

The Slave Trade and Culture in the Bight of Biafra

The Slave Trade and Culture in the Bight of Biafra dissects and explains the structure, dramatic expansion, and manifold effects of the slave trade in the Bight of Biafra. By showing that the rise of the Aro merchant group was the key factor in trade expansion, G. Ugo Nwokeji reinterprets why and how such large-scale commerce developed in the absence of large-scale centralized states. The result is the first study to link the structure and trajectory of the slave trade in a major exporting region to the expansion of a specific African merchant group – among other fresh insights into Atlantic Africa's involvement in the trade – and the most comprehensive treatment of Atlantic slave trade in the Bight of Biafra. The fundamental role of culture in the organization of trade is highlighted, transcending the usual economic explanations in a way that complicates traditional generalizations about work, domestic slavery, and gender in precolonial Africa.

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The Slave Trade and Culture in the Bight of Biafra

An African Society in the Atlantic World

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*This book is dedicated to the memory of Don Ohadike,
historian and gentleman*

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0 25 50 75 100 km
Scale 1:2 800 000



Preface

The human traffic through which African societies supplied the labor needs of the Americas invokes many fundamental questions. Some of the most persistent questions are why Africa supplied so many captives; how the trade was organized; what its political, social, and cultural implications were; what the gender and ethnic composition was; and how the trade affected the societies involved. The answers to these questions are the primary focus of this book. They are addressed from the vantage point of the Bight of Biafra, a major exporting region, extending from the Niger Delta (exclusive of the River Nun) in modern Nigeria to Cape Lopez in modern Gabon. The region supplied an estimated 13 percent of all captives exported between 1551 and 1850, which made it the third most important supply region after West-Central Africa and the Bight of Benin. What marked out the Bight of Biafra slave trade was its unusual trajectory. Departures of captives from the region increased fivefold between the last quarter of the seventeenth century and the last quarter of the eighteenth century (Table 0.1). Concomitantly, the majority Igbo of the hinterland were probably the largest single African group arriving in North America and several Caribbean destinations for much of the eighteenth century. The traffic closed down quickly in the 1840s, but for most of the preceding century, the Bight of Biafra had been the second most important region for captives taken to the Americas (though lagging well behind West-Central Africa). How did a region that once supplied a small number of captives so quickly become the second most important supply region in the eighteenth century, in spite of the absence of large centralized states? In comparison to the well-known ever-increasing demand for African slave labor that the sugar revolution stirred in the

TABLE 0.1. *Estimated Volume of Biafra Captive Exports, 1551–1850, by Twenty-Five-Year Period*

Period	Bight of Biafra	All Africa	Biafra Percentage of African Total
1551–1575	3,383	61,007	5.5
1576–1600	2,996	152,373	2.0
1601–1625	2,921	352,843	0.8
1626–1650	33,540	315,050	10.6
1651–1675	80,780	488,064	16.5
1676–1700	69,080	719,674	9.6
1701–1725	66,833	1,088,909	6.1
1726–1750	182,066	1,471,725	12.4
1751–1775	319,709	1,088,909	16.6
1776–1800	336,008	1,471,725	16.7
1801–1825	264,834	1,925,314	14.1
1826–1850	230,328	2,008,670	13.0
Grand Totals	1,592,478	12,231,600	13.0

Slavevoyages.org. Numbers with decimal points are not precise because of rounding.

Americas, there is still much to explore about how African regions met this demand.

The Aro, who call themselves “Aru,” inhabit a conspicuous place in the history of the inglorious slave trade. They dominated the slave trade in inland Bight of Biafra from their Arochukwu homeland, north of the Cross River–Enyong Creek estuary in the southeastern portion of the Nigerian section of the region. The Aro were a peculiar group. Though the region was marked by “stateless” societies, Aro organization did in fact have characteristics of a state. Yet, it was rather a peculiar organization as a diaspora – rather than a state – which explains the rise and expansion of the region’s transatlantic slave trade. The following chapters elaborate this proposition.

