

A Critique of the Contributions of Old Benin Empire to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade

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Abstract: *The Trans-Atlantic slave trade which lasted for about four hundred years ended nearly 200 years ago. But regular reminders of the trade remain with us both here in Africa and in the Americas. Captive Africans sold as slaves were gotten mainly from the West Coast of the continent and historians assert that many empires in the then West Coast including the Benin Empire, supposedly built from the reward of the slave trade, equally collapsed after the abolition of the trade during the 19th century. But there are contrary evidences. Whatever contributions Benin made to that trade in terms of the supply of slaves must have been negligible because both her geography and culture prevented her from becoming a big supplier of slaves to the Europeans. We therefore must look for other factors for the decline of the Benin Empire at about the same period with the abolition of the slave trade. However, the need to attempt to establish the level of involvement in that trade by the various groups and empires of the West Coast is of great importance because such materials would be useful to both historians and social scientists alike in this era of renewed capitalist globalization.*

I. Introduction

The forced migration of Africans across the Atlantic is usually referred to as the Trans- Atlantic Slave Trade or the middle passage. This trade in human (Africans) brought about one of the most massive human migrations of all times (Sharp & Schomp, 2007:6). Five hundred and twenty years ago, the New World was discovered by Europe. This discovery was made possible by Europe's literacy, her building technology which empowered her to build the ocean-going boats and enhanced navigational skills which enabled these boats to traverse the trackless Atlantic Ocean. In addition were the new challenges posed by Islam her unrelenting pressure from both East and South; all played their parts in the epochal discovery of the Americas and also the Islands of the Caribbean by Christopher Columbus in 1492. The discovery of the Americas whose existence had been unsuspected would today be equivalent to the discovery by mankind of another Earth-like planet which was habitable and accessible.

The discovery of the Americas helped Europe to solve the problem of over population of her cities and to settle these excess population in the new found lands. But regarding the great need for human labour which would be essential to cultivate and tame the newly discovered lands, to Europe's economic advantages, Europe turned to Africa, and the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade began in 1494 exactly two years after the discovery of the new world.

The trade lasted for 400 years before its final abolition in 1830 (Sharp and Schomp, 2007:58). Over the course of those four centuries, slave ships made at least 54, 000 voyages to Africa, and it is estimated that about 20 million Africans were actually landed in the new world. But for every Africa who landed in the New World, it is calculated that one other Africa lost his life either in the course of capture or during the Trans-Atlantic journey to the Americas (Hammond, 1970:201).

The white settlers in the New World could not force the Native Indians to work for them. They were outnumbered, and while with superior weapons they could massacre Indians, they could not capture them and keep them enslaved. The Indians were in their own homeland and were therefore defiant and very much at home in the woods, in stark contrast to the transplanted Europeans.

At the onset of the trade, slaves were got around the Sene-Gambia and Gold Coast areas. But as the demand for slaves continued to surpass the supply, the area of the coast east of the Gold Coast came into the trade. The Niger Delta and the Coast down to Gabon were brought into the trade.

Spain and Portugal were soon joined in the trade by British, French, Dutch and Scandinavian Slavers. Most of these European powers soon set about developing empires on the American mainland as well, at first in the coastal region of north eastern south America from what later became Brazil through the Guianas, Venezuela, and Columbia, into central America from Panama and around the Gulf of Mexico and into the Southern part of what was to be the United States (Hammond, 1970:201).

It was mainly African chiefs and elites (Middlemen) who secured the slaves from West Africa and sold them to the Europeans. The trade retarded orderly progress and development in West Africa. Concentration on the profitable nature of the trade discouraged the development of agriculture and industry. It is said that the inducement from the slave trade played a large part in the rise of West African Empire like Benin and yet the obsession with acquiring more wealth and power from the same trade along with the wars which it fostered, played an equally large part in her decline (Hatch 69:79).

But exactly to what extent did the Trans-Atlantic slave trade enable the rapid growth of Benin? Was Benin a major player in the trade? Did Benin ever engage in any form of systematic slave raiding? How valid is the statement by authors like John Hatch (1969:78) that by the end of the 18th Century, the might of Benin had shrunk to tiny proportions, it had become the victim of its own former source of strength-its slave trade?

The thrust of this paper therefore would be to examine the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade in perspective and specifically the role and contributions of the Benin Empire in the supply of slaves to European merchants during the 400 years when the trade lasted. The paper would also try to determine the extent to which the abolition of the slave trade affected the might of the Benin Empire. But was it really the Trans-Atlantic slave trade that enabled the rise of Benin as a strong and well-established Kingdom? Did Benin ever really evolve structures to enable slave raiding to meet the demand for slaves by the Europeans?

