

## The culture of slavery in traditional context and globalised society

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### Abstract

The culture of slavery is a product of functional dynamics in human society that seeks to sustain unbalanced power relations among interacting persons for political, economic, social or intellectual benefits. This reality is part and parcel of human history and every epoch has to deal with slavery based on its cultural anthropological resources. This paper proposes the argument that in human history the dynamics of the culture of slavery is similar; but the difference consists in the material of domination at the behest of every age or civilisation. Consequently, this work seeks to deconstruct the culture of slavery in traditional African societies and the emerging global society so that their dynamics of slave culture may stand out. Robert Merton's theory of structural functionalism, and Orlando Patterson's theory on slavery and race theories are used as the theoretical frameworks for understanding the culture of slavery. With this, the x-ray of the dysfunctions of the culture of slavery is germane so that the various means of freedom or controlling it in the twenty-first century could be arrived at.

**Keywords:** slavery, cultural dynamics, globalised society, material of domination, traditional society.

## 1. Introduction

Slavery is an unjust institution and handiwork of humanly complex relationships. O. Patterson (1982) argues that at all times; these cultural dynamics force the weaker class to suffer injustice because of the inordinate desire of the powerful in society to seek socio-economic leverage over others. Driven by avarice and the desire to dominate the other person for certain unjustifiable reasons, human beings invented a social system of control in its history known as slavery. According to E. Reynolds (1993), this reality is an impulse of avarice and desire for dominion that has shaped the dynamics of slavery in every historical epoch. This instinct to control the other for personal or corporate interest has created a hierarchical and complex system of relationship among human beings that has metamorphosed into slave institution and slave society thereby giving birth to slaveholding population. Thus, E. Dal Lago and C. Kastari (2018) describe slavery as a historical process in all epochs whereby opportunistic individuals or systems intentionally control human resources for personal ends without paying close attention to the ethos of fairness, equity and justice.

The question of slavery is a perennial one and it seems this has come to stay with varied structural adaptation according to the self-perception of human beings. This is so because slavery in every age takes commodification of existence as its linchpin that constantly shifts the margins of that which could be generally accepted as social ethos. It is not an understatement to aver that slavery is the social burden of every epoch. Consequently, every age has to deal with its own burden of slavery with the human, moral and social capital it has. In the view of J. Miller (2012), this historicisation of slavery explains how human actions are the defining factors in the dynamics of domination and exploitation in every generation. Despite the fact the 21st century has a globally sophisticated legal framework to tackle this retrogressive structure, the complexification of slavery makes the slaving strategies a difficult reality to deal with. And this necessitates an interdisciplinary investigation on this subject matter and a globally enforced ethical behaviour so that humanity may be truly free from it to an extent. Furthermore, J. Quirk (2011) demonstrates that these efforts have changed the reality of slavery from a marginal concern to a mainstream issue in contemporary world with primary focus on new forms of human bondage like child sex

trafficking, sex trafficking, trafficking of persons, forced labour, forced marriage, child labour, domestic servitude, debt bondage unlawful recruitment and use of child soldiers. In all these instances, there is domination of the other by the powerful class and the dispossession of what belongs to the weak and vulnerable persons in society.

In this research, the culture of slavery that shapes the economics of civilisation with weaker human persons being the ones who bear the brunt of this infamous commerce is worthy of expatiation. In view of assessing the culture of slavery in traditional context and globalised setting, it is pertinent to investigate the cultural dynamics of slavery so that one can delineate the historical string that connects this infamy in every age. In addition, the theoretical frameworks on slavery enables a better understanding of this concept and its operational strategies. With this purview, more light is thrown on the tapestry of slavery in traditional societies. Given that it is taken for granted that slavery remains a perennial culture in society, its new forms in the contemporary global world should be x-rayed. Since slavery is a social problem, it cannot be completely eradicated but controlled; hence the measures for doing this forms part of this work. Finally, the conclusion for this research remains that: the culture of slavery is sustained by unbalanced relational dynamics among classes of persons with unequal opportunities both in the traditional societies and global contexts. This reality ridicules the gains of the twenty-first-century civilisation together with its human rights claims; it therefore calls for concrete efforts towards assuaging the effects of the “slave culture” on society. The term *slave culture* as used in this work is different from what M. Childs (2001) referred to, viz. the culture of African slaves in America. Slave culture is used here as all forms of behaviours, attitudes and living strategies that promote domination, oppression, inequality and dehumanisation of persons. On a related note, E. Dal Lago and C. Katsari (2008) make distinction between society with slave and slave society. C. de Vos (2001) indicates that in the former, slaves are tangential aids in the organisation of society while in the latter; slavery is the nexus of its socio-economic life, which creates distinction between slaveholders and those who were non-slaveholders.