This study treats the Aro trading network as a trade diaspora, in spite of the relatively small geographic space of the Bight of Biafra. The enormous ethnolinguistic diversity and the evolution of ethnic identity of the region warrant such a perspective and explain the treatment in this study of the slave-trade-era Aro as a separate cultural phenomenon, even though they are today little more than a subgroup of the Igbo. By the seventeenth century, Arochukwu culture and dialect had emerged as a hybrid of Igbo, Ibibio, and Akpa elements; Arochukwu itself is located in the Igbo-Ibibio-Ejagham borderland. Hybridity – a process undergone in

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different forms and degrees by much of Atlantic Africa during the slave trade era – continued in the Aro diaspora. The process was perhaps more marked among the Aro than was the norm in the Bight of Biafra.

Although the vast majority of present-day Aro people either identify themselves or are identified by others as Igbo, to impose such an identity on the period covered in this study is an anachronism. Arochukwu's multiethnic origin shaped Aro social structures and identity during the period covered in this study. Contrary to the sections of pre-twentieth-century Aro population that originated among groups that came to see themselves as Igbo, the case with the Aro tracing their own origins elsewhere is different. Neither can we simply conflate as Igbo the Aro communities that still remain outside Igboland, principally among the Ibibio in the Cross River region and the Igala in the Middle Belt. It should be noted that the Igbo group covered a much smaller area before the late nineteenth century than they came to occupy in the twentieth century. That an Igbo group in the sense that we have come to know them in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries did not exist in the era of the transatlantic slave trade is not in question; what is subject to debate is whether there were any people who identified themselves as Igbo and, if so, when they began to do so.¹

For the most part, the application of “Igbo” to much of the period covered in this book is not meant to project a pan-Igbo identity as currently exists but to refer to a group of societies that later constituted Igboland. A reading of historical and anthropological studies of the region, as well as ethnographic observations during the late twentieth century, suggests that Igboness came to involve (perhaps not exclusively) four basic elements in addition to a common language – two deities, the *Ala/Ani/Ana* earth deity and *Chi* personal god, and reverence for two crops/foods, yam (*ji*) and kolanut (*oji*). Except for peripheral societies that migrated into the Igbo area after the overseas slave trade had gathered momentum in the region, the societies that became Igbo seem to have in the main shared a strong social and spiritual attachment to yam and kolanut, but only those within the perimeter referred to as the Igbo heartland and which had additionally subscribed to *Ala* and *Chi* deities are assumed to have

¹ The earliest written reference to the group was when Spanish missionary in the Americas Alonso Sandoval entered “Ibo” in his collection of ethnolinguistic groups, which was how some people located in a place we now know as Igboland were referred to and probably how some people referred to themselves as well ([1627] 1956:94). For various perspectives, see Leith-Ross 1939:56; Oriji 1994:5; Gomez 1998, chapter 6; Nwokeji 2000:629–33; Northrup 2000; Chambers 2002; Byrd 2008:17–33, 56, 261n.

become Igbo at the onset of the overseas slave trade.² At any rate, the process of Igboization would seem to have begun with – at least in part – the embrace of yam and kolanut reverence.³ These two foods/crops – as will be shown in this study – played important roles in shaping the structure of the slave trade in the Bight of Biafra.

