

The System of Slavery in Traditional Societies: its nature and dynamics among the Igbo People of Southeastern Nigeria.

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ABSTRACT

There was, essentially, as slavery and slave trade is known in the contemporary times, no slavery and slave trade in the Igbo pre-European traditional society. Slaves, as there were, existed, but as a result of cultural social conflict resolution and punishment for heinous crimes. It was the advent of European contact with the Bight of Biafra and their demand for slaves that introduced full scale slave trading and slavery into Igboland. The political economy and social arrangement of the Igbo - horizontal and equalitarian - could not make for or support slaving. This European contact significantly upset and distorted Igbo society and economy in a macabre fashion. Determined effort was made to fend off slavers across Igboland, but without sufficient success to stem the trade and keep it at bay, by historical accounts, 1.4 million Igbos from being taken as slaves and transported to involuntary servitude in the Americas and elsewhere, from the 1500s to the abolition of the dastardly trade in the mid-1850s. This essay would trace and examine the phenomenon, nature, and dynamics of slavery and slave trade in Igboland, located in the Eastern part of Nigeria. This essay would be hoisted upon the theory of slavery as an explanatory framework based on Orlando Patterson's Social Death theory. The method of longitudinal historical analysis would be employed; and, the subject of the study would be presented through descriptive, analytical approaches.

INTRODUCTION

This essay would examine and explain the practice of slavery among the Igbo people of Southeastern Nigeria. Slavery, in various forms, is ubiquitous in the ancient and early modern world. Its forms, causes and expressions have been articulated by many theorists and commentators. It is also prevalent in the modern world; and, its impact and vestiges on many societies is still evident in the contemporary times. Slavery existed in Igboland and among the Igbo people, but its formative basis, forms and dynamics is far different from the formative basis, forms, dynamics, and expressions in other climes.

Among the Igbos, prior to the arrival of Europeans, Igbos enslaved other Igbos, usually as punishment for serious crimes, dereliction in debt repayments, prisoners of interethnic or internecine wars, or persons exchanged in lieu of war with

another clan for a murdered clan member. People who became slaves were never property but were wards of either deities or the whole community; they were largely free to associate and own property, but are sometimes sacrificed in accordance to the dictates of the cause of their enslavement. In Igboland, however, enslavement evolved and assumed new dimensions and nuances with the advent of European slavery and slave trade, which effectively commenced in the 15th century shortly after European contact with Africa and European discovery of the Americas.

The European discovery of the Americas for Europe and the attendant demand for labor for the plantations therein, shaped by surplus value (profit) based capitalist motives, came to define the nature and of slavery in the modern times; and, it has left vestiges which remains to the present

day in the nature, profile and status of Africa's political economy and place in the international milieu.

This study would investigate the formative inception, nature, process, and dynamics of slavery among the Igbo people prior to the advent of European interest and quest for slaves; it would also explain how the wake of European interest in slaves and the variance of their economic wants intensified, exacerbated and distorted the form and nature of slavery in Igboland, with important implications for the Igbos' economic, political and social condition. Essentially, it was the Europeans that instigated, necessitated and established the impetus for slavery and the slave trade in Africa in general and Igboland in particular; it was also them that sustained it as long as it lasted.

Theories of Slavery

Scholars cannot agree on the reasons for the rise of slavery. Some believe that the need for labor, especially agriculture gave rise to slavery. Others believe that political reasons gave rise to slavery, and yet others postulate that commerce gave rise to slavery. The general belief held by Historians and Anthropologists is that slavery was not important when Humankind depended on food gathering, hunting and fishing, i.e. the basic economy in the first stage of human evolution. In the interim, modern European slavery was undergirded by the need to exploit the Americas for maximum profit by seeking unpaid labor; taking Africans as slaves fulfilled this want and racism and the ideology of white supremacy underwrote it. Clearly, the Igbo people, during the pre-European intervention period, were agrarian, hunter, crafters and embraced basic subsistence economic entity. Their community, organized horizontally was equalitarian, needing no slave labor or services as such. Orlando Patterson, in *Slavery and Social Death* (1982), looked ... at slavery in terms of socio-political relationships and power dynamics in human societies. He opened Slavery and

