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Introduction

In about 1733, Izuogu Mgbokpo, an Aro merchant from Arochukwu, in the Cross River region of what is now southeastern Nigeria, settled his people, or *ndị* (a generic term for offspring, henchmen, followers, clients, and slaves), on a major trade route located some 30 kilometers west of the upper Imo River in the densely populated central Igboland. Called *Aro-ndi-Izuogu* (Izuogu's people's Aro, conventionally written as *Arondizuogu*), this settlement eventually became the largest and most populous Aro settlement. Other Aro merchants soon established settlements farther northwest and in the densely populated part of Ibibioland south of Arochukwu. These merchants were part of an intricate network that accounted for the huge increase in the numbers of captives leaving the Bight of Biafra after 1740. Neighboring people supplied the Aro with produce, captives, and some porterage services, while the Aro, in turn, provided foreign goods, indicating the extent of the region's entanglement with the emerging world economic system. Among these goods, guns and gunpowder came from various European centers, "george" cloth from the Netherlands and most other cloth from India, while tobacco was being produced in the Chesapeake Bay region in today's United States, principally by Biafrans who had been exported as captives of the overseas traffic.[1]

[1] I reconstruct the foregoing detail from the following sources: NAE 81/27-OKIDIST 4/9/70; NAE OR/C/823-ORLDIST 3/1/359; NAE 12481A-MINLOC 16/1/1326; NAE OKIDIST 19/1/1 1908–25; NAE ORLDIST 14/1/3; NAE 35/1920-OKIDIST 4/2/32; NAE 38/22 OKIDIST 4/4/29; NAE CSE 1/85/6197A; Arodiogbu 1996; J.O. Dike 1996; K.O. Dike and Ekejiuba 1990:205–08; Goodlife 1933, 1952; Heslop 1936; M.S. Igwe 1996; Michael Ike 1995; Mayne 1935; J.C. Nwankwo 1973; C. Okoli 1996; J.G. Okoro

The Atlantic slave market provided attractive profits, but the Aro always ensured that they retained within their group many of the people they traded. As a small group, the Aro concentrated on group expansion and depended economically on slaves as both merchandise and laborers. Aro political contests, such as the civil wars and succession disputes, as well as such social facts as marriage, tribute, and the incest prohibition were deeply entangled with slaving. The people's belief system and their media of worship were grounded in, and reinforced by, slaving-related processes. Their value system celebrated the ownership and proliferation of people and encouraged the sale of captives into Atlantic slavery. The decision regarding whom to send into Atlantic slavery and whom to retain was central to Aro political economy and, ipso facto, to this study.

Aro slave trade involved both business and social engineering. The overwhelming majority of captives that Aro traders bought from the non-Aro people were random victims of war, kidnapping, and sundry methods but many were innocent. The Aro welcomed craftsmen, artists, medicine men, fortune seekers, refugees, and others who desired the prestige and protection that Aro citizenship conferred during that time. But even these noncaptive immigrants found that they could enter Aro society only as protected persons under Aro patrons – normally males – who were already well established there. The Aro concept of *mmuba*, meaning, at the most basic level, "proliferation," captured the phenomenon of expansion. Aro oral history and folklore often refer to *mmuba* as an end in itself, but this ideology also encapsulated the people's desire to increase the labor pool and to strengthen the Aro population for geopolitical purposes.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the Aro world comprised more than 150 diaspora settlements across the Biafra hinterland. These communities celebrated common observances and maintained linkage institutions, such as the annual *Ikeji* festival, the *Ekpe* society, and the *Ihu* routine homage system. These institutions fostered and sustained a strong pan-Aro identity that facilitated Aro political interests and commercial hegemony. Yet, in spite of these linkage institutions, the Aro diaspora was susceptible to the cultural influence of host societies and

1985:23–28; J.E. Uche 1996; Umo n.d. One enslaved African of Ibibio origin told German Moravian missionary Christian Georg Andreas Oldendorp in Pennsylvania in the late 1760s that the Aro, whose land "was not too far from [Ibibioland]," supplied the Ibibio with "riffles, sabres, powder, lead, linen, and the like" (Oldendorp 1987: 167).

