



Slavery: Acquired or Ascribed Status?

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Abstract

Without Slavery as an institution the status of a “slave” would have been nonexistent. But slavery is an institution in which no sane person would patronise willingly. Yet, some individuals have found themselves perpetually subject to it generation after generation. This group of individuals, no matter how hard they try, continue to move from one form of slavery to the other. While some people are removed from slavery to leadership positions like Robert Small and Joseph in the bible, others remain perpetually tied to the institution no matter the level of violence, revolt, and destruction instituted by them to terminate their membership of that institution. The resilience and complications in this institution are made worse by some cultures which have made the status of the slave hereditary. As such, tongues have continued to wag, scholars have continued to criticize, and Philosophers have engaged in endless debates on the inhuman conditions surrounding this ignoble institution in order to end it with little or no success. Others interested in the subject have consistently debated the issue along ethical or religious lines. This research, using the interdisciplinary approaches, interrogates this effusive subject matter purely from the academic point of view. The paper relied on secondary and internet sources to arrive at the conclusion that rugged and resilient as the institution may appear, it is not beyond eradicating given the right conditions and attitudes.

Introduction

This paper focuses majorly on slavery and “slave” as a status. It is therefore necessary to begin the debate with clarification of terms.

Ralph Linton, an American anthropologist for instance, defined “status” as a position in society. “Status”, Linton argues, is one level of abstraction away from actual persons. While individuals may hold certain statuses, statuses stand independent of the individual (P No). Put differently, many people may occupy the same status and a status may persist longer than the individual who occupies it at any point in time. A status, according to Linton, is usually expressed as a noun, one that refers to a position in the political economy, for example, ruler, farmer, slave, merchant, etc. Within the family structure, statuses such as father, son, mother, etc or in some other domain such as religion, priest, shaman, etc can be found. Therefore status may mean either the sum of all the offices a person occupies or just one of those offices. The status of a ruler may refer to all of his /her positions - from heir of the previous ruler, intermediary between the people and the gods, to warrior- and it may mean the top position in a society: ruler of a polity. But what is important is that a status exists in relation to at least one other status. There cannot be a ruler without subjects; father without children (biological or social); and a farmer in a state may be able to produce crops, but cannot get them distributed without a market or a distribution system.

Linton distinguishes two ways by which status could be acquired: it is ascribed or achieved. Ascribed status, according to him, is assigned a person at birth, without consideration of the individual’s inherent abilities, often, one’s family position in society. Or it may be automatically assigned according to some characteristics that a person has no control over. Achieved status is acquired during one’s lifetime. It is the result of one’s struggle, often the acquisition of some outstanding skills through education or experience. It can also be acquired through exemplary performance of a task or by attaining an extra-ordinary feat. Status is often associated with roles or rights. Therefore, since status is inherited, roles or rights go with the inheritance. A farmer, for instance, in an ancient society has the right to own land and the duty to pay taxes, and such a person is expected to behave in a way that is deemed appropriate to these rights and duties. It is also appropriate and expected of an earthly King to beget

an heir, from alliances, perform rituals for the gods, etc. These expected roles ascribed to such statuses, are usually determined by people who are in complementary positions to the status in question and by the gods the person reports to (P. No)

There is no consensus on who a slave or on how the institution of slavery should be defined. However, there is agreement on the general characteristics of a person who should be regarded as a "slave" within many cultures. Encyclopaedia Americana sees "Slavery" as "a wide variety of conditions whereby one person subordinates another, usually by the exercise of physical coercion, and exerts some proprietorship, either legally or customarily" (P.No). Orlando Patterson defines slavery as " a relation of domination, a brutal system of exploitation and human degradation; and a special form of human parasitism" (P. No) For Paul Lovejoy, "slavery was fundamentally a means of denying outsiders the right and privileges of a particular society so that they could be exploited for economic, political and/or social purposes" (P. No) To Adamu Mahdi, a slave is simply "a person, male or female, who perform services to another person without payment and without choice of what to do, where to do it, how to do it, or when" (P. No) Okon Uya has also defined slave as " a person who, finding himself destitute of kin through certain circumstances, pledges or is forced to pledge his labour temporarily to another person in return for protection or sustenance"(p. No.).