To achieve these spelt out objectives, the paper would be divided into the following sub themes:

- i. Introduction
- ii. The trade triangle
- iii. The foundation for the Trans-Atlantic slave trade
- iv. The Trade on the African side
- v. The rise of the Benin Empire
- vi. Benin and the Trans-Atlantic slave trade
- vii. Conclusion

The Trade Triangle

It is the three-sided trading pattern that is often referred to as the triangular Trade and this was about ten thousand miles long, depending on the exact destination in each leg of the journey (Sharp & Schomp, 2007:4).

First Leg: Specially designed ships with slave pens sailed from the different ports of Europe to the West Coast of Africa carrying goods meant for exchange for humans. These items included guns, tobacco, iron bars, cutlasses, swords, muskets, handkerchiefs, jugs, smoking pipes, liquor, walking sticks etc. The crews of these ships were often headed by a Captain. Other officers were a doctor (ship surgeon), carpenter, cooks, blacksmiths, sailmakers and several additional seamen. Europeans had given the hundred of miles along the West Coast of Africa, the name, Slave Coast. At the onset, they (Europeans) had labeled the different portions of the Coast to reflect the goods commonly obtained from the different areas of the coast. Europeans traders spoke of the Gold Coast, Grain Coast, Ivory Coast and pepper Coast. But soon after they found the trade on humans to be more profitable than other items, they began to refer to the hundreds of miles along the coast simply as the Slave Coast (Keller, 2004:24). Slave trading between Europeans and Africans was never a straight forward process. The captain and crew of the slave ships were paid according to the number of slave delivered: that meant that leaving Africa with under supplied cargo was bad business. In the early days of the trade, slavers cruised along the coast for a few weeks to several months bargaining for captives from one area of the coast to another. But as the trade progressed, they fashioned out other methods and slave hulks and ware-houses were built along the coast where African middlemen delivered their captives to Europeans. The captives were brought to the sea coast as long caravans shackled to each other and led by armed guards. Warehouses like Elmina and Goree Island held thousands of captives for months, waiting for the arrival of European Slave Ships. The conditions in these ships were disgusting as men, women and children were branded with hot irons, bound with chains and shackles, then crammed in a filthy dungeon with as many as thirty (30) people to each right square foot cell. Rejected captives on account of age, illness, deformity or any other reason were often treated with great severity. Traders were often known to have instantly beheaded such rejected captives rather than set them free. (Anderson, 1995:20).

The Middle Passage – From Africa to the Americas: Before slave ships began their grueling journeys from Africa to the Americas, captives were loaded into ships window-less cargo hold or slave pens. Ships were also loaded with items of trade like ivory as well as food items and other necessary supplies – drinking water, firewood etc. Crossing the Atlantic took a minimum of four weeks to a maximum of three months, depending on the weather, wind, ocean currents and the overall condition of slave ship. This leg of the journey was particularly dangerous and as for the slaves, they endured heart-wrenching experiences. Infact, only a fraction of

them would live to see Americas. During the 400 years of this trade, the bones of captives who perished during this second leg of the journey were said to have lined the bottom of the Atlantic like a rail road of bones. (Sharp & Schomp, 2007:7). Even when captives did not die from diseases, exhaustion, hunger, beating and overcrowding, slave traders occasionally threw captives over-board when there were shortages of supplies. In 1781, running short of water, the captain of the slave ship, Zong ordered 132 captives thrown overboard because the insurance covered death by drowning but not from starvation. (Harch, 1969:72).

When finally the ships arrived the Americas, slaves were taken to slave blocks or markets and auctioned like chattels. Slaves were sent mainly to three parts of the New World – about 58% to Brazil, Central and South America, about 37% to the West India and 5% to mainland North America, including the colonies that would eventually become USA. (Reller 60, 2000).

The Third Leg: This is a journey from the Americas back to Europe. This began with the loading of the same slave ships with new cargoes (sugar, rice, spices, tobacco, wood etc) produced by the slaves already laboring in the New World and bought from the proceeds from the sale of new slaves from Africa. This passage could also take from four to twelve weeks. Occasionally, those slaves that could not be sold in the Americas returned with the ship to Europe. These left-over captives belonged to the ship captain who would end up selling them off in slave auctions in European cities. Many in this group either became House slaves in European homes or seamen, replacing old hands who either died or absconded. By the time the slave ship arrived back in Europe and completed its triangular journey, hundred of people, including those who had never set foot neither on Africa soil nor the slave ship would have made enormous profits. These included banks, insurance companies etc.