of the societies from which the Aro drew immigrants. For example, an estimated more than 1 million inhabitants of the Aro settlements in central Igboland, the vast majority of whom descended from people who were not Aro 250 years ago, speak a dialect that deviates substantially from the one spoken in metropolitan Arochukwu.[2] The frontierspeople also brought with them new media of worship and developed new taboos and even notions of class consciousness. These developments did not result simply from the routine domestication that is associated with frontier societies, colonists, or immigrant groups adapting to a new environment; they were also shaped by the Aro struggle to dominate trade in various parts of the Biafra hinterland. Ironically, while the Aro diaspora altered Aro ways, sometimes radically, the Aro nevertheless often remained aloof and distinct from the preexisting communities in their immediate neighborhood, ostensibly in order to maintain strict fidelity to Aro culture.

After the trade in palm oil replaced the Atlantic slave trade in the mid-nineteenth century, most of the region's food-producing groups devoted more of their efforts to the production of palm oil and palm kernel oil. Other groups became actively involved in the new trade, giving the Aro keener competition than they had had in the days of the overseas slave trade. These developments restructured the Aro economy and affected Aro relationships with the non-Aro. By the 1890s, the Aro had begun to produce foodstuffs for domestic consumption and, increasingly, for the market, while continuing to dominate what was left of the slave traffic, until the British Aro Expedition of 1901–02 overthrew the Aro and imposed a new order. The present study elaborates the foregoing story and situates it in Atlantic and regional contexts.

[2] This estimate is from a 1.5 percent compounded annual growth rate of 45,000 inhabitants in 1927 for Arondizuogu, by far the largest Aro diaspora settlement, plus a roughly equal number of inhabitants for the rest of Aro settlements in central Igboland. A 1927 estimate put Arondizuogu's population at 30,000 (see NAE 81/27-OKIDIST 4/9/70. "Anthropological Report on Aros of Ndizuogu and Others"). The report itself shows that colonial officials made their estimate based on one part of the town alone, the part that fell into the Orlu District (making up most of the Arondizuogu territory west of the Imo), leaving out the part that fell into the Okigwe District (east of the Imo and some territory on the west bank). One 1935 report again covered only the Orlu part, as did the map accompanying it (see Mayne 1935). I have increased this figure to 45,000 because the 1927 estimate underrepresented the population after leaving out east-Imo Arondizuogu. This situation obviates any attempt to derive reliable census figures. Theresa Nwankwo (1991:10) has claimed that a 1931 census put the population at 180,000, which would drastically escalate present estimates. I have not seen this census.

MAIN FEATURES, ORGANIZATION, AND EXPANSION OF THE OVERSEAS SLAVE TRADE

Although the Biafra trade grew dramatically in the eighteenth century, it represented a small part of the overall African Atlantic trade before the 1740s. The region's share of captives exported from all African regions combined was only 5.5 percentage points in the first half of the seventeenth century. Although there was an appreciable increase in trade in the third quarter of the seventeenth century, the Biafra trade quickly entered a long period of decline.[3] By the 1670s, Bende, the principal slave mart in the Biafra hinterland, was already well established (Nwokeji 1997a). Captives leaving Bight of Biafra ports were carried mainly on English ships; some 80 percent of Biafra captives ended up in English America colonies during the eighteenth century.[4] The region's share of total African trade rose by 13.6 percentage points between the 1700s and the end of the century. Eighteenth-century British slave trader John Hippisley must have echoed his contemporaries' sentiments when he wondered "how Africa [was] able to supply … such prodigious numbers" (Hippisley 1764:1).

In the Bight of Biafra, the big surge in slave trade took place in the 1740s. The region exported an annual mean of about 13,800 captives between 1741 and 1800; that number increased to about 20,000 a year in the 1780s. Taking up only about 270 kilometers of coastline, the southeastern Nigerian portion of the Bight of Biafra was during this period the site of the most intensive slaving in Atlantic Africa, accounting for 90

[3] Except when otherwise stated, overall Biafra export figures are calculated from the *Expanded Online Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database* (Slavevoyages.org). There are many contending estimates. See Anstey 1975; Behrendt 1997; Curtin 1969, 1976; Eltis 1978, 1987, 1989b, 1995; Eltis and Richardson 1995a; Inikori 1976a, 1976b, 1978, 1992b; Lovejoy 1982b; Richardson 1989a, 1989b; Richardson and Behrendt 1995. See Henige 1986; Inikori 1994a, 1994b, 1998; Lovejoy 1989; and Manning 1998b for analyses of the historiography.