Social Death with the statement that 'all human relationships are structured and defined by the relative power of the interacting persons [1]... Patterson stated, slavery was at a fundamental level a relation of domination. ...[2] Patterson went on to argue that slavery was not primarily an economic system, but was instead defined by three kinds of relationships of oppression that, together, constituted a 'social death' which then allowed the slave's labour or services to be employed in a new system of control. The first condition was that the subjugation of slaves is underpinned by violence, and the ability of their owners to physically coerce them. Secondly, 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 ('dishonored'), where at 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 laborers, pawns, debt servants, or other 'servile' groups, for example, did not experience 'natal alienation', as well as chattel slavery. "Slavery and the Slave Trade have been age old institutions and practices in almost every continent in the world. Orlando Patterson states: There is nothing notably peculiar about the institution of slavery. It has existed from before the dawn of human history right down to primitive of human societies and in the most civilized. There is no region on earth that has not at some time harbored the institution. Probably there is no group of people whose ancestors were not at one time slaves or slave holders. Slavery was firmly established in all the great early centers of human civilization (*Slavery and Social Death-A Comparative Study*, 1982:vii).The earliest known legal documents concerned not the sale of land, houses, animals, boats and such like, but the sale of slaves. In Mesopotamia for example, the sale of slaves was known from 2300 B.C.

Slavery and Slave Trade in Post-European Contact Period

Igboland is among the areas of West Africa that experienced the most intensive slave-trading activities during the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Although the total number of Africans enslaved remains unknown, available estimates suggest that about 637,500 Igbo slaves, amounting to 75 percent of the total shipments from the Biafran hinterland, landed in the Americas between 1640 and 1800 [3]. Furthermore, ex-slaves of Igbo ancestry constitute a majority of the population in Bonny, Okirika, and many other eastern delta states that served as depots and exchange centers for European merchants. Much is already known about how the slave trade was organized in the Igbo hinterland and its impact on local communities [4]; [5]; [6]; [7]; [8]. As in all vices wherein substantial profits stand to be made, European slavery found some unscrupulous persons in Igboland and elsewhere who were willing allies in the dastardly trade; such people, with the encouragement and equipment's where able to conduct slave raids , carry out kidnappings through subterfuge and force of arms to procure, for the Europeans,

The slave trade in the Igbo region commenced with the appearance of the first Portuguese Ships in about 1517. There were multiple different ways that people were gathered or taken to be sold off to the Europeans. Most of the slaves that were taken from the Bight of Biafra were Igbo peoples. While some people were taken during raids and wars, it was not the most common way for people to become enslaved, contrary to popular belief. Possibly, one of the more common ways for people to become enslaved was to be sold off. For example, if a thief was caught in a village, the person would be sold to the slave traders by the elders. People were also sold by the community for committing sundry other taboos. The elders would then use the money for the betterment of the community. Another common way to be brought into slavery was to be sold, or "pawned" to settle

debts. Children were often used to settle these debts.

Kidnapping is also a common way to be forced into slavery. Slave traders would often seek out children who were alone, or small groups of people who were traveling and ambush them. This forced people to have to travel in rather large, armed, groups to protect themselves. Although this is similar to war and raiding, it is at a much smaller scale. Children who were home alone while their parents were working were especially easy targets for the slave traders. ...Adults were the most common ones taken, amounting to roughly 85% of the total slave trade from this region, children only made up about 15%. The main reason for this was because adults were already capable of performing hard labor, and had better chances of surviving the grueling journey across the sea. It is estimated that a total of 1.4 million Igbo people were transported (via European ships) across the Atlantic in the era of Atlantic slave trade [9]. Most of these ships were British [10]

The dynamics of slavery and slave trade in Igboland and prior to the arrival of Europeans and pursuit of slaves was starkly different, but assumed a different form after the European demand for slaves in terms of depth, latitude and intensity. In effect, European slavery distorted and disturbed significantly the economic and social structure of Igboland. But, for the arrival of Europeans and their demand for slaves, the geographical location, equalitarian social and political structure of the Igbo people made slavery virtually nominal even in practice; there, however, were slaves for other social reasons: war, certain traditional practices, taboos, crime and punishment, etc. European incursion into the Bight of Biafra and demand for slaves altered and upset the social-economic balance in Igboland in ways that this study would explain in the short run.

