

# The Slave Trade and the Unholy Triangle A Caribbean Perspective

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*Paper delivered at the Heritage and Identity Session, BWA Annual Gathering, Ghana, July 2007*

The transatlantic trade in African slaves and the institution of slavery in the Western world constitute one of the major blots on the history of the so-called enlightened peoples of Europe and the United States of America. The reason given to excuse the action and the institution is that the context and mind-set of the times need to be taken into consideration when assessments are made about the involvement and participation of Europeans in the trade. But this is an untenable proposition if Europeans are going to maintain the adjectives of being enlightened and of being civilized.

Unholy is a rare biblical concept but one understands it to be the opposite of holy. It does not appear in some biblical reference books or concordances. It is in only two passages in the New Testament, both in the Pastoral Epistles *viz.*, I Tim 1:9 and II Tim 3:2, and in both passages it appears among a list of vices. It is the Greek word transliterated '*anosios*' and means "ungodly" or "not having any regard for God or man (human beings)." Some synonyms are listed as "impious" and "hater of God." Relevant antonyms are "holy," "undefiled," "devout," "pious," and "consecrated." It is instructive that in the list of vices in 1 Tim 1:9-10 one of the vices stated is slave traders or men stealers or, more commonly, kidnappers. Kidnapping was one of the most important means of procuring Africans for slavery in the Americas. Luke Timothy Johnson notes that "slave traders" refer to those who sold into slavery' free people who had been captured in war or had been kidnapped.<sup>11</sup>

The reference to the triangle is an allusion to what in historical study is called the triangular trade. It refers to the route that was regularly traversed to bring the produce of the colonies of Europe to the benefit of the countries of Europe. The route began in Europe and went down to Africa where eventually goods from Europe were traded for the main product of Africa--people to be slaves. From Africa the route went across the Atlantic Ocean into the Americas, where the captured were sold to be the main element in the production of the staples Europe needed for its own development. The produce of the Americas being accomplished, the ships crossed the Atlantic back to Europe from the

Americas. On the map the route from beginning to end forms a triangle, hence the name “triangular trade.”

The reference to the triangle as being unholy is somewhat of a tautology for it is the inclusion of slavery in the facets of the route that primarily makes the trade unholy. While that is true, the immoral conduct of the Europeans in their dealings with the Africans also falls in the category' of being unholy, for they defrauded the Africans by exploiting their innocence.

Slavery is the ownership of human beings by other human beings. Orlando Patterson defines slavery:

Slavery is the permanent, violent, and personal domination of nationally alienated and generally dishonored persons. It is first, a form of personal domination. One individual is under the direct power of another or his agent. In practice, this usually entails the power of life and death over the slave. Second, the slave is always an excommunicated person. He more than she, does not belong to the legitimate social or moral community; he has no independent social existence; he exists only through and for the master; he is in other words, nationally alienated. As Aristotle observed, “The slave is not only the slave of his master; he also belongs entirely to him and has no life or being other than so belonging.” Third, the slave is in a perpetual condition of dishonor. What is more, the master, and.. his group parasitically gain honor in degrading the slave.<sup>[2]</sup>

Patterson's definition shows the social death of the individual for the person has no worth apart from being the property of another.

### **The Origins of the Unholy Triangle**

The attempt to quantify the number of Africans transported across the Atlantic to the Americas to serve as slaves on the plantations of these locales remains a matter of disagreement and ranges from 15 million to as high as 100 million. Clearly the accurate figure will never be known and proposals will remain “guesstimates.” What, however, is a consensus is the assertion that the transatlantic trade in Africans “was the largest forced human migration in recorded history. The extent of human suffering associated with this involuntary relocation of men, women and children may never be known. But their shipment, packed and stored beneath the decks of ships like commodities, constitutes one of the greatest horrors of modern times.”<sup>[3]</sup>

This forced migration began on this horrifying scale from about 1500 when sailing ship routes linked Western Africa to Western Europe and eventually included the Americas and the Caribbean, where the main resources for the building and sustaining of Europe were located.<sup>[4]</sup> The Portuguese had been transporting several thousand slaves annually to supply and supplement their profitable domestic labor. This situation changed dramatically when it became clear that the mines and plantations of the Americas needed hard working laborers. Africa became the source for the laborers needed in these mines and plantations and so the Africanization of the trade.