The Foundation For The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade

Slavery was always an integral part of African culture. It was indigenous to the Africa continent. However, in Africa, slaves were considered as members of the family and were treated as such. They worked side by side with the children of the homes in the farm and undertook similar household chores in the same manner. Those of the male slaves who proved to be wise and responsible enough became personal assistants to their masters while those females who were homely enough either joined the rank of wives in the master's harem or got married off to some of the male members of the family. It was the Portuguese who began the new pattern of slavery whereby Africans were either shipped from one part of the continent to the other part as labourers, or shipped from the continent overseas. Even before the treaty of Tordesillas (1494) which gave Portugal a monopoly hold on the African continent, Portuguese sailors had become familiar with the West Coast of Africa. In the mid fifteen Hundreds, Portuguese ships ruled the seas as Prince Henry the Navigator sent his nation's swift sturdy sailing vessels (the caravels) on many voyages of exploration and discovery in the West Coast.

These explorers sailed along the West Coast often stopping to trade in gold, animal skins and spices. In 1441, one over-zealous Captain captured twelve Africans and carried them to Portugal, to Henry. The following year, some other group of Portuguese seamen took home some other African captives. And so it continued year after years, Europeans swooping down and carrying off African men, women and children. By the end of the 15th Century, Portuguese and Spanish slave traders had abducted nearly 200, 000 Africans and sold them into bondage in Europe. (Sharp & Schomp, 2007:10). As early as 1482, that is ten years before the discovery of the New World, Portugal had built a slave fortress (the Elmina Castle) on the coast of the then Gold Coast (now Ghana). With the commencement of diplomatic relations between Benin and Portugal in 1486, Portugal's trade with Benin included trade in slaves. These slaves were required in the Sugar Cane Plantations of the newly discovered African Islands of Principe and Sao Tome. Others were taken to the then Gold Coast and battered for gold. The trade in slaves then was restricted within the African continent. In the Islands of Principe and Sao Tome, trading right were granted to private merchants, so it was also through these groups that many Edo Benin indigenes were taken to these Islands as plantation workers, house servants and in some instances as slaves.

Despite Portugal's influence in Benin, being the first European Nation to have formal contact with Benin, Portugal was unable to control the trade in slaves within the Benin Kingdom. Oba Ewuare and his successors, as early as the late fifteenth century and early sixteenth century had established a new foreign policy stance with regard to the sale of slaves in the Kingdom, by establishing separate markets for male and female slaves and it then became more difficult for Portuguese and indeed other Europeans (interlopers) to buy slaves in Benin (Ryder, 1965:45). Despite such restrictions, Portugal was successful in getting large supplies of slaves from other mainland territories (Congo, Angola and Mozambique) to maintain the sugar cane plantations founded on the Tropical Islands sitting on the Equator (Principe and Sao Tome). And through the labour of these African slaves, she created the world's first Trans-Atlantic Trading Conglomerate – trading in sugar. Portugal's endeavours and experiments in the sugar can plantations of Principe and Sao Tome and African slave labour served as the template for the Triangular Slave Trade.

This was fundamental in the series of processes of the European exploitation of African labour for capital formation in Europe. The lessons learnt by Portugal in Sao Tome/Principe of the successful bringing together of African slave labour and the sugar cane crop became the winning formula which was later introduced into the New world, especially as the driving force behind the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade was the large-scale production of sugar for consumption in Europe.

The Trade On The African Side

Europeans introduced firearm to Africa. And its presence and use in West Africa facilitated the capture of people who were eventually sold to Europeans as slaves. When the Portuguese had a monopoly of the Trade of the West Coast, including the Benin Kingdom, there was a Papal Bull, restricting the sale of guns and iron to only Christian kingdoms. The King of the Congo got both guns and iron from the Portuguese because he became a Christian, along with his Kingdom. But both Oba Ekwuare and his son Ozolua could not get guns and iron from the Portuguese because they and the kingdom would not become Christians. However, Benin got guns and iron from the protestant Dutch in the course of trade between them. At the onset of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade therefore, Africans were already armed against themselves by the Dutch and other Europeans for the purpose of getting war captives for sale as slaves. At the height of the trade, it was estimated that the gun smiths of Birmingham were providing more than 100, 000 muskets a year “ which was highly welcomed by the Manchester merchants. Yet at the other end of the trade, it was giving Africans a fire power they had never before had (Hatch, 1969:72). As observed by a Dutchman, writing from Elmina Castle in the year 1700,: “ The main military weapons are muskets or carbines, in the use of which these Africans are wonderfully skillful. It is a real pleasure to watch them train their armies. They handle their weapons so cleverly, shooting them off in several ways “ one man sitting another lying, another creeping along the ground or sitting down - that it is surprising that they do not harm each other. Perhaps you will wonder how Africans came to be furnished with these fire arms. But you should know that we sell them very great quantities and in so doing we offer them knife with which to cut their own throats. But we are forced to do this, for if we do not do it, they would easily get enough muskets from the English, Danes or Prussians. (Hatch, 1969:73).