## 2. Cultural dynamics of slavery

Cultural dynamics of slavery connotes the various shifts that human beings have to make in their transactional lives because of changes in their socio-economic needs. Culture lives on through human beings, *ipso facto*, it changes because of factors that are controllable and uncontrollable. Slaving culture is part and parcel of earthly society and its dynamics adapts to perceived economic needs of human beings in various historical epochs. No matter how conservative a society might seem, social interactions can engender cultural dynamics that affects the life of the people and their perception of reality. The interactions of indigenous African societies with the Europeans and trajectories of trans-Atlantic slave trade changed the way Africans perceived the slave society. F. Kolapo and C. Koriech (2007) suggest that this changed African perception of slavery from domestication to commercialisation of human resources because the Europeans convinced African slave-masters that they could get more from selling their slaves to them.

The dynamics of slavery is also dependent upon cultural ecology which evinces the relationship between human beings and their environment and how these factors influence transactional culture of slavery. The neo-liberal culture and its economies reflect modern slave-master *cum* transactional dynamics. Thus, M. Lapka et al. (2012) aver that neo-liberal slaving culture does not really care about those in the chains of production and the environment that makes profit possible; it is the contemporary concretisation of how the master-slave mentality creates a dysfunctional society through the prioritisation of profit over human values and well-being. Since slavery is fundamentally a culture of domination and control, slaving at all times, notwithstanding the changes in cultural ecology remains an unjust system that human beings always struggle to be liberated from.

In slaving culture, the master-slave relationship is sustained through created asymmetric power relation and dependency that exist between them. The asymmetric power relations and dependency in question are not nature-given; they are products of humanity's sense of superiority towards its own kind. B. Behnam et al. (2017) indicate that these cultural dynamics make an individual or group of persons to arrogate to himself or themselves inherited social stature, economic advantage, epis-

temic and technological advancement in view of sustaining a stratified society. The asymmetric dynamics that characterises slaving culture remains the common denominator of slave systems at all times. The contents and the forms of their concrete expressions are dependent upon economic factors, ecological circumstances and the needs of the masters who control the affairs of society. This asymmetric power relation is equally evident in traditional societies. S. Langlois (2001) describes traditional society as a community firmly guided by customs and habits that were handed on in the past for organisation of society. In traditional societies where in attachment to customs and past cultural heritage are taken seriously, asymmetric power relation equally abounds: the perception and treatment of women, the poor and less privileged. The dynamics of these cultural patterns have metamorphosed into contemporary capitalist hegemony in socio-economic affairs globally, promotion of patriarchal systems and sustenance of patronage that remain enslaving in their fundamentals.

The contribution of Immanuel Wallerstein through his works on the analysis of world-systems fit into the hermeneutic principles of slaving culture. The world-systems are like a melange of social prisons that are products of slaving culture that is not slavery in strict sense of the word. Consequently, analysing world-systems could help one to navigate through them and enables the extrication of one's self from their shackles. I. Wallerstein (2004: 21-23) explains as follows:

*For world-systems analysis, these actors, just like the long list of structures that one can enumerate, are the products of a process. They are not primordial atomic elements, but part of a systemic mix out of which they emerged and upon which they act. They act freely, but their freedom is constrained by their biographies and the social prisons of which they are a part. Analysing their prisons liberates them to the maximum degree that they can be liberated. To the extent that we each analyse our social prisons, we liberate ourselves from their constraints to the extent that we can be liberated.*

In explaining I. Wallerstein analysis of world-systems, W. Robinson (2011) sees contemporary capitalist world-economy as networks of production and marketisation processes that bring all people in the globe into its logic and single line socio-economic structure. This globalising structure leaves those who belong to the lower socio-economic strata in a kind social prison. These persons await their liberation

from the neo-capitalist enslaving culture through the analysis of their socio-economic contexts and strategic innovative thinking that are crucial to a future with less slaving constraints. That being said, it is pertinent to turn to some theoretical frameworks on slavery.