### **Slave Supplies for the Unholy Triangle**

Slavery existed in Africa when the Europeans made their assay into the continent. It is, however, necessary to determine the nature of African slavery for apologists for the European slave traders are quick to point out that Africans already were enslaving Africans when the Europeans came on the scene. There is no denying that Africans were enslaving Africans then. But it must be remembered that slavery was a universal practice and had existed in all known societies and so there is hardly any nation where its people were not at some time slaves. In Africa, as it was in some parts of medieval Europe, the economy was not slave based and so it is asserted that they should be referred to as “wageless workers” who were never mere chattels, that is that they were without rights or had no hope of being set free. Some of them were bought and sold and presented as gifts to others but their condition greatly differed from that of the African slaves who were transported to the Americas to work in the mines and the plantations.<sup>[5]</sup>

Sources for Africans as slaves resided in the social systems of the continent. African society was feudal in nature with rulers, vassals, and subjects. Before the coming of the Europeans men and women were used in traditional forms of labor such as portage because there were no animals for that purpose. Also labor was obtained from some groups and individuals who had received punishment for a crime, war captives, and through conquests. Normally peasants were tied to the soil and differed little from the serfs and villeins of medieval Europe who provided forced labor. In reality the vassal was free but owed services and tribute to their ruler who in turn was expected to provide protection and settle disputes. The vassals in turn provided protection to the subjects in exchange for labor and goods. The societies were of a communal and stratified nature with no one working for money but everyone virtually providing duties or services to someone else.

Despite this, there were groups of persons who had no freedom such as community outcasts, adulterers, debtors, prisoners of war, and those convicted and condemned of witchcraft. But still these persons had limited rights and were not chattels. They could marry according to the customs of the society, own property, establish and preserve family connections, worship freely according to their religious traditions and at times became military commanders and have been known to rise to the rank of rulers.<sup>[6]</sup> It is therefore unwarranted to compare slavery in Africa with slavery in the Americas where the individual was chattel and defined as property and real estate.

Probably more disturbing is the fact that there were ex-slaves, particularly some from Brazil, who in the nineteenth century returned to Africa and engaged in the slave trade.<sup>[7]</sup> Explanations of various kinds have been given. One was that there was no work with the consequence that slave trading provided a way out. Another had to do with the complexity of human motivation that would include greed and the push for wealth. Still other reasons for participation in the trade may never be known for these would depend on the circumstance of those who took part. One thing that is clear is that universal human reasons operated in the Africans as in any other person. At the same time it must be said that there were other ex-slaves who were skilled individuals and who brought their skills back to Africa and settled in the Jamestown section of Accra and contributed positively to the society.

### **The Middle Passage—Some Horrors of the Unholy Triangle**

The transportation of Africans to the Americas included what has become known as the Middle Passage. However, the movement of persons from capture to deposit on the other side of the Atlantic has been conceptualized into six distinct stages that help to highlight the horror of the experiences of those transported. There are the stages:

- Capture and enslavement in Africa
- Journey to the coast and other departure points
- Storage and package for shipment
- Transatlantic crossing
- Sale and dispersion in the Americas
- Seasoning/adjustment in the Americas

Each stage of the process included fatalities and the deepening of the trauma of the persons captured. At times some had to travel hundreds of miles to the place of shipment. Storage time for individuals differed from place to place on the journey to the coast. The loss of lives before the journey across the Atlantic was great. It took approximately fifty

days for the crossing to be completed. It is estimated that up to thirty percent of those transported died.

