received in exchange of ten blacks, male and female, from various countries . . . ’ and various goods including ‘ . . . a little gold dust’”.⁶⁰ He went ahead to describe how several slaves, with a splendid retinue, were sent as a gift to Pope Eugene IV.⁶¹ All these actions did not only send a signal to the Europeans that, there were ‘unwanted’ people available in Africa that could be used as goods or commodities or gifts to show gratitude for a kind gesture, but they also move a long way to demonstrate the extent to which Africa can or cannot be blamed for the transatlantic slave trade.

Again, despite the fact that some of the Europeans instigated slave raiding and could influence certain locals to embark on slave raiding and kidnapping in Africa, it is clear that, this was after they have bought slaves voluntarily sold to them by Africans themselves. The other civilized people such as Asia and the Middle East, where slavery was practiced, did not give the Europeans the chance to trade with them in large number of slaves. Therefore, as Luiz Angeles observed, “The Europeans never faced the choice between, say, African, Middle Eastern and Chinese slaves and chose the first ones because of skin colour”.⁶² But the fact is that “African slaves were available for sale, in large numbers, all along the coast of Africa and on its northern frontier” by Africans themselves, who acquired large number of slaves through interethnic conflicts and wars.⁶³ “This was simply not the case anywhere else in the world”, as indicated by Luiz Angeles.⁶⁴ Every business man who understands the theory of demand and supply would realize that, “the higher the supply, the lower the price”, and would go for cheap products. Africans presented “the cheapest, and indeed the only option for obtaining slaves in the tens of thousands every year”.⁶⁵ Therefore, in finding out whether or not Africans can be

⁵⁹ S. U. Abramova: *Ideological, doctrinal, philosophical, religious and political aspects of the African slave trade: The African slave trade from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century: The general history of Africa: studies and documents: UNESCO, 1979*

⁶⁰ Ibid

⁶¹ Ibid

⁶² Luis Angeles: *On the Causes of the African Slave Trade* American press (2014)

⁶³ Ibid

⁶⁴ Ibid

⁶⁵ Ibid

blamed for the slave trade, the critical question one may ask is 'are the Europeans to be blamed for being supplied with thousands of African slaves by Africans themselves?'

Another point to consider, when looking at whether or not Africans can be blamed for the transatlantic slave trade is the beneficiaries of the trade. Klein, observed that "the African slave trade was a profitable economic activity for both African sellers and European buyers".⁶⁶ This means that Africans were benefiting significantly from selling themselves to Europeans. Now, can only one side be blamed for a trade that benefits two sides? In fact, Manning, made a critical point to the effect that "Europeans could offer to buy a slave for more than the value of its production in African agriculture, and the deal would be profitable for both parts since slaves would be put to work using the advanced, plough-based, European agriculture".⁶⁷ This means, that, the value of a slave for the African slave owner, was far less than what the slave owner would have sold the slave for. This clearly shows the kind of profit that African slave dealers were making from the slave trade. Thus point to the direction of whether Africans can be blamed for the slave trade or not.

Luis Angeles made the point that, during the Transatlantic slave trade, the readiness and willingness of the Europeans to buy slaves anywhere on the world was not in doubt.⁶⁸ It is therefore logical to observe that if the Europeans were very much willing and ready to purchase slaves anywhere around the world, then the reason why they did not obtain slaves in other areas such as Asia and the middle east, must have been the fact that Africans were very much ready and willing to sell themselves than others were. This means that Africans were carried away by the profitability of the business of slave capture and selling.

Again, it has been scholarly established that one main method for obtaining large number of slaves in Africa was through wars and slave raids. These wars and raids were largely fought and embarked on by Africans themselves, who saw each other as outsiders. The effect of this phenomenon was that, "slaves were mainly obtained from outside the society of the enslavers".⁶⁹ The concept of an outsider in this context in the words of Luis Angeles: "... an outsider is a cultural one - a person who behaves differently, talks a different language, prays to different gods."⁷⁰ According to Moses Finley, "... the slave was always a deracinated outsider - an outsider first in the sense that he originated from outside the society into which he was introduced as a slave".⁷¹ This clearly supports

the argument that, Africans saw themselves as outsiders and decided to sell themselves to the slave buyers with the aim of making profits from it.

III. CONCLUSION.

The paper has looked at the transatlantic slave trade with a special focus on examining the role that Africans played in the trade as well as looking at who is to be blamed from the trade that has now been seen as a forgotten crime against humanity. The paper established the distinct nature of the transatlantic slave trade that distinguished it from the trans-Saharan slave trade and other forms of slavery experiences in Africa. The paper has also established the fact that, Africa played a very significant role in the transatlantic slave trade, as they were virtually playing the very important role of supplying slaves to Europeans slave buyers most times voluntarily. The paper also acknowledged the few instances where Africans were coerced by their European trading partners, but established that Africans traded in equal terms with the Europeans and dictated the terms of trade, as they aimed at benefiting from the lucrative trade. The paper has also, indicated how Africans sold their relatives, friends and other acquaintances through various tricky ways with the aim of making profit from the trade. It has also been established by the paper that Africans exchanged slaves for fire arms which they needed serious to protect themselves from invasion by neighbours. It is therefore worth concluding that, the slave trade was a trade between two parties – Africans and foreigners and both parties benefited from the spoils of the trade and cannot be exonerated from any blame that may arise as a result of the consequences of the trade.

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⁶⁷ Manning, P. *Slavery and African Life*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (1990),

⁶⁸ Luis Angeles: *On the Causes of the African Slave Trade* American press (2014)

⁶⁹ Luis Angeles: *On the Causes of the African Slave Trade* American press (2014)

⁷⁰ Ibid

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