² Explicitly and implicitly, anthropologists have identified *Ala* as the most important deity among the Igbo (Meek 1937:20, 24–33; Ottenberg 1959:136). There was a larger number of units in the Igbo pantheon, but some of these were not pan-Igbo even at the turn of the twentieth century, in the sense that nearly all the groups that referred to themselves as Igbo had come to be associated beyond *Ala* and *Chi*. The heartland is the home of an inner core, the “autochthonous” communities of Igboland – a group of societies whose peoples have continuously occupied the area for so long that their traditions locate their origins in the vicinity of their present abodes. For the autochthones, see J.O. Ijoma 1986c:11; Ifemesia 1979:21; Isichei 1976:67; G.I. Jones 1963; Ohadike 1994:12; Oriji 1994. The autochthones may be deemed the first-order Igbo, followed by the rest of the heartland. Beyond the heartland, we find an outer ring of groups that had significant non-Igbo elements, such as Arochukwu, several other Cross River Igbo groups, southern Igboland – principally the Ngwa, Ndoki, and communities to their south – as well as the societies around and beyond the city of Enugu. Finally, there are groups that migrated into the region in the course of the transatlantic slave trade, mostly in riverine regions, such as Onitsha, Oguta, Abo, Igga, and many of the West-Niger Igbo societies. Historian John Oriji (1994:5) has drawn attention to the presence in the Igbo heartland of *Amaigbo* (Ama-Igbo, meaning “Igbo Square”), the ancient town to which many Isuama Igbo communities trace their origins, and the historic *Igbo-Ukwu* (“Grand Igbo”), in which the archaeologist Thurstan Shaw (1970a, 1970b) uncovered artifacts of ninth-century vintage, which suggests that the nucleus of Igboland was perhaps the Amaigbo/Igbo-Ukwu axis of the so-called Igbo heartland. The human figures found among the artifacts had the distinctive *ichi* marks on their faces, a practice that continued in the Nri-Awka area up to recent decades (Ifemesia 1979:18–19, 89). There is a dialectical variation in the ways people of the Amaigbo and Igbo-Ukwu subregions of the Igbo heartland pronounce the earth cult – *Ala* in the case of Amaigbo and *Ani/Ana* in the case of Nri. There are no dialectical variations in the pronunciation of the other key terms – *oji* (kolanut), *ji* (yam), and *Chi*, except for the nasalization that mark some dialects. The cultural landscape of the region was, however, more fluid than this schema might imply. A given group may have combined cultural forms that related more to groups outside than the ones inside the category it is placed in, a reflection of relentless movement of people and ideas. Aro diaspora communities were in very recent centuries established in areas long settled by autochthones and heartland groups.

³ Originally, *Ikeji* itself celebrated the beginning of yam harvest among the Aro, although the festival changed significantly after trading became the principal occupation of the Aro. Kolanut also played a central role in Aro covenants with their trading and political allies as well as in inducting newly acquired slaves into the household (Kanu-Igbo 1996b; J.G. Okoro 1996). The present writer has not seen any evidence in support of the existence of *Chi* and the *Ala* cult among the Aro before the nineteenth century. An instance of *Ana* emerges among the Aro diaspora of the Ndieni cluster, located in the Nri-Awka region, in the late nineteenth century. *Ikeji*, *Ihu*, and to an extent the *Ana* cult (*Ajana*) are discussed in detail in Chapter 4. The role of yam and kolanut in shaping the structure of the slave trade is analyzed in Chapter 6. Aro traditions refer to gifts of kolanuts and yams accompanying the *Ihu* “homage” rite, and to wives giving their husbands kolanuts during the *Ikeji* festival (Arodiogbu 1996; Nwankwo and Okereke 1996).

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With their Arochukwu homeland located in the southeastern periphery of what we now call Igboland and having significant sections of their population speak languages and subscribe to customs significantly different from what was later recognized as Igbo, the Aro had not subscribed to *Ala* and *Chi* at the onset of the overseas slave trade, even though most of them seem to have adopted kolanut and yam reverence. The process of Aro Igboization intensified with Aro expansion into the Igbo heartland in the mid-eighteenth century, and the process accelerated during the twentieth century. As emerges in the following pages, there is a difference between the Aro who left the Igbo-Ibibio-Efik borderland to establish settlements in the Igbo heartland and present-day inhabitants of those settlements, themselves mostly descendants of non-Aro Igbo immigrants who joined incoming Aro charter groups. The ethnolinguistic diversity of the Bight of Biafra, the close relationship of trade and culture, and the need to cast light on the background of the African diaspora in the Americas justify a cultural perspective to the study of the region's slave trade.