[4] For the Biafra Atlantic slave trade to 1700, see Thornton 1999. John Thornton states: "Undoubtedly … the greatest source of slaves for New Calabar [then the dominant port] was the Igbo-speaking region" (11). As early as 1627, Spanish missionary priest Alonso de Sandoval reported that *Caravalies*, as Biafra captives were then called, were "innumerable" in Spanish America and spoke a variety of tongues (de Sandoval [1627] 1956:94, 96). A 1790s British House of Lords survey shows that the Bight of Biafra and West-Central Africa accounted for 78 percent of all captives arriving in Jamaica from known African ports. This pattern reflects that of other English colonies. Between these two regions, the Bight of Biafra exported more (H. Klein 1978, 147–48, 150, 173). It accounted for 40 percent of all British purchases just before abolition in 1807 (Law and Lovejoy 1996).

percent of the region's overseas trade. The mid-century surge had implications for Biafra's major ports. Bonny, serving mainly the trade from the Igbo heartland, superseded Old Calabar as the region's preeminent port between 1726 and 1750; by 1750 it was the single busiest slaving port in Africa north of the Equator. Turnaround rates at Biafra's ports also became significantly shorter than they were elsewhere. Indeed, the 1740s marked a turning point in the Biafra Atlantic trade. By the third quarter of the century, the "trust" system, by which Europeans advanced goods to African merchants on credit, had been well established (Lovejoy and Richardson 1997, 1999). In addition to this extraordinary expansion of trade, the Bight of Biafra exported higher proportions of females than any other major coastal region. This characteristic deviated from the focus of New World demand, which tilted heavily toward males. To properly understand these unique features of the Biafra Atlantic slave trade, a close examination of the institutions and processes that underpinned the trade in Africa is imperative.[5]

The Nigerian section of the Bight of Biafra was home to numerous ethnolinguistic groups. The Igbo and Ibibio people predominated in the region south of the Benue River, known today as southeastern Nigeria. These two groups had long provided most of the export captives.[6] German-born Moravian missionary Christian Georg Andreas Oldendorp reported a substantial Igbo and Ibibio presence in the Caribbean and North America during the late 1760s. By the mid-eighteenth century, Biafrans had become the largest African group in the Chesapeake.[7] They were also a substantial presence in the British Caribbean. Most of the captives exported from Biafra – some 70 percent, according to most estimates – passed through the Aro network (K.O. Dike and Ekejiuba 1990, 250; Ijoma and Njoku 1991:300). The Aro were also the largest slaveholders in the hinterland. More than any other group, they were linked directly to region-wide institutions. Along with the coastal city state of Old Calabar and Cross River Igbo warrior groups, the Aro participated in

[5] Eltis 1986; Eltis and Engerman 1992, 1993; Galenson 1986:97–114; Geggus 1989:37–38, 40–41; Inikori 1992a; H. Klein 1978:174, 241–42; 1983:35–37; Lovejoy and Hogendorn 1979; Robertson and Klein 1983; Thornton 1991, 1998.

[6] A 1953 census shows that the Igbo and the Ibibio made up respectively 68.56 percent and 10.36 percent of the region south of the Benue River known today as southeastern Nigeria. *International Population Census* 1953. (See "Population Census of Eastern Region of Nigeria 1953.")