Slavers debated whether loose or tight packing was more profitable: the former being based on the assumption that the more comfortable the captives, the better they will survive the crossing; while the latter took the position that a large percentage is going to be lost anyway. And so the more tightly the “cargo” is packed, greater will be the survival of sufficient numbers to make the enterprise maximally profitable.

The callousness and inhumanity of the operators is staggering. The surgeons on board ship had the responsibility to detect early warning of disease among the “cargo” and, to protect the healthy captives, jettisoned those considered ill. Women captives were kept separate from male captives and the sailors felt they had the right of sexual access to the female captives, some of whom arrived pregnant. Some captives seized the opportunity to escape the horror and terror they were experiencing by jumping overboard.

One of the conclusions from studying the records left behind was that mortality among the males was higher than among the females. This was probably attributable to the fact that women had more spacious accommodation on board the ships; that they were not chained and, since they were sexually exploited, that the sailors may have ensured better treatment for those women so favored.

### **Life in the Caribbean–The “Cargo” from the Unholy Triangle**

Upon arrival at the plantations the captives were made to go through a period of adjustment that was called “seasoning.” This was to make the Africans adjust to the condition of being a slave; and the process could last between one and three years, during which one quarter to one third of them died. Life on the plantations was harsh and hard. Long hours of backbreaking labor to ensure maximum return on investment was the norm. Bear in mind that the African, in the eyes of the owners and managers of the plantation, was no longer a person but simply one of the dispensable factors of production.

The fertility rate of blacks on the plantation declined. It is calculated that the males suffered emasculation regarding their understanding of themselves as males. Slavery abolished any distinction between male and female since the women were expected to work as hard as the males. The women were punished as hard as the men. In addition, the sexual favor of the female was desired by both black and white, and she was more often in alliance with the white than with the black. In the long run the male was completely demoralized, for he was incapable of asserting

his authority either as husband or father, his sexual difference in no way recognized in his work situation by the all powerful out-group, the object of whatever affection he may possess, beaten, abused, and often raped before his very eyes, and with his female partner often in closer link with the source of all power in the society, it is no wonder that the male slave eventually came to lose all pretensions to masculine pride and to develop the irresponsible paternal and sexual attitudes that are found even today.<sup>[8]</sup>

### **Undermining the Unholy Triangle—the Slave Fights Back**

Despite what has just been noted about the male slave, it must not be taken as the final understanding. It must not be thought that the captive and eventually slave submitted passively to the condition in which he was at any stage of his time as captive or slave. From the moment of capture, the individual begins to fight back out of a sense of dignity and awareness of the violation of his person. There was unrelieved resistance by the person in mind, body, and spirit.<sup>[9]</sup> It was resistance that was widespread, intercontinental, and multifaceted and was, at times, considered “non-violent disengagement,” although violent reaction would become part of their sense of dignity.<sup>[10]</sup>

In the Caribbean violent resistance has been called “slave rebellion.” However, the reference has been revised and is now considered by Caribbean historians as “slave war of liberation” in that the slaves were always conscious of their personhood, never accepting that they should be anyone’s property, and so decided to take their freedom since it would not be given willingly and freely by their oppressors.

It was felt among slaves that any slave who did not seize the opportunity to run away had lost his self-respect and sense of dignity. In addition, the slaves engaged other means to defeat the system including infanticide, suicide, stealing, lying, and destruction of the implements of production—whenever they could safely do so. No doubt God understood and sympathized with what under different circumstances would be considered immoral.

### **Sharing the Benefits of the Unholy Triangle**

It is generally accepted that the labor of the slaves has contributed to the development of the states of Europe and was largely responsible for the industrialization of these nations. In this context there has been the call for reparation to the descendants of those who experienced the brunt of the slave produce over the centuries of their enslavement.