The Merchant class in Africa was smaller and less organized than their European counterparts. They were more heavily reliant on the monarchs who held leading commercial roles and demanded special privileges. In Benin, only the Oba and his principals Chiefs, acting on his behalf, could sell slaves to the Europeans. The two merchant classes “ the European and African, understood each other very well and recognized their mutual interest and common purpose. However, the major problem was that whilst the European merchant could turn his profits to constructive activities in his own home land, the African merchant were selling the human resources of their societies; reducing the able-bodied elements of their communities and at the same time undermining productive economic activities amongst their own people. They were also carrying on essentially destructive activity through the warfare which was necessary for the capture of slaves. (Hatch,1969:74).

Some idea of the trading relations between the Europeans merchant and the local African merchants can be gathered from the record of the French trade (Captain Landolphe) during his commercial activities in Benin in late 18th century. His ship la Nagress entered the Benin River in February 1778 and he eventually took a boat to Ughoton (the Benin Port). From there, he was transported to Benin City by carriers in a hammock. In Benin, the Frenchman met the Oba and those of his chiefs who sat in the Council of Commerce (Eribo, Oshodin and Uwangu) “ the Chiefs who had followed immediately after the Oba and Ezomo in signing the 1735 treaty with the Dutch West Indian Company. After exchanging gifts with the Oba, his council of chiefs and twenty other appointed chiefs, Landolphe returned to Ughoton in the same manner he had arrived Benin. But this time accompanied by forty of the King’s overseers and messengers (Veadors and Passadors) who then inspected the goods in Landolpes Cargo. The unit of value for this exercise was the “payne” “ a measure that harked back to the Portuguese Pano or customary yard of the early 16th century (Ryder, 1965:208). The Benin cloths were of two types and were woven by Benin women on perpendicular looms which were to be found in most homes. But there were also some other special kinds of cloth that were woven only within the Palace and used by the Oba and his court.

Accordingly, the cloth values assigned to Landolphe’s goods were as follows:

- 1 cholet kerchief
- 12 cloths
- 1 nimes silk kerchief
- 12 cloths
- ½ piece printed calico “ 7 ells
- 7 cloths
- 1 piece Breton Linen “ 5 ells
- 4 cloths

1 piece Rouen Cotton Cloth-bells
6 cloths
1 piece white baft 5 ells
6 cloths
1 piece dress cholet 6 ells
6 cloths
1 piece Nimes silk satin
6 cloths
1 piece Indian chintz 5 elles
10 cloths
1 roll Brazilian tobacco weighing 80 lb
20 cloths
1 Brass basin 3 feet diameter
7 cloths
1 Brass basin 2 feet diameter
4 cloths
1 scrap regulation musket
7 cloths
1 scrap dragoon's holster pistol
4 cloths
1 regulation sabre
1 cloth
1 barrel of powder 5 lb
5 cloths
1 bag of lead hunting shot 1 lb
1 cloth
100 flints
1 cloth
6 flemish knives with painted ligman vital handles
2 cloths
1 case containing scissors, razor and whetstone
1 cloths
1 common hat edged with red wool
1 cloth
1 barrel brandy 20 pints
8 cloths
1 case 12 flagons of brandy, each 1-spints
8 cloths
1 iron bar, 7 feet long by 3 inches wide
3 cloths
1 necklace of coral at 40 frances at 1b
8 cloths
1 necklace of round coral rosary beads at 60 Frances a 1b
8 cloths
1 necklace of 12 small pipe coral beads
5 cloths
Source: Ryder 1965:208

Once the prices of goods had been determined, attention then turned to the prices the Europeans is to pay for slaves. A male slave and a female slave are then produced for that purpose in the same way that the captain had shown samples of his merchandise. Finally, an agreement is reached that a male slave would sell for 100 cloths while a female slave sells for 90 cloths (Ryder 1965:210). A flurry of gunshots heralded the end of haggling and the beginning of trading. Along with slaves, Europeans also bought ivory which the Oba had a monopoly of as he was entitled to one tusk from every elephant killed within his kingdom and had the option of buying the second tusk.