Dave Imbua, citing Steven Yates Ray Bornert, asserted that slavery is "non-ownership of one's person and labor. It is involuntary servitude. A slave must work under a whip, real or figurative, wielded by other persons, his owner, with no say in how (or even if) his labours are compensated. His is a one-way contract. He cannot opt out of it" (p. No.). This plethora of definitions is very relevant to the subject matter of slave and slavery. The slave is a property; hence, he belongs to someone else. In some cultures, slaves were considered movable property, in others immovable property, like real estate. Encyclopaedia Britannica concludes that slaves are objects and not subjects of law because he/she was not ordinarily held responsible for

what he/she did, like an ox or ass. "He was not personally liable for torts or contracts" (p. NO.). The slave usually had few rights and always fewer than his owner, but there were not many societies in which the slave had absolutely none. The extent to which slave rights were given and limited varies from societies to society, but what appears to be the same with particular reference to the New World slave system is that such treatments are not different from that given an animal. The slave is detached from his kin and said to have no natal descent. No relatives therefore could stand for his rights, seek or get vengeance for him. The Encyclopaedia Britannica aptly described a slave as " an "outsider," "marginal individual," or "socially dead person" in the society where he was enslaved, his rights to participate in political decision making and other social activities were fewer than those enjoyed by his owner." A slave lives at the margin of society and by which position remains marginal to what goes on in that society.

The slave was deprived of personal liberty and the right to move about geographically as he desired. There were likely to be limits to his capacity to make choices with regard to his occupation and sexual partners. Slavery was usually, but not always, involuntary. Among the pre- European America especially the Magyars, Aztecs and the Incas, slaves were one of the most valuable commodities, with warfare providing the best source.

Slaves occupied the lowest social status and were sometimes sacrificed in religious ceremonies in some cultures. Men have enslaved one another for two main reasons: first, as a form of punishment, either for transgressions in social behaviour or for vanquished warriors; second, as a response to the demand for men and women to serve as labourers. Organized religion and every type of society accepted slavery as a normal part of human activity until the late 18th century.

Slaves were generated in many ways. Probably the most common means was by capture either by design, as a form of incentives to warriors, or as a way of disposing of many troops or civilians. Others

were acquired through kidnapping, raid or through pirate expeditions. Many slaves were the offspring of slaves. Some were enslaved as punishment for crime or sold to settle debts. Others were sold into slavery by their parents, relatives, or even spouses and individuals or free persons sell themselves to escape starvation. A variation in the selling of children was the publicity, either real or fictitious, of unwanted children who were then rescued by others and made slaves. Another source of slavery was self-sale, undertaken sometimes to acquire an elite position, sometimes to escape destitution, political victimization, starvation or economic hardship (source)

History

The origin (s) of slavery appears to have been lost to human memory, but archaeological study, according to the Encyclopaedia Americana indicates that "slavery existed before 2000 BC among the Sumerians of Mesopotamia, a people who later formed the cultural core of the Babylonian empire. Perhaps the oldest formal slave laws date from this period. The Christian Holy book, the Bible records that slavery came into the world shortly after the great Noah's flood as a result of the transgression of Ham which forced Noah, his father to pass a curse on him that his children will be slaves to his brother's children (source). In the view of Orlando Patterson, slavery "existed from the dawn of human history right down to the twenty first centuryProbably there was no group of people whose ancestors were not at one time or the other slave or slave holders" (p. No.).

In Asia, for instance, slavery is known to have existed as early as the Shang dynasty of 18TH-12TH century BC in China. According to the new Encyclopaedia Britannica, slavery has been studied thoroughly in ancient Han China (206 BC-AD 25), where perhaps 5 percent of the population was enslaved. It added that slavery continued to be a feature of Chinese society down to the 20th century (p.no.). Slavery was widely practised in other areas of Asia as well. The Romans inherited the institution of slavery from the Greeks and Phoenicians and expanded it with the territorial growth of the Roman Empire. In

central Europe, slavery existed in the Germanic lands until about the 15th century AD. It provided an opportunity for male prisoners who previously could have been executed after battle to work the farms. Encyclopaedia Americana explains that in pre-colonial Africa slavery were divided into two categories: Muslim and non Muslim. Muslim slavery derived its sanction from the injunction of the Koran where the Muslim faithful were demanded to convert the heathen by suasion if possible, but by force if necessary. In the Muslim slave system, the slave was accepted into the master's household and his status was not different from that of the master's legitimate child or ward. The master not only educates his slave but also used royal terms in addressing him/her. Muslim slaves had no demeaned status. Some were members of such elite group like Janissaries, the standing army of the Ottoman Empire. Others enjoyed great political powers. In non Muslim Africa, the social position of the slave approximated that of Africa north of the Sahara - slaves formed part of the extended family system, sharing the duties of other members of the family and having children accepted as free and equal members of the community.