[7] Oldendorp [1777] 1995, 2000: ms. 427–28, 431–32, 459, 462, 464, 466. For the Virginia evidence see Chambers 2005:10–11; Gomez 1998:115–16; Kulikoff 1986:321–23; Morgan 1998:62, 63; Sobel 1987:5; Walsh 1997:67.

the *Ekpe* confraternity.[8] This society settled credit matters and provided local law enforcement, as well as monopolized the *Nsibiri* writing system. The Aro controlled the *Ibiniukpabi* oracle, which served as the highest court of appeal, including for the coastal city-states and communities on the west side of the Niger River. Further, they maintained alliances with Cross River Igbo warrior communities that facilitated Aro wars in different parts of the region, operated the region's rotational slave fairs, and zoned virtually all parts of the region to individual Aro lineage-groups as spheres of influence (*mbia*). Overseeing these *mbia* on a day-to-day basis were a variety of permanent diaspora settlements corresponding to the respective Aro lineage-groups. These settlements ranged from small, peacefully established Aro presences within preexisting non-Aro lineage-groups to large conquest settlements. The existence of Aro settlements in areas separated by distance, language, and cultural practices within the Biafra hinterland was an Aro hallmark.

In spite of this highly visible role, Aro organization and its basic chronology are still in need of integration into Atlantic scholarship. Perhaps the most promising line of inquiry is to relate Aro expansion to the expansion of the Biafra Atlantic trade and to explain the correlation of the two processes. Aro expansion occurred in four main phases. The first phase – lasting from the beginning of the seventeenth century to the end of the 1730s – witnessed the consolidation of the Arochukwu metropole, the establishment of Aro influence in the Cross River Region, the foundation of the principal market at Bende, Aro forays into Ibibioland and central Igboland, and the rise of Old Calabar (the city closest to Arochukwu) as Biafra's principal port. The second phase – beginning in about 1740 – witnessed great expansion in the Biafra export slave trade, the establishment of Aro settlements in the Biafran hinterland, and Bonny's supersession of Old Calabar as Biafra's principal port. This period ended in 1808 when the British, carriers of some 80 percent of Biafra captives, abolished slave traffic. The third phase of Aro expansion began in 1808, following British abolition, to the end of the Atlantic slave trade by 1850, the region's deeper involvement in the overseas palm oil trade, and the expansion of the domestic slave market. The fourth and final phase began in the 1850s and ended in 1902, when the British

[8] This society took the name *Okonko* in other areas, such as the Niger delta states and southern Igboland where the Aro exported this institution. The role of this variant of the society comes out most clearly in the work of John Oriji (Oriji 1982, 1983). The examination of the role of the *Ekpe* society as an agency of slave procurement awaits future research.

conquered Arochukwu. By the 1890s, the Aro had vigorously embraced agriculture in an effort to minimize the pangs of the world depression in the oils trade and to cope with their food needs. Along with a host of domestic social implications, Aro adoption of agriculture generated conflicts when the group expanded into agricultural regions at the expense of the preexisting communities. The Aro case highlights the interconnectedness of major changes in the Bight of Biafra with changes in the overseas trade and its aftermath over three centuries.

THE ARO IN THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE BIAFRA SLAVE TRADE

The literature of the Bight of Biafra slave trade has often dealt separately with the hinterland and coastal sections of the region rather than considering the two in their relationship within the Atlantic system. This tendency has impeded the effective study of the region's involvement in the Atlantic slave trade. Consequently, Joseph Inikori has lamented the neglect of the region in the production of studies dealing with the Atlantic slave trade, despite a massive surge in captive export there in the second half of the eighteenth century (Inikori 1994a:9). The literature of the Atlantic slave trade has dealt with the coastal states rather than the hinterland, even though much of the trade was subject to influences from the hinterland, while the work dealing with the hinterland did not actively link the Aro to the Atlantic context.[9]

Aro historiography effectively began in the mid-nineteenth century, when Europeans and Sierra Leone–based African returnees from Atlantic slavery traveled the Niger River and began to pay special attention to the Aro. Based mostly on hearsay, their reports focused on Aro omnipresence in the region via trade and/or oracular activities.[10] British attention to the Aro and efforts to suppress them left a trove of paperwork, ensuring that Anglo-Aro relations and the Aro role in the domestic slave trade during the postoverseas slave trade era – rather than the overseas trade itself – loom large in the historiography. Interest in the Aro continued into the early colonial period, although much of the colonial-era literature was nonhistorical. Even the historical work that

[9] For studies dealing with the Atlantic slave trade with a focus on coastal states, see Alagoa 1964, 1970, 1971a, 1971b, 1972, 1986; Cookey 1974; Hargreaves 1987; Latham 1973; Nair 1972; Noah 1980; Wariboko 1991.