The Rise Of The Benin Empire

The kingdom of Benin is seven degree above the equator " in the hinterland of the Bight of Benin. The peoples of Benin also call themselves the Edos and live outside the swamp forests and there are no grounds for believing that it ever extended, nearer to the coast (Bradbury 1959:92).

Prior to the reign of Oba Ewuare (750 years ago), Benin City the capital of the Benin Empire was a straggling collection of villages enclosed by the Oguola moat (Aisien; 2012:66). But by the dint of Ewuare's efforts, Benin City, became an impressive city with wide streets and large houses; with two moats demarcating the city into inner and outer parts. According to UNESCO, the moat of Benin, dug by Oba Oguola 700 years ago and extended by his grandson Oba Ewuare about 600 years ago, remains one of the greatest ancient engineering feats undertaken by a people. The ingenuity associated with the digging of these ramparts is in many ways equaled only by that associated with the Chinese walls built by the Qin and Handynasties in the 5th centuries respectively (Wikipedia). Successive monarchs improved on those structures put in place by Oba Ewuare and as at the 15th century, Benin had acquired enough fame to earn her total deference from all the neighboring tribes around the kingdom. The centralized system of political governance was achieved as far back as the 8th century; during the reign of the Ogiso in the 1st dynasty and specifically in the reign of Ogiso Odoligie. He (Odoligie) brought the different political units in Benin together under one single central authority, similar to the unification of the Old Italian City State by Giuseppe Garibaldi in the 19th century. This unification gave further steam to the political, economic and cultural authority of the central monarchy. Oba Ewuare enhanced the powers of Benin. The details of his campaigns and conquests create a strong impression that there was a type of militia force which engaged in regular annual expeditions either to enforce and ensure the submission of recalcitrant subjects or extend the bound of the empire still further. (Egharevba, 1960:105). On this great territorial foundation the Benin Kingdom grew in size and splendor.

It is said that it was in Ewuare's reign that Benin acquired the name "city". The number of chiefs increased and the magnificence surrounding the Oba's personage was enhanced with the introduction of coral beads brought in by the Portuguese (Bradbury, 1959:100). As at 1472, (that is twenty years before the discovery of the Americas), when the first Portuguese visited the city, Benin had become one of the richest and best organized states in the West Coast of Africa. Benin's strength and fame were augmented by an early contact with both the Portuguese and other Europeans. The kingdom was one of the earliest territories to be visited by the English " Thomas Windham putting ashore there as early as 1553 (Hatch, 169:58).

European visitors to wherethe lives is large that, Lorenzo Pinto, had the following to write about Benin. "Great Benin where the king lives is large than Lisbon; all the streets run straight as far as the eye can see. The houses are large especially that of the King which is richly decorated and has fine columns. The city is wealthy and illustrious. It is so well governed that theft is unknown and the people live in such security that they have no doors to their houses" (Benin Forum: unpublished paper: Oct. 2013). Diplomatic relations between Benin and Portugal was established in 1486. King John II sent Alfonso d' Aveiro to Benin while Benin sent the Ohonkun of Ughoton to Portugal. Intelligence gathered from the Ohonkun in Lisbon about the supposed Kingdom of Prester John encouraged the expedition of Bartholomew Diaze a years later in 1487 " all these happening before the discovery of the New World and the commencement of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Benin engaged in international trade with Portugal and as at 1488 a trading post and factory had been established at Ughoton (the Benin Port) and was manned by Aveiro until his death there in the early 16th century. On the Benin side, commodities of trade included camwood, pepper, ivory etc and these were battered for silk, beads and other articles of trade from Portugal. Trade in slaves also featured but on an intra-continental basis whereby slaves taken from Benin by the Portuguese were battered for gold in the Gold Coast (now Ghana) or taken to the colonized Island of Sao Tome, Principe. The Benin Empire reached its zenith during the reign of Oba Ehengbuda (1578 A.D) " the last of the warrior kings-even before the empire was brought into the trade on Humans. During this period, the empire had extended its hegemony towards the Niger as more Ibo towns and villages to the West of the Niger submitted to the Oba. Large areas of Ekiti also came under the Oba's suzerainty and tributes were paid to Benin from rulers of both Akure and Owo. In some directions, it reached its natural boundaries; Niger to the East and the sea to the South (Egharevba, 1960:106).