Slave as Acquired Status

Status is said to be acquired or achieved when it is attained during one's lifetime as a result of one's contribution to society. It is the result of one's struggle, often the acquisition of some skill through education. This is the most available, visible and common status of a slave. This category of slaves forms the foundation of slavery that was or is treated with coercion. They were individually seized in a war or raided, kidnapped, or enslaved through judicial and religious means. Toyin Falola agrees that "Enslavement in the Bight of Biafra was much more commonly the result of judicial rulings, orders of oracles and above all kidnapping" (p. no). Other means by which slaves were acquired include acts of taking free persons when they offered free passage to ports, theft of children, child abandonment and sale, self enslavement, punishment for crimes against social norms, etc. They are treated with exceptional violence, denied freedom in its entire

ramification including the right to their own sexuality and, by extension, to their own reproductive capacities, inflicted with physical injuries, regulate their feeding and in some cases were castrated. Where they were allowed to marry, their children inherited the slave status and form the next category we shall look at after. This is the class of slaves Yates and Bornert, as stated earlier, defined as a involuntary servitude and that a slave must work under a whip, and has no say in how his/her labour is compensated, in fact, a one way contract such a person cannot opt out. No relative can stand in for him/her and no one can seek vengeance for him/her and such a person is usually property of the owner. This category of slaves is not different from animals as no law protects them except that formulated by its owner. In some cases they have no names but identification marks, have no access to what they produce as their mouths are usually padlocked and for fear of nature, they were clothed only on the hazardous part of the body.

Finally, although slaves are the least in the social strata, ordinarily of different race, ethnicity and nationality, the role of slaves in the economy and society cannot be over emphasised. Their activities become more important by the year, resulting in the transformation of the social, economic and political order of the world. The external trade was associated with this transformation. Slaves may have been maltreated, dehumanised, used as zombies, etc. This simply treatment made them who they become; no economy of this world will claim not to have been influenced or impacted on by the activities of the slaves. This they did by accepting their status and turn their disadvantages into advantages and their masters and their children who had manual labour skill on the disadvantage. Thanks to the mechanized and computerised world.

Slave as Ascribed Status

Linton distinguishes two ways of acquiring status: either it is ascribed or achieved (p. No.). Ascribed status is assigned a person from birth, without consideration of the individual's inherent abilities, often,

arising from one's family position in society. Or it may be automatically assigned according to some characteristics that the person has no control over, for instance, progressing from being an infant to a child and then a youth. As property, a slave is chattel. That is to say that a slave could be bought or sold. Slaves belong to their masters who, at least theoretically, have complete power of control over them. No group, be it religious, kinship unit, or other groups in the society can protect them as legal persons. Some household slaves sometimes merged, in varying degrees with the families of their owners, so that boys become adopted sons or women become concubines, or at the very best, wives who give birth to heirs. In some other households, even when such children are born, they remain slaves. As further explained by Paul Lovejoy, "Masters had the right of sexual access to women slaves, who became concubines or wives, depending upon the society." Slaves were fully subservient. Their masters controlled their sexual and reproductive capacities. Therefore children born of slaves are automatically the property of the owner or the children of their owner as the case may be. This latter group could form the basis for which Aristotle said that certain people are naturally free, others are naturally slaves. And that for the latter, slavery is both just expedient and necessary (p. No.). Also, it is this group of slaves that Peter Lee in *Konyo Korea* admonished that "in general, the offspring of the lowest class are of a different stock. Be sure not to allow the people of the lower class to become emancipated. If they are permitted to become free, later they will certainly get government positions and gradually work into important offices, where they will plot rebellion against the state; if this admonition is ignored, the dynasty will be endangered". In order that this status could be maintained, there was even legislation in Konyo against lower class for fear that some may flee and escape their status. The foregoing clearly shows that it is to this category of slaves that status is a matter of ascription rather than acquisition.