Satchel has outlined some objections that have been proffered against reparation. Some have considered it in terms mainly of monetary contribution, indicating that the suffering of the ancestors cannot be quantified in terms of dollars and cents. Others have argued that slavery was legal and the trade legitimate then, and so there was nothing criminal about it. Concomitantly, Satchell has pointed to cases offered for compensation to descendants of Africans, both in Africa and in the Americas. He further indicates that the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal has listed enslavement, deportation, and any other inhumane act committed against any civilian population as crimes against humanity. In addition, the slavery experience caused the rise of poverty, landlessness, and under- development, as well as the crushing of culture and language, the loss of identity, the inculcation of inferiority among black people, and the indoctrination of whites into a racist mind-set, all of which continue to this day to affect the prospects of equality of black people's lives in the Caribbean, the USA, Canada, and Europe. <sup>[11]</sup>

Mention must be made here of the controversy that arose in the United States of America as a result of a proposal put forward by Congressman Tony Hall of Ohio. His proposal was that the Congress "apologize to African-Americans whose ancestors suffered as slaves under the Constitution and laws of the United States until 1865." That resolution caused a division of opinion, with two of every three whites objecting while two of every three blacks were in support. The President of the day, Bill Clinton, acknowledged that slavery had left deep scars on America but that what should happen is that opportunities should be created for Americans to work hard in order to overcome the unacceptable legacies of the past. It should be noted that some agencies, including Anglicans, some Baptist groups, and the Roman Catholic Church, have apologized for involvement in slavery.

### **The Church and the Unholy Triangle**

Missionaries and other ecclesiastical personalities accompanied the colonizers into the Caribbean. The Anglican Church, in the period before emancipation ideas began to take shape, was reputed to be the white man's church. It could not cater to the spiritual needs of the slaves because the planters, who dominated and controlled the House of Assembly that paid the clergy of that church, had strong objections to this happening. They believed preaching Christ to the slaves would give them ideas of equality. The planters missed the fact that the slaves needed no one to tell them that they were human beings: they had not lost their sense of self.

When Protestant and Non-Conformist missionaries began to arrive, they were restricted in what they could say on the instruction of their sending

bodies. These bodies stated categorically that their missionaries should not become involved in political matters, which effectively meant that they should not say or do anything concerning slavery and should confine their activities to the spiritual welfare of the slaves. They gave these instructions because they were aware of the sensitivity to the subject of the planters and their agents. Their missionaries were also at pains to show that Christianity, instead of being revolutionary, taught obedience and submission.

In Jamaica Baptists are highly regarded for their involvement in the movement for the abolition of slavery. In this regard the name of the missionary William Knibb stands out. The reason seems to inhere in the Baptist insistence on the importance of the liberty of the individual. In 1788 the Reverend Robert Robinson preached a sermon at Cambridge on the subject “Slavery inconsistent with the Spirit of Christianity.” In that sermon he insisted that “slavery in a state is a deep-rooted obstinate evil, and love of dominion is a disposition that thrives too well in the hearts of depraved men.”<sup>[12]</sup>

The church in the Caribbean must engage the societies of the region in combating some of the legacies of slavery including rejection of blackness, racism, problems of identity and poverty. These issues are made more complex with the advance of globalization.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *Letters to Paul's Delegates: 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus*, 113.

<sup>[2]</sup> Orlando Patterson, *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture*, Vol. I, 9-10.

<sup>[3]</sup> Hilary McD. Beckles and Verne Shepherd, *Trading Souls; Europe's Transatlantic Trade in Africans*, xxii.

<sup>[4]</sup> Basil Davidson, *Africa in History*, 206.

<sup>[5]</sup> Davidson, *op. cit.* 209

<sup>[6]</sup> Joseph Harris, *Africans and Their History*. 73.

<sup>[7]</sup> Anne C. Bailey, *African Voices of the Atlantic Slave trade: Beyond the Silence and the Shame*. 87.

<sup>[8]</sup> Orlando Patterson, *Sociology of Slavery*, 167-168.

<sup>[9]</sup> Bailey, *op. cit.*, 90.

<sup>[10]</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>[11]</sup> Veront Satchell, *Reparation and Emancipation*, 6-8.

<sup>[12]</sup> Robert Robinson, *Slavery Inconsistent with the Spirit of Christianity*, 18.