From a geographical standpoint, Igboland is insular and remote and inaccessible during the pre-European era. It is nestled

in the rain forest region far away from the coastal areas and distant from the powerful Yoruba and Benin kingdoms. Harnessing slaves from this geographical location was very onerous and the character, customs and traditions of the Igbo, especially their egalitarian nature made limiting or dissuade slave holding. Essentially, there was no enabling social or economic basis for slavery and slave trade in the pre-European era.

The political and economic framework of Igboland, prior the arrival of Europeans in the early 16th century the Igbo people lived in an egalitarian environment and made policy by consensus. The society was agrarian and there were no powerful kings and no hierarchy of social stratification that could lend itself to the oppressive institution of slavery and slave trade; rather, the system was horizontal. Slaves, such as there were, were captives in inter-tribal wars, criminals, or taboo violators or murderers who may be offered to the injured community as compensation for the murdered member of the community. Such persons would be considered community servants, owned by no one in particular unless they are handed to a family as a compensation for a murdered family member [11].

Furthermore, the Igbo system of jurisprudence was similar to the Mosaic Law in that it did not provide much leeway for those found guilty. An individual, who committed homicide for example, might be killed or sold into slavery, unless he/she paid adequate compensation to the injured family, and carried out a protracted and expensive ritual cleansing ceremony in Ala shrine (Isa Ihu, or washing one's face) [12]. The tragic fate of Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1984) after he had committed manslaughter, clearly illustrates how rigidly the laws of Ala were enforced. In spite of the towering heights he had attained in the Umuoṣa clan, Okonkwo had to go into exile with his family to his maternal home, undergo ritual cleansing, and pay painful

penalties, including the destruction of his yams and his compound [13]. Individuals who wanted neither to take refuge in Ala shrine and become Osu (cult slaves) nor to go into exile had an option left for them to save their lives. They might escape say at night to a distant place to found new homes, and continue to live as free citizens. The escapees are associated with the origins of many communities like the Ogwashi-Ukwu and Ibusa of western Igboland, the Ugboko of Udi, the Osu clan of Mbano, and the Umuru and Umogba of the Ikwerre-Etche axis [14].

The traditional Igbo economy rested on three major sectors namely agriculture, non-agricultural production and trade. The manner the Igbo worked and controlled her economy over the centuries attracted comments about the character of the Igbo as a people. As it is still is to this day, the enterprising nature and disposition of the Igbos, as well as their mercantilist assiduousness, agility and ingenuity is legendary. This was aptly captured in Hugh Crows comment. This race is of a milder and engaging disposition than the other tribes particularly the Quaw, they are preferred in the West India colonies for their fidelity and are the most industrious of any of the tribes in the colonies [15]. Hence, they were highly sought after by slavists, but their tendency to resist enslavement even after placement in the plantations of the new world was well known and it made the slavists leary to take the Igbo a slaves; however, many were still taken, regardless of their revolts, suicides, resistance in the Americas, their value as hardworking people far outweighed the drawback of their resilience in general. This was an observation by a slave dealer about the Igbo. There was also an account of the famous ex-Igbo slave, Olaudah Equiano who wrote about his people [the Igbo] as contained in his popular *Interesting Narratives*. He talked about the economic activities engaged by his people. According to him, Agriculture is our chief employment; and everyone, even the children and women are engaged in it, our

land is uncommonly rich and fruitful and produces all kinds of vegetables in great abundance [16].

The above observations about the Igbo were quite appropriate. The diligent and hard-working characters of the Igbo were encouraged and complemented by the benefits of their fruitful and conducive environment richly endowed with fertile soil for agriculture, as well as various solid mineral resources such as iron ore, salt-lakes, palm trees, cotton, clay soil and screw pine (padamus), that encouraged the development of local crafts and industries in the area had an environment free from any natural barrier. Thus free movement of people within and outside the area for the purposes of trade and other economic activities was guaranteed. These flourishing economic and environmental outfits in Igbo land must have provided the enabling conditions and they must have had the political and economic organization which made the requisite trade possible since the goods had to be carried over long distance. Moreover, the people undoubtedly had iron tools and

weapons with which they exploited their productive environment. [17]