[10] Allen and Thomson 1848a; Baikie 1856; Burdo 1880; Crowther and Taylor 1859; J.A.B. Horton 1863:183–85; Hutchinson 1861.

germinated during that era did not produce much notable information on the Aro trading system. Instead, it concentrated on Aro origins (G.I. Jones 1939:101). In tune with the Hamitic hypothesis – the tendency to attribute "civilizations" found in Africa to descendants of the Biblical Ham – the British seemed bent on locating external provenance for the Aro, one that would ultimately be linkable to Caucasian influence. The resulting theories of Aro origins were so speculative that historian Adiele Afigbo has insisted on putting them on the same footing as Aro sagas. Afigbo's analysis has itself come under severe criticism, illustrating the continued interest in the subject.[11]

Major Arthur Leonard's firsthand account of the Aro market at Bende during 1896 was the first published work on the Aro. While Leonard provided useful glimpses into a changing Aro society, as a harbinger of British invasion, he was interested mainly in immediate strategic matters (Leonard 1898). Several British military officers generated useful ethnographic information in a round of publications that appeared in the wake of the Aro Expedition of 1901–02.[12] The multivolume work by colonial officer and anthropologist Amaury Talbot, published in 1926, provided equal measures of useful and chimerical information on Aro organization.[13] In the 1920s and 1930s, the colonial government commissioned "intelligence" and anthropological reports that produced significant knowledge of the Aro.[14] From the 1930s through the 1960s, local historians and other scholars in many communities in the region did much spadework.[15] The aforementioned sources did not, however,

[11] Afigbo (1971b, 31; 1972a). Afigbo's critique has, with some justification, been termed a stretch (Nwauwa 1995, 110). As made clear in Chapter 2, however, Afigbo's comments on the genealogies collected by colonial administrators should be taken seriously.

[12] A.G. Leonard 1906:34, 175, 183, 308–09, 287, 486; MacAlister 1902; Mockler-Ferryman 1902:127, 222; Steel 1908; Venour 1902; Vickery 1906. For an illuminating scholarly account of Aro-British relations up until the invasion, see Anene 1959.

[13] Instances of the latter category are his claims that the Aro were of Carthaginian provenance and that they ran a theocracy (Talbot 1926a:183; 1926b:50, 52, 338; 1926c: 592, 821).

[14] See Anthropologists' Papers 1927; Mathews 1922; Mayne 1935; Shankland 1933.

[15] See Nwana [1933] 1950; Ojike 1947; Umo n.d. [1947?]; Igwegbe 1962, and Uku 1993. A portion of Uku's account that appeared in the *West African Review* (Dec. 1953) is quoted widely. For more recent works see A.O. Anyoha 1977; Irono 1988; Mbadiwe 1991; E.O. Mmeregini n.d; E.O. Okoli 1977; J.G. Okoro 1985. For a representative sample of theses, see Agu 1985; Anaba 1988; Chuku 1989; Emeruwa 1992; C. Eze 1987; C.E. Igwe 1992; Imo 1980; G.C. Mmeregini 1978; Monye 1991; I.O. Nwankwo 1986; J.C. Nwankwo 1973; T. Nwankwo 1991; D.C. Nwosu 1978; Onyensoh 1985; B.N.N. Orji 1978.

provide reliable chronologies and did not explicitly place the Aro in regional trade, let alone the Atlantic system.

Serious historical inquiry into the Aro role in regional trade, however, began with the seminal work of historian K. Onwuka Dike. Although he focused on the coastal trading states, Dike referred to the Aro as the "economic dictators of the hinterland," and emphasized the role of their oracle, *Ibiniukpabi* (K.O. Dike 1956:38). The role of oracles in Igbo social organization has since been studied, as have the workings of Aro influence and the importance of *Ibiniukpabi*, leading to the finding that this oracle was not a major source of captives (S. Ottenberg 1958; 1971:24–26).[16] It was, however, the former British colonial officer and anthropologist G.I. Jones who began to place the Aro in a regional chronological framework. Based on the traditions of the coastal port states, Jones suggested that the Aro had been formed by the mid-seventeenth century (Jones 1963, 134). This means that the Aro had been well established by the eighteenth century when the Biafra Atlantic trade became prominent. Together, the aforementioned works established the significance of the Aro in the region's political economy and commercial history. Unfortunately, however, these important contributions did not stimulate scholarship in the hinterland.

