

## Christians Organise Slave-Trade

Slaves were taken from Africa even during the Roman Empire, but the real “slave-trade” started in 16th century with the advent of the Christian European countries.

Edward A. Alpers of the University College of Dar-es-salaam, writes that “as we draw a distinction between the incidental trade in slaves which trickled across the Sahara from West to North Africa as long as the days of the Roman Empire, on the one hand, and the phenomenon which we call the West African slave-trade, on the other hand, so we must draw a similar distinction for East Africa.”<sup>1</sup>

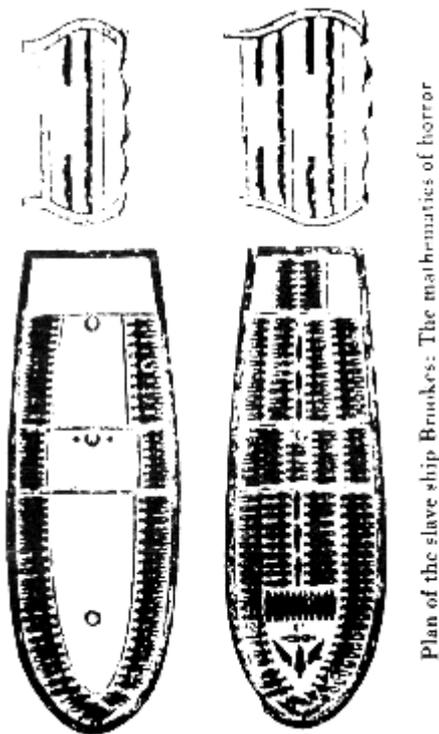
Walter Rodney also of University College, Dar-es-salaam, begins his booklet *West Africa and the Atlantic Slave-Trade* with the following words: “It must always be remembered that the Atlantic slave-trade was an event in world history, involving three continents – Europe, Africa and America. The people who set out to seek slaves were Europeans coming from every country between Sweden in the north and Portugal in the south. The Portuguese arrived in West Africa shortly before the middle of the fifteenth century. Immediately, they started seizing the Africans and taking them to work as slaves in Europe, particularly in Portugal and Spain. But the most important developments took place in the sixteenth century, when Europeans capitalists realised that they could make enormous profits by using the labour of Africans to exploit the wealth of the Americas.

As a result, Africans were taken to North America, Central America, South America and the Caribbean to provide slave-labour in gold and silver mines and on agricultural plantations growing crops of sugar, cotton and tobacco. This notorious commerce in human beings lasted altogether for more than four hundred years, since the Atlantic slave-trade did not come to end until the late 1870's.

“Much can be said about the way that the Atlantic slave-trade was organised in Europe, and about the vast profits made by countries such as England and France. A lot can also be said about the terrible journey from Africa to America across the Atlantic Ocean. Africans were packed like sardines on the slave-ships, and consequently died in great numbers.”<sup>2</sup>

And what a sardine! For details of these packing, read the following:

One of the most chilling of all the appalling documents is 'The Plan of the Brookes', a notorious eighteenth-century scheme for stacking slaves into the slave-ship 'Brookes'...By a precise mathematical calculation, the technology of horror is laid out – feet and inches, standing room and breathing space assigned with lethal concern for maximum profit. A Mr. Jones recommends that 'five females be reckoned as four males, and three boys or girls as equal to two grown persons. ..every man slave is to be allowed six feet by one foot four inches for room, every woman five feet ten by one foot four...' and so it continues until every scrap of flesh is accommodated – 451 in number. But an Act of Parliament allows for 454. So the document concludes that, 'if three more could be wedged among the number represented in the plan, this plan would contain precisely the number which the act directs.'<sup>3</sup>



Once the Africans landed on the other side of the Atlantic, they were really in a “New World”, full of oppression and brutality. The following revelations may be helpful in understanding the situation prevailing at that time. Rodney writes:

“From the time of the arrival of the [Christian] Europeans until 1600, about one million Africans were carried away in slave-ships. During that period, the Portuguese were the chief slave-traders in West Africa. They either took Africans to Brazil, which they owned, or else they sold them to the Spanish settlers in Mexico, Central America, South America and the Caribbean Islands. In the seventeenth century, some seven to eight million West Africans found their way across the Atlantic. The Dutch joined the Portuguese as the leading slave-traders in the seventeenth century, and in the following century the British were the biggest slave-traders. By the time that the Atlantic slave-trade was at its height in the eighteenth century, British ships were carrying more than half of the total of slaves, leaving the rest to be divided up between the Dutch, the French, the Portuguese and the Danes.

“By the nineteenth century, there was another change of the people who took the leading role in

exploiting Africa. The European countries themselves were not as active in the slave-trade, but instead Europeans who had settled in Brazil, Cuba and North America were the ones who organised a large part of the trade. The Americans had recently gained their independence from Britain, and it was the new nation of the United States of America which played the biggest part in the last fifty years of the Atlantic slave-trade, taking away slaves at a greater rate than ever before.

