

## **SENECA ON SLAVERY: AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE**

**By**

**Chidimma Stella Ukaulor**

**&**

**Walter U. Onumaegbu**

**Department Of Philosophy, Imo State University, Owerri**

### **Abstract**

Slavery is one of the humanistic concepts bothering the human society. Slavery can be seen as a state in which ones life and affairs are controlled by another; hence the slave is seen as a lesser being. The African society is dialectic in structure, thus there is the existence of the opposites; master (free born) and slaves. The interest of this paper is on the basic ideas of Seneca on slavery. He wrote based on the inhuman treatment meted on slaves who are humans too and therefore advocates for the abolishment of slavery, otherwise they should be treated as persons, with *voluntas* and *ratio*. When there is mutual relationship and respect between humans, there would be enhancement of values, peace and development in the society.

**Key words: Slavery, Human society, Person, Value, Slaves.**

### **Introduction**

The issue of slavery is as old as human race, society and nature, hence it is peculiar to all human society; be it the black or white, the haves and the have not's. Slavery is also one of the humanistic and anthropocentric concepts bothering the human society, based on the aphorism (Human Right Declaration) that all human beings are born free, equal and deserve fair treatments. The ironical aspect of this aphorism is that some persons are meant (if not born to) serve others, hence J.J. Rousseau ([www.google.com](http://www.google.com)) maintains that "man

is born free and everywhere in chains'.

Lucius Annaeus Seneca (4BC- AD65), an Ancient Roman statesman, philosopher and trenchant expositor of stoicism, (1996:347) like many other philosophers has observed this inequality among humans in the society; hence he is not the only philosopher who wrote on slavery. Seneca pleaded a powerful case for the treatment of slaves, hence, he appeals to readers through pathos. (It is an appeal to the heart, a plea for man to do what is right.). His contention is that slaves be regarded as individuals with different moral capacities, (1976:256). He therefore addressed the issue philosophically and adequately in his *Epistle* and his *Moral letters Lucillius*. The ultimate questions raised here include: who is a person? Are all human beings not a source of value? Does the name slave make some people lesser human beings? These questions and many of their kinds would be looked into in this work.

### **The Notion of Value**

The word value is from a Latin derivation, *Valere*, which means to be worthwhile or strong, hence a value can be seen as that which is worthwhile and the value of all values is human (human life). Thus, Ukaulor, Chidimma et al (2012:.23) explain:

A thing has value if it has some worth living because he finds to be of great value. It is these values which give him a distinct cultural personality and enables him to make some contribution to knowledge, history and civilization...

Every society has its values. In other words, these values are anthropocentric, (centered on man). The highest value in the African worldview is life, hence *Ndi-Igbo* say *Ndu bu isi* (life is the ultimate) to interpret the importance and essence of life. Some other values are rooted/ deeply in religion, culture, customs, tradition and so on

The kind of values include pre-moral value (those concrete goods things that ought to be done, in the class of values, they are the lowest and they include: beauty, wealth, and so on), moral values (those values that are essential to proper human living. These include honesty, temperance and so on).

Values are universal in the sense that values are parts and parcel of nature and nature itself is universal. So much importance is attached to values, and since humans are the value of all values, this paper looks at Seneca's idea of slavery and how it affects human dignity.

### **Seneca's thought on Slavery**

In Seneca's 47th letter to Lucilius, Seneca sees slavery as an inherent part both of human experience and of Roman society, where one fall into the power of another (an owner, a beloved, or a king). It is a wide range of condition whereby one person subordinates another, usually by the exercise of physical coercion and exerts some proprietorship, either legally or customarily. Hence: (Ep. 1-307)

I do not wish to involve myself in too large a question, and to discuss the treatment of slaves, towards whom we Romans are excessively haughty, cruel, and insulting. We treat then not as if they were men, but as if they were beasts of burden. But this is the kernel of my advice: Treat your inferiors as you would be treated by your betters And as often as you reflect how much power you have over a slave....

The slaves so to speak are socially dead; they are not recognized as persons at all.

He further praised Lucilius' treatment of his slaves, who considers them in a humanistic and compassionate way. "I am glad to learn, through those who come from you, that you live on friendly terms with your **slaves**. This befits a sensible and well-educated man like yourself. "They are slaves," people declare." Nay, rather they are men (Ep1-301).

Seneca reaches his audience by making individuals consider their own station in life. "Associate with your slave on kindly, even on affable, terms; let him talk with you, plan with you, live with you... I propose to value them according to their character, and not according to their duties. Each man acquires his character for himself, but accident assigns his duties (Ep1-309).

Seneca is critical of slaves and proposes "treat your slave with compassion, even with courtesy; admit him to your conversation, your planning, your society" (14). Therefore masters should be more "human" with their slaves by inviting them to the table. Thus: (Epistle XLvii.):

He is a slave!" But perhaps a free man in spirit. "He is a slave!" Shall that count against him? Show me a man who is not a slave; one is a slave to lust, another to greed, another to ambition; all is a slave to fear. I can show you a consular who is slave to a crone, a millionaire who is slave to a housemaid I will show you youths of the noblest birth in serfdom to pantomime players! No servitude is more disgraceful than that which is self-imposed.