### 3. Theoretical frameworks

Theoretical frameworks are heuristic instruments that aid the understanding and interpretation of social realities. They give perspectival approaches to reality thereby improving epistemological assessment of social concepts. Structural functionalism, slave theory and race theory are used in this work for a better understanding of slavery. Structural functionalism seeks to interpret society from the binoculars of interactions that go on among its constituent elements namely: institutions, norms, customs and traditions. This theory posits that when any of its constituents is dysfunctional, the effective organisation of society will be affected. And it is equally the case that not all the components of society work towards organic unity of its system. Because of this, some institutions and structures in society may have effective functions while others are dysfunctional in the long run. Furthermore, J. Holmwood (2005) avers that Robert Merton made the dynamics of power and conflict the key issues in functional theories. Following this line of thought, slavery is a dysfunctional institution that affects an integral progress of society. It endures because of unbalance dynamics of domination exerted by opportunistic individuals for their selfish interests. Consequently, for it to be properly managed, human beings must establish legal rules of engagements that minimise slave culture and dysfunctional feudalism. As response to this slaving culture, R. Merton (1938) encourages every society to see itself as an organic reality, *ipso facto*, the need to deal with social genesis of deviant behaviours that threatens the stability of its social structures is always paramount if social tensions are to be controlled. For this reason, J. Henslin (2005) indicates that R. Merton's logic of structural functionalism aids a holistic understanding of the changes in human societies so that their negative unintended effects could be controlled by adjustment those social structures that dehumanise and enslaves members of the community. With a holistic interpretation of one's context, the frame work of

R. Merton (1968) shows that there in every creative and thinking human person specific tendencies as desire for liberation and protest against all forms of oppression. This innate desire sustains the struggle of human beings, in every age, to extricate themselves from dehumanising shackles.

Furthermore, slavery can be explained using parasitism framework of Orlando Patterson. In this regard, O. Patterson (1982) argues that slavery remains human parasitism sustained by relational and asymmetric domination. Therefore, understanding slavery from the framework of human parasitism enables society to critique the asymmetry of unequal relations – whereby the host is always destroyed – that characterises this institution at all times. O. Patterson's framework shows that the slaving culture always benefits those who control power relations to their advantage and in doing this the host is always impoverished. This partial dependence of the parasite on the host reveals the complex web of dependency in the theorisation of slavery. The individual or group of persons with domination advantage depends on the subjugated ones for survival because without their resources, the latter cannot exist. Similarly, those subjugated by slaving structures owes their survival on the slave institution to an extent because of the patronage system that is tangential to it. Within this framework and in the long run, freedom can be negotiated or earned through effective struggles since the “parasite” is conscious of its dependence on the host.

L. Parker and C. Roberts (2005) state that the critical theory of race and ethnicity explores the connection between unequal opportunities and conflicts in society both at traditional and global level. These unequal opportunities could be historically inherited or arrogated by certain individuals or group of persons in society. Fortunately, conflicts arise when successive generations of “disadvantaged” persons are no longer satisfied with established *status quo* that is always for the advantage of particular race or ethnic group. But those who profit from race and ethnicity-based inequalities struggle to maintain the *status quo* because of the material and non-physical benefits they derive from it. Unfortunately, stabilisation of this slaving *Sitz im Leben* contributes to unfair socio-economic structures that strengthen the socio-political dominance of individuals or group of persons over others in society that are based on race or ethnicity.