Perhaps, albeit in a rudimentary way, Igbos did participate in the sale and capture of slaves. But, significant and effective acquisition of people for slavery were actually carried out by Berbers, Arabs and Fulanis (Fuldes) who are of non negro stock and ravaged their negro neighbors for resources to purchase ivory, make money and provide domestic labor. They used cavalry, horses and guns purchased from or provided by Europeans for such macabre and cruel quest. Their role in slave raiding is extensively documented in the work, Cardinal LeVigre and the African Slave Trade, edited by Richard F. Clerke; London, Longman, Greene and Co. 1734. In the interim, Elizabeth Isichei's oral history notes of interview of an Igbo yielded important information about the nature and dynamics of Igbo participation in slave trade in the aftermath of European intervention in Africa and somewhat before that time. The interviewee noted that:

Our people traded extensively in slaves. It was a dangerous trade, but very profitable. It was dangerous, because you must be strong enough to overpower your victim. Secondly, you must be prepared to risk your life, wresting children from their parents, and so on. In fact, slaves were obtained in various ways - by kidnapping, through wars, through punishment for crimes and breach of taboos, for failure to pay debts. Parents even sold their children, for want of food. My father told me that one occasion he followed his father on one of these expeditions that took them from Enugwu-Ukwu to Agbaja, and thence to Ubulu, and then to Eke Imoha in Abakaliki. When they came to Agbaja, one man wanted an .Ozo title to be conferred on him. He said that the members of his age grade were deriding him because he had not taken an .Ozo title. This man had to sell two of his children in exchange for the Ozo title. There was another episode when a man had so many children, and he had to ask them to buy one of his children in exchange for one cow. ...Our people had no internal market for slaves. You know we belong to Umunri and it would be contrary to our tradition for slaves to be sold in our market. Yes, at times our people kept slaves for domestic purposes. In such a case the owner of the slave might sell one of the children of the slaves [18].

Influences of Slave Trade in Igbo Society

By the 19th century, negative developments started to creep into the

market system, following the advent of the European traders and the subsequent introduction of capitalist system in Igbo land in particular and Nigeria at large.

Capitalism is said to be an economic system based on private rather than state ownership of business and transport services, with free competition and profit

- making⁴¹. Unbridled quest for profit infiltrated and indeed permeated the commercial as well as the socio-political lives of the Igbo [19].

“Igbo economy like most economies world over started as a local phenomenon. It was organized in three major sectors, namely, agriculture, non-agricultural production, and trade. All these sectors prospered in the precolonial period, taking care of the needs of the people at the local, village group and Igbo national levels. The economy began to face threats and challenges since the inception of European influences in the area from the 17th century onwards. Local and external factors contributed immensely to the down trends of the economy. But the external factors played greater damage to the economy than the local factors. For instance, the crushing roles of slave trade, colonialism and the associated problem of importation of European made goods did not augur well with the economy” [20]

Efforts to Fight Slavers in Igboland

According to Equiano, he had undergone some military training, including shooting and throwing javelins. Presumably, he and other young boys, after their training, were expected during their adolescent years to become members of the local militia responsible for defending their community against the incursions of slave raiders and other agents of violence. The militia was equipped with “fire-arms, bows and arrows, broad two-edged swords and javelins” [21]. Equiano also revealed that some children acted as scouts, helping in the absence of their parents to reconnoiter the movement of the slave raiders [22]. The concerted, vigorous and assiduous effort to fight slavers and slavery in Igboland is a testimonial that this obnoxious practice and the unscrupulous entities behind it were unwelcome in the Igbo society and that slavery was not a practice in Igboland prior to its introduction by Europeans, beginning with the Portuguese in about 1517; then, the British, the Dutch and the Spaniards. A majority of the slaves they recruited were obtained by raids, kidnapping, and at times, slave wars involving the Abam. According to oral tradition, Enwelana, the priestly king of the Nri (Eze Nri), was so deeply touched by the loss of human lives and the socioeconomic dislocations caused by the Abam that he appealed to Okolie Ijoma of Ndikelionwu, the leading Aro slave dealer, who engaged the Abam’s services to end the slave trade. But as Okolie Ijoma failed

to heed the warning, the Eze Nri is said to have pronounced a ritual curse on him and the Abam, declaring them unwanted persons in his domain [23]. The curse may not have stopped the raids, but it put the Aro and Abam in greater physical jeopardy, since anyone in Nri was free to attack and even kills them without being accused of committing murder and forced to carry out a ritual cleansing ceremony in the shrine of the earth goddess. “Their response was to adopt the strategy of the fox and wage a cold war against the Abam by avoiding direct military confrontations with them. The strategy involved dropping poisoned food, water, and wine for the Abam in strategic routes and other places they often used to invade the town. This strategy terrified the Abam, who mysteriously died in large numbers before an invasion, and in consequence, they excluded the town from future military operations [24]; [25].