He challenges his audience to realize that, (13)

“The man you call slave sprang from the same seed, enjoys the same daylight, breathes like you, lives like you, dies like you”. Men are being compared with plants originating from seeds.

He further explains that slaves should respect their masters and not fear them; hence (Ep1-311): I bid slaves respect their masters instead of fearing them. Respect means **love**, and love and fear cannot be mingled. So I hold that you are entirely right in not wishing to be feared by your slaves, and in lashing them merely with the tongue; only dumb animals need the thong. This, among other things, is a mark of good character: it forms its own judgments and abides by them....

The only significant difference between men says Seneca, lies in Virtue, whose acquisition is within anyone's control (Ep.31.11) the social condition of slavery touches only the body and not the mind. If slaves, like other men differ morally and these differences alone matter, then we must consider them as individuals and choose friend among them on the basis of character (Ep.47.15).

However, Seneca sees two distinct visions of human slavery. The first slavery is *familiariter* (47.1), as we see in the slavery which Lucilius administers and in the familial slavery of ancestral Rome (47.14). Here, the relation between the master and slave is mediated by friendship. The second slavery, the decadent, urban slavery typical of Seneca's present day, is filled with enmity and fear. It is this second slavery which inspires the graphic depictions which litter the 47th letter. The relationship characterized by fear and hatred (mutual on both accounts) creates a discord which not only alienates master and slave from each other, but each also is alienated from his or her own nature. This latter understanding of the passage will help to explain the depictions which persists throughout the letter as a whole, in which we see slaves, unsleeping and unfed,

attending a master who has eaten to the point of his own physical suffering (47.2-3), the *obsonatores* who are finely attuned to the palate and digestion of their master (47.8), and the *vini minister* who must embody boy, man, and girl (47.7). In the case of slaves, simple need is ignored while it is outstripped by the lifestyle of the master.

Seneca's closes by asking Lucilius to consider the slave's character and appeal to the reader's compassion for human beings. His argument revolves around the fact that no one is perfect. He contends that a slave cannot be blamed for the fact that he's a slave; he should be treated with dignity because he is human.

### **The Igbo-African Context**

The Igbo African society is not left out as regards the issue of slavery. Slavery prevailed during the colonial era were people (children/wards) are sold into slavery as a result of disobedience, debt, committing offences, weakness, kidnapping amongst others. Nwadike, J. and Ejike, K. (2004:123) explain:

Slavery as a social institution is as old as human society...history has it that all ancient oriental nations including Jews had their slaves. Some of these slaves were acquired by wealthy individuals and families, warriors or titled men to help in their domestic chores and activities.

Despite that, that colonial era form of slavery is no longer in vogue, there are some other forms of slavery (Neo slavery), ill human treatment and so on in the society.

Moreover, Marcus Aurelius lists slaves along with wives as a class of persons to whom one has obligation, while J.S. Mill in Shanley (1998:344) uses master and slave (master and servant) to describe the relationship between husband and wife. Mill called the

dependence of women on men the primitive state of slavery lasting on. Wife is the actual bond-servant of her husband; no less so, as far as legal obligation goes, than slaves commonly so called. Women were not free within marriage and were not truly free not to marry. Mills view of marriage as slavery suggested a significantly more complicated and skeptical views of what constituted a free choice in society than did either his own earlier works or those of his liberal predecessors. This is also in line some radical feminists (Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett, Shulamith Firestone etc) who see marriage as a barbaric and relegate women to slavery.

Also this relationship exists between some of the rich and poor, the employer and employee. The rich (employer) sees themselves as superior humans while the latter are the lesser/inferior humans. According to Hegel, (2006:349) he is the lord, who sees himself as a master, who is autonomous and relies upon his slaves not only to fulfill his needs and desires but also for his identity. Human trafficking is another neo slavery (new form of slavery), dehumanization of values in the society. Human trafficking therefore makes a mockery of the meaning and value of human lives, since humans lives are the greatest and highest value.

Both master and slaves are all persons (individual substance of a rational nature) and composite beings with volition and reason as well as with body and soul respectively. Regarding slaves as *perpetuis mercennarius* is immoral since they do not have different moral capacities like the masters.

The laws/relationship that exist between persons should be based mutual reciprocity, love and respect rather than fear. John Rawls (1996:122), opines:

The principle of justice condemns slavery as unjust based on the notion of justice as fairness. Among the political virtues, are toleration, mutual respect, a sense of fairness

and civility.

Slavery violates the principle that would be agreed to in the original position by the representatives of persons as free and equal as in the Human Right Declarations. In other words, it violates the principles that cannot be reasonably rejected by persons who are motivated to find a free and informed basis of willing agreement in political life. Any family or society with sense responsibility, honours and sense of community then should value every human being.

### **Evaluation and Conclusion**

The above has analyzed the notion of slavery in the thinking of Seneca, an Ancient Roman Philosopher and narrowed it down to the Igbo African society. It is imperative to note that this work analyzed inequality, oppression as well as man's inhumanity to man. The Institution of slavery is a hindrance to societal values, since at the centre of morality, societal development and human enhancement is human, hence, whatever affects the wellbeing of human negatively is not a value. With fair treatment/justice between person, there is egalitarianism, which creates a foundation for social friendship, foster human and societal development and thereby, making human life worthwhile.



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