Benin had surely become a rich, famous, highly centralized and renowned empire decades before the trade in humans across the Atlantic began. Oba Esigie (1504 A.D) could write and speak Portuguese (Hatch, 169:40). His son Oba Orhogbua was educated in either in Lisbon or Principe " Soa Tome; training to become a Roman Catholic Priest. His overseer exposure influenced his love of the sea, and his refinement in state affairs and government. He turned the extensive lagoon system running parallel to the Bight of Benin into a Benin Lake 15 and became the Lord of all the lands bordering the lake, as far as modern-day Ghana (Aisien,2001: 160).

The greatest threat to the integrity of the Benin Empire came from neighbouring states powerful enough to attract or compel parts of it to enter their own orbit. In the sixteenth century, Benin had overcome this danger by defeating or warding off her most menacing neighbours-Idah, Oyo and Nupe (Ryder, 1969:22). However, in the 18th and 19th centuries, new pressures had begun to emerge. In the wake of the Fulani

Jihad came a fresh wave of Nupe attacks on Northern Edo areas; to the West, the break up of the Oyo Kingdom led to fighting in Ekiti; on the Coast, a British presence gradually established the bases which demanded and made an advance possible to the interior. Wars in the Nupe country had destroyed trading links to the North; the growth of the Royal Niger Company severed the routes to the East; in the West, the considerable arms traffic which flourished during the early period of the Yoruba wars was shut off in the eighteen-seventies by the closing of the Oke Igbo route. Not even at the height of its fortunes and numerous conquests could Benin have resisted and overcome the new forces that were closing in upon her. Its decline was therefore inevitable a fait accompli (Ryder, 1969:22).

Benin And The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade

The following are some assertions from four different authors about the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and the decline of the Benin Empire.

- i. "By the end of the 18th century, the might of Benin had shrunk to tiny proportions; it had become the victim of its former source of strength its slave trade" (Hatch, 1969:70).
- ii. "Benin therefore from being a once formidable and dreaded power based on the slave trade had now dwindled into insignificance" (Consul Campbell) (Ryder, 1965:233)
- iii. "Though Benin had been ruined mostly by the suppression of slave export, the Oba accept it as a fait accompli" (Burton, 1865:416).
- iv. "Despite the fact that the Slave Trade of the Benin River in its last year had been almost entirely in the Itsekiri hands; mid-nineteenth century British observers were firmly convinced that its abolition had brought ruin to Benin" (Ryder, 1965:208).

But was the Benin Empire built on the slave trade? Did the empire ever become a big slave trading centre? However, evidence seems to suggest the contrary. The sale of slaves to European merchants was not a popular idea in Benin. The Overseas export of humans and the resulting de-population of the country had from the beginning seemed unattractive to the kingdom (Aisien, 2001:171). As far back as the late 15th century when slaves were sold to the Portuguese for Sao Tome etc, Benin had begun to embrace new foreign policy stance with regard to the sale of slaves to Europeans. At first, export was restricted to the sale of only female slaves while the export of the productive fighting male disallowed by the kingdom (Ryder, 1965:45). This foreign policy position was maintained even after the discovery of the New World and the subsequent mass Trans-Atlantic exportation of Africans that followed. In 1522, that is 40 years after the discovery of the New World and 42 years after the commencement of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, the records of Manacihin Fernandes, a Portuguese Merchant showed that out of the 83 slaves purchased from Benin, only two were males. And this purchase was made after a whole month of waiting at Ughoton in a vain attempt for a market to be opened for male slaves. Infact, his hunch was that even the two male slaves purchased were acquired outside the Oba territory. To further demonstrate the lack of enthusiasm and zeal on the part of the Kingdom with regard to the sale of slaves, the 81 female (mostly between 10 and 20 years of age) were acquired at a very slow rate of one or two a day; between the 25th of June and 8th of August. As the century wore on, Benin stopped completely from cooperating with Europeans in the business of the exportation of humans (Aisien, 2001:172). Another trader and a ship's captain (Landolphe) made the following observations in his record; "The Ezomo was the richest man in Benin, owning over 10,000 slaves none of whom was ever sold". This observation buttressed the point that both the tradition and culture of Benin discouraged the sale of slaves. However numerous they might be, it was almost a taboo for a Benin man to sell any of his slave. So as a corollary, the Ezomo would not sell any of his 10,000 slaves. The saying in Benin goes thus: "Vbo gi da oba No na mu ovio ren khien?"