Abam incursions into Awka elicited a different response from its inhabitants. They mobilized themselves, forming a local vigilante group armed with snider rifles to repulse the incursions. The sound of the guns alerted the local population to an invasion and thus helped in aborting Abam raids. The Awka also built high walls around their houses to foil kidnappers. During slavery the walls not only had perforations for firing guns but towers for monitoring the movement of intruders [26]. Some communities that could not effectively defend themselves

against the Abam allied with their neighbors for their mutual defense. Typical examples are the Umuchu, consisting of IHITE, OGWUGWU, and OKPUNAACHALA—autonomous communities that are said to have collectively hired the services of a native doctor, not only to cement their unity but to prevent Abam incursions with his medicine, called Ichu (lit., prevention, driving away). It was from the medicine that the community derived its present common name, Umuchu (children of Ichu). The native doctor, the tradition further claims, buried symbols of Ichu in strategic places like the central Nkwo market and Odere

Lake, which are currently called Nkwo Ichu and Odere Ichu, respectively [27].

Similarly, the Isuochi and Nneato of Okigwe formed confederations that helped them in warding off Abam invasions [28]. Such was the trepidation, unrest and sense of insecurity due to slave raids that families had to restructure their mode of social and economic operations in order to foster their collective security. The manifestation of this difficult and dangerous social environment as described by [29] is worth citing at some length. He observes that:

“ ... women carried out economic activities like farming in groups (Oru Ogbo), and those who attended distant markets were accompanied by their husbands or armed male escorts. As in other places, Ikoro was used to alert people of an impending Abam incursion. The increasing militarization of Ngwa society during the Atlantic slave trade is further evidenced by the consecration of war gods like Ike-Oha (lit., the power of the community), and the initiation of young men into its cult to protect them from bullet wounds. The young men, after their initiation, were given military training and drafted as warriors to defend their community against external aggression. Also consecrated was Udu-Agha (lit., war pot) carried by the head warrior, who alerted people of an invasion and led other warriors to attack the invaders. Warriors were also involved in other civil defense activities, including the policing of their communities. Some communities also deployed their young men and professional hunters armed with Dane guns (also called flintlocks, these were the main guns imported to West Africa during the slave trade), machetes, and other deadly weapons to help in searching possible hideouts of the Abam in the forests” [30].

Moreover, even when captured, the resistance and effort for regaining their freedom persisted; would-be slaves, who had an opportunity to escape to freedom, did so without hesitation even if it meant leaving their family members and other close relatives behind. The Osu and others provide a typical example of these escapees, responses to slavery varied ranging from “passive resistance,” to mass mobilization, involving a local

militia, scouts and others who were actively engaged in civil defense. [31]. The Igbo example clearly shows that slavery and the slave trade were the primary cause of violence in the West African sub-region for over three centuries. It is also clear that without the stiff resistance mounted by many individuals and communities, slavery would have had a more devastating impact in the hinterland.

CONCLUSION

Igbo people prospered in the pre-European era, from economic and social standpoints. Their community was egalitarian and horizontally organized. They had no need for slaves or the slave trade given their agrarian and individualistic nature, and the fact that they had no hierarchical authority that is

able to arrest and enslave in the mode reminiscent of other powerful kingdoms of the Binis and the Yorubas. The Igbo society began to face threats and challenges since the inception of European influences in the area from the 17th century onwards. For instance, the crushing roles of slave trade, and the

associated problem of fear and unrest, as well as the distortion of the daily lives and social functionality of the Igbo people this also not augur well with the economy. The Igbo example clearly shows that slavery and the slave trade were the primary cause of violence in the West African sub-region for over three centuries. It is also clear that without the stiff resistance mounted by many

individuals and communities, slavery would have had a more devastating impact in the hinterland. I have tried to show in this paper the knowledge and the practice of the institution of slavery and the slave trade in pre-European Africa, beginning with the rise of the institution with the advent of the Portuguese in the 16th century to its abolition in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

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