Consequently, for T. Allen (1994), racism and ethnicism are forms of slaving mentality that grow from the psycho-social dominance that human beings create within a particular culture for the purpose of gaining the upper hand in the struggle for power and relevance. Critical race theory and ethnicity have one thing common: the unjust stratification of society and the attendant conflict these hierarchical dynamics create. Liberation from the slaving structures of racism or ethnicism primarily consist in the revision of narratives and establishing the fact that every human person is born equal as well as the enforcement of this truth with functional legal framework that enforces it. For instance, manumission was consequent upon change of narrative that makes the master to see his/her slave differently and thus grants him or her freedom. Similarly, the freedom narrative that is established on the fundamental equality of all human beings in various nation-states can go a long to liberating people from slaving mentality regardless of its ramifications.

#### **4. Slavery in traditional context**

In traditional society, constituent indigenous communities have limited number of persons. In this society, everyone knows his or her neighbour. For this reason, E. Adeyi (2005: 68) describes traditional societies as “those societies or elements of societies that are small scale, derived from indigenous and often ancient cultural practices. The production in these societies is mainly for subsistence, with strong cooperation among the simple division of labour (age, sex) and units of production are family, clan, and village, with consumption purpose is to satisfy basic need or ritual”. Given that these societies are populated by small number of persons, the economic system of traditional societies are not complex and highly commercialised. With its sizable population, relationships within traditional societies are more personal and the legal system is informally maintained through the elders of the various family heads that make up the community in traditional societies.

Preindustrial societies were largely traditional in the context as explained above because their economy was subsistent. Thus, for T. Wiedemann (1981), in ancient traditional context, domestication of human resources through slavery was legally permissible. This explains why slavery was acceptable in the New Testament



era and the Letter of Paul to Philemon, one of Judeo-Christian sacred text, should not be read anachronistically. From what has been discussed so far, traditional context as used in this work refers to societies that hold unto past customs and heritage with regard to culture and the culture of slavery in particular. Since the judicial system in the traditional societies was not institutionalised, freedom of slaves was left in the hands of the masters' manumission or their rebellious escape.

In ancient traditional societies, slaves were kept or acquired for various reasons. S. Akpan and N. Bubu (2019) mention that, for example, in pre-colonial traditional societies within the African continent, slaves were kept for domestic chores; as a sign of prestige; objects of sacrifice for idols, means of procreation, etc. Also, in some African traditional societies, the idea of slave society is transtemporal. This was exhibited in the burial rituals of kings whereby slaves of Efik regents (in Cross River State, Nigeria) were buried, sometimes alive, with their masters. They held this erroneous belief that in the land of the ancestors, the asymmetric power relation still holds sway. On another note, concerning procreation, T. Allen (1994) points that the status of the slaves is often changed via legal integration: marriage or adoption so that they can share in the privileges of kinship. Consequently, the status of slaves undergoes mutation according to the needs of those who own them or out rightly through manumission. In these dynamics, what matters most is the convenience of the opportunistic ones who have an upper hand in the asymmetric power relation. In addition, J. Derrick (1975) posits that this pattern sometimes continues in patron-client relationship whereby the client depends on the master for some benefices. However, a question may be asked if the globalised society is really different from the traditional society with regard to slavery.

### **5. Neo-slavery in globalised society**

Globalised society is characteristically a modern one with largely populated mass of people connected together by complex socio-economic relationships. It is morphologically different from traditional society with the mantra of interdependence among nations of the world as its buzzword. The means of production within globalised society normally aim at commercialisation of produce in view of meeting

the demands of its teeming population, the web of interdependence (military, economic, cultural, etc.) and maximisation of profits. From the analysis of M. Hardt (1998), as well as E. Dal Lago and C. Kastari (2001), the global society is the new empire through which the West seeks the control of the public and private space in contemporary and emerging international communities with the apron strings of neo-liberal economies, technologies and cultures.