Systematic analysis of hinterland trade began during the late 1960s. The genealogy of this historiography starts with regional geographer Ukwu I. Ukwu's pioneering study of the regional marketing system, trade routes, and delivery systems. Ukwu identified the conscious coordination of diaspora settlements with fairs and trade routes as the distinctive feature of the Aro system (Ukwu 1967:1969). His work foreshadowed the scholarly interest in regional trade, as well as in Aro operations and the institutions that underpinned them, that developed during the 1970s. Similar studies proliferated in the early 1970s (Ekejiuba 1972a, 1972b; Northrup 1972; Ofonagoro 1972). Further, Afigbo mapped the extent of regional trade and highlighted the hitherto neglected trade links between southeastern Nigeria and the Middle Belt to the north, complementing extant studies on Igbo–Middle Belt relations.[17] It is noteworthy that the relevant scholarship of the late 1960s and early 1970s concentrated on trading mechanisms, trade routes, goods, and supply systems. It had little to say on the implications of these processes for politics, culture, and social organization.

[16] K.O. Dike and Ekejiuba 1990, 250; Ekejiuba 1972b, 12; J.O. Ijoma 1986c; Ijoma and Njoku 1991:206, 300; Northrup 1978, 138; Ofonagoro 1972:83.
[17] Afigbo 1973b, 1977; Boston 1968; Shelton 1971; Sargent 1999:173–89, 252–59.

A holistic approach to regional history developed from the mid-1970s. Elizabeth Isichei's (1973, 1976:49–67) work dealing with Igbo history was the most notable example of this trend. The underlying theme of Isichei's work is transformations in the Igbo social economy. She traces the process by which trade-induced migrations between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries helped to shape modern Igboland. The efforts of many other scholars – university thesis authors, nonprofessional local historians of increasing sophistication, and professional historians – have since further clarified our understanding of this process through a plethora of cases studies. These contributions did not, however, relate Aro expansion to the Atlantic slave trade.[18]

In their study of West Africa as whole, historians Paul Lovejoy and Jan Hogendorn see the rise of the Biafra Atlantic trade in the mid-eighteenth century as the culmination of four developments: expansion in the structure and organization of the coastal states; the role of the *Ekpe* society in guaranteeing credit; the division of the lower Niger trade among the Ijo and the Niger riverine states; and the consolidation of the Aro network in the hinterland (Lovejoy and Hogendorn 1979:225–31). Lovejoy and Hogendorn's critical insight that the African slave trade was organized around self-conscious regional cartels has received implicit support from empirical findings about the institutional basis of the Aro network in southern Igboland (Oriji 1982, 1983, 1987). Because Lovejoy and Hogendorn's study did not primarily focus on the Bight of Biafra, it did not resolve the important question of the timing of the developments they identified, an essential step in establishing the extent to which the trading groups caused or resulted from them. The developments may have been repercussions of major environmental and geopolitical changes in late-sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century West Africa, as Robert Sargent has argued (Sargent 1999:15–20).

One common limitation of the Biafra literature is that, while gender relations in the societies of the region have sometimes received attention, the gender structure of the Atlantic slave trade has suffered neglect, even though it has long been discernible to scholars not primarily focused in

[18] For examples of pertinent studies done by professional historians, see Afigbo 1977, 1981a, 1981b, 1987; Ifemesia 1978, 1979; Ijoma and O.N. Njoku 1991; Oguagha 1991; Ohadike 1994; Oriji 1987; O.N. Njoku 2000; Uya 1984. Of no less significance is the work of anthropologist M. Angulu Onwuejeogwu 1975, 1981, 1987. For published work dealing specifically with aspects of Aro history by a variety of authors, see K.O. Dike and Ekejiuba 1990; Eni 1973; Ezekiah Muotoh 2000; Igwegbe 1962; Ijoma 1986b, 1994; Pita Nwana 1933; Ohia 2007; J.G. Okoro 1985; Uku 1993; Umo n.d. [1947?].