“When the Atlantic slave-trade began on the West African coast, it took the form of directed attacks by Europeans on Africans living near the shore. When the first Portuguese sailors reached the coast of what is Mauritania, they left their ships and hunted the Moors who lived in that region. In reality, this was not trade at all – it was violent aggression. However, after being surprised on a few occasions, the Africans on the coast naturally kept watch for their European attackers and defended themselves vigorously.

Within a very short while, the Portuguese came to realise that raiding was a very unsafe manner of trying to obtain slaves. Besides, they also wanted gold and other African commodities, which they could acquire only by trading peacefully. So instead of raiding, the Portuguese considered offering the manufactured goods in order to encourage the Africans to exchange local products and to bring African captive to the European ships. Not only the Portuguese, but all other Europeans found that from their point of view this was the best way to obtain goods in Africa; and it was in this way that they laid their hands on so many million Africans.”<sup>4</sup>

Commenting on this aspect of the slave-trade the writer says that, “One of the most important things is to recognise the very painful and unpleasant fact that there were Africans who aided and partnered the Europeans in enslaving other Africans. It means that we cannot take the simple attitude that the whites were the villains and blacks were the victims. A useful parallel which would help in the understanding of what took place in West Africa during the centuries of slave-trading can be found in Africa today, where many leaders join with the European and American imperialists to exploit the great majority of the African people.

“In the long run, West Africans were reduced to the state of 'sell or be sold'. Here the question of firearms was particularly important. To be strong, a state needed firearms, but to get firearms from the Europeans, the Africans had to offer slaves. African rulers found themselves selling slaves to get guns to catch slaves to buy more guns. This can be described as a 'vicious circle'. It does not entirely excuse the African rulers who helped the Europeans, but it explains how in the end they were not so much the partners of the Europeans but rather their servants or lackeys.”<sup>5</sup>

And what was the church doing all that time? Hear the same author commenting: “Because there was so much profit to be made by taking slaves from Africa, Europeans refused to listen to their consciences. They knew about the suffering that was inflicted upon people in Africa, on the slave-ships and on the slave-plantations of the Americas, and they were aware that to sell their fellow human beings could not be morally justified.

Yet the Christian church came forward with excuses for the slave-trade. Many priests themselves carried on slave-trading, especially in Angola, and many others owned slaves in the Americas. The only reason the Catholic Church could give for its actions was that it was trying to save African souls by baptising the slaves. The Protestants were worse, for they did not even make it clear that they accepted that the Africans had a soul. Instead, they supported the view that African slave was a piece of property like furniture or a domestic animal. There is no part of the history of the Christian church which was more disgraceful than its support of the Atlantic slave-trade. [6](#)

According to the Lloyd's List, slaves were most decidedly considered to be a cargo, and very precious. Policies taken out at Lloyd's insured slaves for as much as 45 pounds each – a considerable sum in early 18th century England.



To prevent them escaping, or to punish them, extraordinary devices such as shown here were used both in West Africa and the West Indies. [7](#)

There were always a few individuals who protested against the Atlantic slave-trade right from the beginning; but governments and traders paid no attention to them during the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It was not until the late eighteenth century that serious attempts were made to put a stop to this trade.

James Boswell, trying to refute the arguments of abolitionists, writes in his *Life of Johnson* that, “The wild and dangerous attempt which has for some time been persisted in order to obtain an act of our legislature, to abolish so very important and necessary branch of commercial interest, must have been crushed at once, had not the insignificance of the zealots who vainly took the lead in it, made the vast body of Planters, Merchants, and others, whose immense properties are involved in that trade, reasonably enough suppose that there could be no danger. The encouragement which the attempt has received excites my wonder and indignation; and though some men of superior abilities have supported it, whether from a love of temporary popularity, when prosperous; or a love of general mischief, when desperate, my opinion is unshaken.

To abolish a status which in all ages God has sanctioned, and man has continued, would not only be robbery to an innumerable class of our fellow-subjects; but it would be extreme cruelty to the African Savages, a portion of whom it saves from massacre, or intolerable bondage in their own country, and introduces into a much happier state of life; especially now when their passage to the West Indies and

their treatment there is humanely regulated. To abolish that trade would be to shut the gates of mercy on mankind.”<sup>8</sup> The humanely regulated treatment and mercy shows itself in the details and diagrams given above!

- <sup>1.</sup> Alpers, Edward A., East African Slave–Trade (Dar–es–salaam: The Historical Association of Tanzania, 1967), p. (?)
- <sup>2.</sup> Rodney, Walter., West African and the Atlantic Slave–Trade (Dar–es–salaam: The Historical Association of Tanzania, 1967) p. (?)
- <sup>3.</sup> Newsweek (March 15, 1965) p. 106.
- <sup>4.</sup> Rodney, op. cit., pp. 4–5.
- <sup>5.</sup> Ibid, p. 7f.
- <sup>6.</sup> Ibid, p. 22.
- <sup>7.</sup> Lloyd's List, 250th Anniversary Special (1734–1984), April 17, 1984, London, p. 149.
- <sup>8.</sup> Boswell, J., Life of Johnson (N.Y.: Modern Library Edition, 1965) p. 365.

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