The pivotal role the Aro diaspora played in the rise of the Biafra Atlantic trade shaped and was shaped by both external forces and the region's political economy, defined as the totality of the region's economic, political, cultural, social, and ideological processes. The Aro built their influence mainly by extending preexisting commercial infrastructure and adapting spiritual norms to new circumstances (Ijoma and Njoku 1991:307; Northrup 1978b:142). And expanding trade in the eighteenth century was, in the first instance, the function of increasing Euro-American demand. Although shaped by internal developments, the trade and its aftermath affected the region in many ways. By asserting the collaborative relevance of both internal *and* external factors, this study departs from the strong tendency in African studies to see historical agency as deriving from either one *or*, and the other. The interactive approach seeks agency in both internal and external processes and examines how their interaction produced change. This approach throws light on the Atlantic world into which the Aro sold people, not only for pecuniary ends but also for other reasons touching on particular visions of the political and social order. By focusing on one region of Atlantic Africa, the present study provides some basis for understanding developments in the Atlantic region. The following chapters explore African patterns of supply, American patterns of demand, and the sociocultural processes underpinning them. This study should thus be read more than simply as an analysis of the slave trade in the Bight of Biafra. It makes pertinent connections and comparisons with other regions at many junctures; two

of these connections – the use of the average daily loading rates of slave ships to measure the intensity of slaving interregionally and the implication for the gender structure of the slave trade of the culture and commerce that developed around kolanut – are introduced here for the first time.

The arrangement of the chapters is both chronological and thematic. There are chronological overlaps, but even within the affected sections, I have strived to present the material chronologically. Chapter 1 details the historical and historiographical contexts of the Biafra Atlantic slave trade, and stakes out the claim that the rise and expansion of the Aro merchant group and their organization as a trade diaspora were pivotal to the massive expansion of the Biafra trade in the mid-eighteenth century. In Chapter 2, I relate the chronology of Aro expansion during its first and second phases to the oscillations in the Biafra Atlantic trade up until 1807, when the British, carriers of the bulk of the region's trade, abolished the traffic. Focusing on the second and third phases, Chapter 3 situates Aro slaving in the regional context with an emphasis on Aro organization between the 1740s and 1850s, a period that captured both the expansion and decline of the Biafra Atlantic slave trade. I link cultural and economic processes within the Bight of Biafra to the Atlantic slave trade in Chapters 4–6, presenting slaving within the region, not just in terms of economic relationships, but also in terms of collateral, social, cultural, and ideological systems. Chapter 4 illustrates how the formation and expansion of the Aro diaspora as a result of the expanding overseas slave trade reconfigured the geocultural landscape of the Bight of Biafra hinterland. On the other hand, endogenous sociocultural practices, such as slavery, means of enslavement, and conceptions of the Atlantic world helped to shape the composition of export captives. The means, process, and structure of slaving are thus the subject of Chapter 5, with a focus on who got enslaved or retained in the region, and who got shipped to the Americas, how and why. Chapter 6 engages with the unusual gender structure of the Biafra slave trade and explains it by patterns of domestic consumption, ritual, warfare, gender division of labor in agriculture, and long-distance trade. Chapter 7 continues the story of cultural changes imposed by the Atlantic slave trade into the final phase of Aro expansion between 1850 and 1902, highlighting the increased incidence of warfare both as the long-term effect of slaving and as the immediate impact of the end of the overseas slave trade. Detailed analysis of the demographic impact has been left out because it has received attention elsewhere (Nwokeji 2000). It suffices here to affirm that the demographic impact was less severe in the Bight of Biafra and its hinterland than in most other

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regions, not because fewer captives were removed from here, but because the region gained population from immigration from outlying inland areas, and did not suffer the adverse effect of the additional slave trade from across the Sahara. Unlike other West African regions, that trade was marginal in the region. Chapter 8 summarizes and concludes the study. A detailed note on the sources appears at the end.