Meaning: "What need does the Oba want to satisfy by putting out his slaves for sale?" (Aisien, 2001:171). Furthermore, the kingdom during the last centuries of the trade increased the prices of slaves available for sale within the kingdom by nearly 100 percent (Ryder, 1965:207). This sudden hike in price discouraged Europeans from sourcing for slaves from the kingdom. As at the 18th century, the price for a male slave had risen from 74 cloth to 105 cloths and that of a female had risen from 53 to 95 cloths. From Landolphe's record the customs for the Oba and his chiefs had also been increased as follows: 900 clths for the Oba 300 clths for the Ezomo 100 cloths for the twenty Chief of Iwebo 40 cloths for 40 vendors 20 cloths each to six interpreters 10 cloths each to 40 carriers (carcados) 20 cloths to the chief at ughoton

Source: Ryder, 1965:190

In addition to these obligatory payments, Landolphe lamented that he had to also distribute (as a convention) other presents to a value of 2, 000 cloths â€“ making a total of 15,160 cloths or the equivalent of 120 slaves; which in summary represented 20 percent of the value of the entire cargo. In monetary terms, the value of the cloth was put at 2 shillings, 2 pence. Ordinarily therefore, almost two thousand pounds was disbursed in customs and presents. In which case, the customs system in Benin had been revolutionized since the turn of the 18th century and the chief beneficiaries had been the Oba, the Ezomo and the chiefs of the Iwebo (Ryder, 1965: 199). With the gradual emergence of such structures of trade protectionism in the kingdom most European slaves traders stopped visiting Benin. One of the best known (Captain Crow) of Liverpool entered Benin River only once in the course of his many voyages to lower Guinea. Another captain (Adams) also went to Benin only once in the course of his numerous voyages. Adams on his part attributed his neglect of the Ughoton port of the river by slave ships to the alarming rate of ill-health that affected the crew of vessels anchored there. Ports at the North of the river were known to be healthier than inland places, such as Ughoton and Ode-Itsekiri. For example, while Landolphe was still gathering his cargo of slaves and ivory in 1764, with his ship only two thirds full and so many of his goods unsold, he departed precipitately from Ughoton without taking leave of the Oba after losing a third of his crew of 90 to various diseases (Ryder, 1965: 199). Tropical diseases were always a major hazard to Europeans in Benin and traders could not afford to wait for long to get full supplies before running for their dear lives. For example Landolphe could have carried up to 600 slaves but departed with only 400 and with so many of his goods still unsold (Crowder, 1962:73).

Portuguese activity in the Benin River seems to have declined in the latter part of this eighteenth century. Of the 74 ships which entered the harbor of Principe between 1760 and 1771, none was bound from Benin, nor did any Portuguese vessel from that river call at Sao Tome between 1772 and 1774, though the Island was visited by a number of foreign ships coming from Benin in those years. The Captain of Sao Tome attributed the falling off of his branch of the slave trade to the high prices being demanded for slaves. (Blake, 1937:105).

With the numerous difficulties associated with getting slaves from Benin, European trade with Benin drastically changed in its composition. Slaves figured hardly at all in cargoes the Dutch took from Benin even in those years when they were in high demand for the Pernambuco colony (in modern day Brazil). The major article of trade had become the locally manufactured Benin Cloth. According to Bold, the finest of these cloths equaled the finest Manchester products in later centuries (Crowder, 1962:73).

The flourishing cloth trade in Benin in the mid 17th century is of significant interest because articles of indigenous manufactures had not played much role in Benin trade with Europeans. Portuguese traders in the late 15th century bought some Benin cloths to cover their slaves destined for their plantations in Principe-Sao Tome as well as the Gold Coast. But such purchases were relatively few, compared with the new pattern of both English and the Dutch. These cloths were resold by better in other parts of the coast and both the English and the Dutch found the trade very lucrative. In 1633, Beninreyse (a Dutch ship named after Benin) reached port Nassau in the Bahamas at the time the headquarters of the West India company in the Guinea with 6, 461 pieces of Benin cloth and still had no leave behind another 6, 000 for lack of space. Between 1644 and 1646, the Dutch at Arbo on the Benin river bought at least 16, 000 pieces of Benin cloth and claimed that their English rivals had bought more. (Ryder, 1965:233).