Contemporary process of globalisation is a complex cultural phenomenon that has revolutionised the commodification of human existence. M. Hardt (1998) argues that in historical precedents of globalisation, the Hellenistic, Roman, Parthian and maritime European empires controlled the social, economic, political and cultural commodification of human life with weaker nations providing the capital for the world's growth. The present-day globalising society equally operates via the slave society dynamics found in the traditional contexts as explained above, but its power relation is rather driven by market economy of various capitalist systems that control it. According to M. Friedman (1962), this market economy oscillates with neoliberal spirit which hinges on the basic assumption that economic transactions will benefit the parties involved in them in as much as they enter into these commercial activities voluntarily after being reasonably informed. This is not the entire truth because *ab initio* its transactional framework is unbalanced and some of the technologies sold within the neo-liberal context create patron-client relationship that makes one part quasi-dependent on another. This happens whenever transfer of technology is not part of the commerce. Therefore, in globalised society, the pretext of homogeneity and free access to the new *highway of everything still* creates unequal power dynamics between those who control the system and their dependents. As long as greed or avarice or self-interest remains the default *cum* existential mode of present-day neo-liberal and capitalist culture, the globalised society remains the creation of the so-called developed countries that sustains the new exploitative and class relations which has become the new world order.

Despite the benefits of modernisation and globalisation, the fact remains that the asymmetrical relationship which existed between the parasitic empires and the host-colonies has taken a new form. These dynamics favour the former rather than

the latter. This asymmetrical relation, that can equally be destructive to the host, is rooted in avarice and sustained by it. In contemporary processes of globalisation, foreign aid is an example of a system that encourages neo-economic slaving structures which maintains the asymmetric functions of Western domination over developing nations. Z. Rodriguez (2011: 269-270) argues that: “[c]ritics of foreign aid have maintained that the system represents a form of neo-colonialism in which creditor nations can maintain rigid economic control over debtor states without having to cope with the messy appearances of the old colonialism”. Thus, for F. Clairmont (1992), the dynamics of neo-slavery at work here is economic control of poorer nations by the West through its global financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF). There are also other forms of neo-slavery evident in the cultural, political and educational spheres, human trafficking, immigration related issues, etc.

During the modern period of Western civilisation, the efflorescence of sympathy in humanity was largely responsible for the discourse on rights when human suffering caused by unfair power relations became unbearable. Therefore, after the modern era, human dignity upon which its rights were enshrined, was considered inviolable. Regrettably, at the global public squares, it is difficult to enforce concordant and legal agreements that promote human rights and dignity. According to F. Rodriguez (2011) and S. Moyn (2017), there is no gainsaying that the consciousness of the need for global ethics and the affirmation of human rights amidst the slaving culture of the contemporary world is a plus for contemporary civilization. Yet, M. Frost (2002) avers that the politicisation of global affairs seems to be gradually eroding this sympathy in humanity because of those who seek the control of the world order with their apron strings. For the above reasons, the reversal of slaving structures in the global context remains a cultural utopia that awaits the resurgence of not just sympathy but empathy among those in the global public space and its discourse so that the absence of global sovereign might not continue to be the reason for neo-slavery or neo-colonialism here and there. From the foregoing, the task of realistically arriving at a world with truly free citizens is an onerous one.

## 6. Towards controlling slave culture in the twenty-first century

The overarching line of thought in this paper shows that the culture of slavery in the traditional context and global world are fundamentally hinged on the dynamics of domination and control fuelled by misplaced sense of superiority, human arrogance and avarice. In addition, the neo-slavery structures of contemporary world are part of the enslaving sub-culture that is entrenched in human history and civilisations. According to F. Mueller (1984), the fallen state of human nature and the dysfunctional consequences of this reality are responsible for social problems that cause the disorganisation of society. Slavery being a social problem that could be traced to human arrogance and avarice can only be controlled but not eliminated from society.

First, the slaving and enslaving narratives of the globalising parlance need to be changed. The globalisation agenda that is cloaked with neo-liberal garb promises development and uplifting of those at the margins of development to prosperity and better wellbeing. This can hardly be entirely the case because the neo-liberal economic structure is inconceivable without the desire for domination and profit-making on the part of financially stronger partner. Concerning ethnic and racial related domination, similar slaving dynamics is at work. Hence, the counter-narrative of equality, fairness, and mutual respect should be promoted in the contemporary traditional, local, global and international relations. For M. Crossley (2000: 47), this is because the counter-narrative of ethically just society is founded on the claim that effective descriptive principle “guides human thought and action [...] hopes, dreams, fears, fantasies, planning, memories, loving, hating, the rituals of daily life”. This counter-narrative can hopefully persuade developing nations and the advanced societies to reconstruct mutual imaginations that are not based on domination but collaborative agenda that benefit the interests of all the parties involved regardless of race and ethnicity.