Lovejoy further maintains that "slavery is fundamentally a means of denying outsiders the rights and privileges of a particular society so that they could be exploited for economic, political and/or social

purposes.” Also captivating are the views of Orlando Patterson in *Slavery and Social Death* (1982) that slavery is “one of the most extreme forms of the relation of domination, approaching the limits of total power from the viewpoint of the master, and of total powerlessness from the viewpoint of slave” (p.No.). He characterizes slavery as a form of oppression. He further categorizes slavery into three conditions which to him together constitute what he called ‘social death’. The first condition, according to him, was that the subjugation of slaves is underpinned by violence, and the ability of their owners to physically coerce them. Second, that slavery involves ‘natal alienation’, i.e. a complete removal of family and community ties, leaving them without any form of legal or social protection or the ability to inherit or pass on rights or property. Finally, slaves are considered socially debased (‘dishonoured’), whereas their owners are seen as social elites (honourable).

Patterson’s definition of slavery is useful because it distinguishes between slavery and other forms of ‘unfree’ labour: indentured labourers, pawns, debt servants, or other ‘servile’ groups, for example, those who did not experience ‘natal alienation’. In medieval Europe, for example, pawns were offered by their families as surety for loans, but this did not entail natal alienation as slaves were able to rely on their family connections to ensure their safety during the loan period and were returned to their former lives after the loan was fully paid. Indentured servants in early modern Europe and its colonies were protected, at least in theory, by contracts which fixed the terms of their employment, and therefore had access to legal protection.

However classified, categorized, divided or perceived the important thing to bear in mind about slavery is that exploitation, which cut across all forms of slavery and that the institution, took countless forms and variables within given period, be it historical or contemporary. Another important point to note, as argued by Paul Lovejoy, is that slavery was fundamentally a means of denying outsiders (emphasizing their alien origins) the right and privileges of a particular society so that they can be exploited. If such is the

institution of slavery, then, asylum seekers, the exiles (self-imposed, government exiles, migrants, etc) are all slaves in their own rights because they are all deny basic rights and privileges including access to some areas. By this assessment, Lovejoy has also paired slavery with racism, apartheid and other unwholesome human practices. He further stated that in Europe, slaves were perceived as racially distinct despite acculturation. If this is anything to go by, then, the number of slaves will continue to increase against that of slave owners and its abolition is not at sight even in the next century.

Conclusion

Slavery is a complex term to define. In whatever form it may appear: chattel, forced labour, debt bondage, serfdom, human trafficking, servile marriage, etc, it negates freedom and connotes oppression, exploitation, and degradation. As such the institution deserves to be completely abolished. But the question to be answered is: are there people who are predestined to be slaves by God? If the answer is in the affirmative, then, we can as well forget about its abolition since in "God's case, no appeal". But if the answer is in the negative, how do we ensure that it is abolished and completely eradicated? Attempt to answer the question posed above will polarize our views. It is the view of this paper that slavery should be abolished in all its ramifications. Doing so will render the status of those who find themselves within that institution (slave), obsolete.

Those who believe in God, especially adherents of the Christian faith, would confirm that the Holy book, the Bible, told us the story of a man after God's heart, Noah, who placed a curse on his son, Ham that his children (Ham's) will be slaves of his brother's children. This curse was not revoked when Noah passed on. And since God answers the prayers of the faithful, the implication of this curse on Ham's children is that they were made slaves forever. Another consequence of Noah's curse and eventual death is that it established, permanently, the institution of slavery. As such, we can do nothing to curtail or change it. Should this Christian belief differ from that of other religions will be addressed in our next oncoming article.

Without prejudice to the above argument, the same holy book tells us of a Joseph who was sold into slavery by his brothers. In the course of time, Joseph turned out to become a prime minister thus implying that similar divine visitation may come upon the descendants of Ham. But these are things spiritual different from scholarship which denies assumptions. More importantly, of course, there is no “if” history since history is an evidence based discipline. The science of history demands that scholars know the way things work to avert repetition of events. The days of super-ordinate finger of God working in men’s affairs to create history are forever gone. Therefore the pronouncement of Noah upon the children of Ham remains irrevocable.

Accordingly, this brazen fact and truth of history stirs us in the face. We must provide a solution to this endemic institution of slavery and in doing this, we advocate a situation where: (a) the world would voluntarily and unequivocally dismantle the institutions of nobility, dynasty and the caste system (b) the status of house-help/maid would be abolished and respect for all labour agreements equally promoted and (c) due emphasis would be placed on equality before the law as human dignity, integrity and equality before God remains not negotiable. There will emerge, it is hoped, some respect for the human person should the above recommendations be enforced.

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