Perhaps, the loss Benin suffered following the abolition of the slave trade accrued as a result of the loss in trade of those supporting materials that accompanied the slave cargoes â€“ mats, raffia cloths, yams, palm oil, wood, etc. There were also the loss of tributes paid to the Oba by tributary tribes on the Benin River. As for Benin cloths, as manufacturing techniques improved in Europe, the cheaper European textiles gradually undermined the indigenous cotton weaving in Benin and other parts of the West Coast â€“ making their economies more dependent on European manufactures. The observations made by both Campbell and Burton earlier noted in this article were perhaps based on the false notion of the relationship between Benin and Warri â€“ they believed that Warri had been the strong arm of the Obaâ€™s power in the Benin River as far afield as Badagry. (Crowder, 1962:73). There are also some difficulties and confusion while trying to determine how much of those European traders actually went to Arbo and to Itsekiri traders in the main river. Dutch sources made it plain that English ships gathered their cargoes outside the Benin Kingdom and that the growth of the slave trade was attracting large numbers of Itsekiri into the river. (Ryder, 1965:207).

Dutch experiences further suggest that Benin would have had some difficulty in supplying the many slaves needed by the vessels, the larger of which could have been unable to reach Ughoton. With this handicap on the side of Benin, most slavers preferred gathering their cargoes in Lagos or Badagry. Thus the great upsurge of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Passed the Benin River in favour of the more convenient ports of call. (Donnan, 1931:496).

There is no evidence that Benin ever engaged or organized a great slaving campaign similar to those organized by tribes of Eastern Delta. That the Rainbow had wait for four and half months collecting 261 slaves indicates that supply was no more plentiful in the mid 18th century than it had been early in the 16th century. In 1798 for example, English ships were sent to buy 19, 450 slaves from Eastern Delta as against only 1,000 from

Benin River and most of these were bought from the Itsekiris. Benin either would not or could become a slave trading state on a grand scale. (Donnan, 1931: 496).

Indeed Benin economy did not develop on the slave trade. The state had a long history of heterogeneous commerce with several European nations. When the Portuguese arrived Benin in 1485, they marveled at her ancient political organization, technology, arts, and the sophistication of her ancient economic and social enterprise. (Oba Erediawa, 2014:30). Benin reached her zenith well before her involvement in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. However, it is known that the abolition of the slave trade led to almost complete cessation of all European trade in the Benin River since the other supporting commodity (ivory) was not by itself enough to support the trade. In any case as at the 18th century, ivory was almost exhausted (Hatch, 1969:82).

II. Conclusion

Benin did contribute to the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, though in a little way. Her supply of slaves was rather insignificant when compared with the supplies from the Eastern Delta, Lagos, Badagry and other groups along the West Coast. The abolition of the slave trade alone could not have led to the fall of the Empire because she was already a rich powerful state before she bought into the trade. However, as already observed in this paper, other factors (the jihad, wars in the Yoruba states) had threatened the might of Benin, alongside the abolition of the slave trade. Benin did try re-energizing her might by embracing new domestic and foreign policies. Her new foreign policy of isolationism led to her eventual conquest by Britain, her colonizer. Benin today remains relevant only as the nucleus of a region in the relatively new country, Nigeria, put together by Britain over a hundred years ago.

However, the little contributions of Benin to the slave trade and the enormous contribution of those other ethnic groups of the West Coast of Africa have gone on to change the human map of the world. The seeds of those Africans who were carted away as human merchandise during the four hundred years of the slave trade have gone on to flourish in the New World, emerging into a new ethnic group, the Afro-Americans. They constitute 13% of the USA, 50% of Brazil and 80% of the Caribbean Islands.

With break-throughs in the Medical Science, a few Afro-Americans have engaged in DNA testing to determine what areas of the West Coast their ancestors were taken from and behold results have been revealing. Indeed, some knowledge of the degree of involvement of the different ethnic groups and empires of the West Coast in this trade on humans will certainly provide useful materials in the course of further DNA studies.

Historians and social scientists alike have continued to show interest in the study of this forced migration of Africans. Some African, scholars, politicians and human right activists have rightly called on Europe to pay reparation to Africa for the painful exploitation of her labour force. It is however sad to note that Africa has continued to provide cheap labour and cheap market to the Europe-American- Japanese trio of global capitalism, with China as the latest addition to the list of imperial masters of the African political economy trajectory. The slave trade inflicted horrendous damage on Africa and also put a stigma on her peoples. Africa may seem to possess the New World with Europe but this is at a very huge cost to the African peoples. The Benefits of such possession are open to debate, especially when viewed against the background of new fronts of racism, marginalization and dehumanization of the African peoples in both the global north and global south.

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