Narratology used as a liberating tool was instrumental to the abolition of slave trade in the overseas countries. M. Oshatz (2012) notes that an important text on the slavery and freedom reveals that the abolitionist’s preachers and advocates used counter-narrative phraseologies not found in the Bible to speak against slavery as social vice. In this narratology, they were guided by their conscience towards a deeper

understanding of divine revelation concerning slavery that was not condemned in the Bible. Similarly, the slave culture lurked in ethnic or racial domination demands counter-narratives and thinking outside the box in a compelling way so that new rules of engagement can pave the way for policies that promotes equality of citizen everywhere in the world.

Second, those who belong to the social class that promotes slaving culture, those who own the institutions that sustain this injustice and the oppressed must speak out against it. This social activism has the power of changing social imaginations in the long run. D. Acemoglu and J. Robinson (2008) argue persuasively that historical changes in the world have been successful in resistant societies because of the deconstructive campaign activities and this programme calls for collaborations by people who are ready to advocate for unfettered freedom that promotes justice and humanity. Therefore, all forms of communications media: social and mass media should be used in exposing the mechanisms of slaving cultures in the globalising world.

Third, Civil Liberty Organisations and Non-Governmental Organisations have a crucial role to play in controlling the spread of slaving culture in contemporary society. Since they are not part of institutions that promote social inequality and injustice, their interventions in challenging the *status quo* as well as holding corporate persons and bodies accountable for the dehumanisation processes maintained by the culture of slavery remain credible and effective means of liberation. C. Welch (1995) is correct to observe that since sustainable democracy is the fertile ground for the flourishing of Civil Liberty Organisations and Non-Governmental Organisations, the effects of their advocacies will not be phenomenal in countries, like Nigeria, with weak democratic institutions. Nonetheless, these organisations should not cease to create awareness and sustain the fights against neo-slavery as well as race/ethnic related social injustices that are still holding the world captive.

Fourth, the reorganisation of power relation is instrumental to the control of bondage that slavery unleashes upon those under its shackles. And education of the mind is pivotal to the eradication of mental slavery that still encumbers some free citizens in various ways. T. Lockley (2011) indicates that pro-slavery writers knew the

liberating power of education hence they supported the denial of universal rights concerning education to black slaves. Thus, one should not underestimate the capacity of education to control the slaving structures in a global scale. It does this by unmasking the lies of racial, ethnic, neoliberal claims thereby giving every human person the ability to defend himself or herself whenever the occasion arises. Education gives cultural, social and economic empowerment to human beings so that they can, *inter alia*, reverse the unbalanced power relations in the world. Consequently, governments of the world should make universal rights to education a prioritised reality so that the slavery index of the world might be reduced.

## 7. Conclusion

The slave culture and its vestiges are still discernible in traditional contexts and the global societies of the contemporary world. As a by-product of dysfunctional society wherein asymmetric relationships favour the opportunistic few, slavery is antithetical to deepest human desires such as freedom and prosperity. Furthermore, destructive parasitic relations are not sustainable in a world that embraces fairness and promotes human dignity. Therefore, new rules of engagements are needed in the emerging global order so that the damage caused by slave culture might be controlled. In view of this, there is a dire need for new narratives backed by good will and political willingness that promote new cultural policies for the world of the future if humanity truly desires to live in freedom and harmony. This ought to be the case because the human spirit will not cease to rebel against every intruder that occupies its space forcefully and, *ceteris paribus*, enslaving culture is a trespasser in the world given to humanity a gift from the Creator.

The perpetual chains that hold free human beings as captives are products of human civilisation in every historical epoch. Consequently, every society has to deal with the menace of slavery by listening to the voice of its conscience that wails when the human person is dehumanised. It is through listening to this sacred voice that a new narrative of existence will be born. The birth of new narratives can effectively engineer and sustain the desired freedom and social justice in a democratic world where there are strong institutions of governance and firm political will as humani-

ty's faithful witnesses to peace and progress. This is an urgent task because the culture of slavery only changes its contents but the dynamics remain unchanged at all times, viz. unjust domination and control of others for socio-economic reason.

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