In the course of writing this book, I have accumulated debts of gratitude to numerous individuals and organizations. At the University of Toronto Ph.D. program where it all began, the history department, School of Graduate Studies, and the Center for International Development gave generous funding. Over the years, funding has also come from the history department and the Institute for African American Studies, both of the University of Connecticut (UConn), as well as from the African American studies department and the Chancellor of the University of California, Berkeley. This book has benefited from the congenial atmospheres and resources afforded me in the following institutions where I have held visiting positions over the years – the history department of Emory University, the DuBois Institute for Afro-American Research at Harvard University, the Gilder Lehrman Center at Yale University, and Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin, Germany. I enjoyed the assistance of many librarians and archivists in several countries, but I would like to single out U.O.A. Esse of the Nigerian National Archives, Enugu, and Father Leo Laden of the Holy Ghost Provincialate, Dublin, Republic of Ireland. Among the elders who taught me aspects of Aro and Igbo history are the late Eze John O. Dike and Eze Jonas Ekemezie Uche, as well as K.G. Ufere, the late Aaron Muotoh, Michael Sunday Igwe, the late Jacob Okoro, Ukobasi Kanu-Igbo, J.G. Okoro, Thomas Okereke, the late Eneanya Akpu, and Azubuike Nkemakonam Nwaokoye-Emesuo (Periccomo). The late Princewill Imo gave me an insight into the Izuogu lineage in a way few are able and willing to offer. Obi and Ngozi Uche helped me clarify some items in the Aro vocabulary. Ohiaeri Okoro, Aloy Igbo and Fritz-Canute Ngwa, and my cousins Ifeanyi Ike and Emeka Okoronkwo, helped during crucial junctures of the fieldwork; Udi Ojiako provided me invaluable material about and insight into Nri-Awka history. I would like to single out J. Okoro Ijoma and the late Rev. Canon Amos Egwuekwe D. Mgbemene (“AED”) for their assistance during my fieldwork, including giving access to sources and contacts and their own invaluable intellectual reflections on Aro history. All my colleagues in the history department of UConn during 1999–2003 and in the African American studies department at Berkeley since 2003 have given me every support possible.

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Foreword

Paul E. Lovejoy

The interior of the Bight of Biafra has been somewhat of an enigma in the attempt to reconstruct the history of Africa during the era of transatlantic slavery. Its importance in the peopling of the Americas is clear. Perhaps one in six enslaved Africans came from the region. And while there is disagreement in estimating the relative proportions of people who can be identified as Igbo, Ibibio, and other ethnic categories and, indeed, in the meaning of these categories, it does seem certain that most people came from the relatively densely populated areas immediately inland from the coast behind the Niger Delta. Although Portuguese and other European traders did acquire some enslaved Africans from the Bight of Biafra in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the overwhelming majority of people from the region left in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and especially in the century after circa 1730. The enigma is that it has been difficult to document this migration, the causes of enslavement, and any relevant political and economic factors that might explain the phenomenon and its timing.

The reason for this difficulty relates to two factors. First, there is a paucity of documentary and oral sources that might be used in historical reconstruction for the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Second, there seems to be what might be called a “wall of silence” in the region about the past. Perhaps the lack of centralized institutions that can preserve details of the past explains this problem. There seem to be few historical benchmarks, such as the accession to office of political figures, their deaths, major battles, and such chronologically specific details that can be useful in historical reconstruction. There is historical memory, of course, but it is often connected with titled societies and associations that

require initiation and secrecy rather than the accumulation of knowledge about the chronological past. The political and social titles were related to positions of rank, but these are difficult to identify with specific individuals within a precise chronology. History tends to be telescoped, therefore, which has meant that historians have had to be innovative in attempting to provide a structure to analyze change over time.

For these reasons, G. Ugo Nwokeji's study of the Aro is important. One of the exceptions, the Aro have retained memories and traditions that help to establish a chronology for the interior of the Bight of Biafra. As the principal merchants in slaves and other commodities of long-distance trade, Aro merchants have left traditions of origin, settlement, and internal migration that coincide with the expansion of the slave trade in the Bight of Biafra. Nwokeji follows in the footsteps of K.O. Dike, F. Ekijuiba and David Northrup, whose pioneering work established the Aro role in the history of the Bight of Biafra. But the difficulty of historical reconstruction tied to a chronological framework plagued their research. By drawing on the latest estimates of the scale and timing of slave departures from the Bight of Biafra, Nwokeji is able to establish a chronology that can be correlated with Aro settlement patterns and oral traditions in the interior. The results of his analysis will be subject to debate and refinement, but the methodological breakthrough deserves notice.

How are historians to deal with gaps in documentation and historical memory that is telescoped? Why is it that in some places there is a wealth of historical documentation, while in other places it is difficult to reconstruct the basic chronology of the past? It seems as if some societies and some eras want to remember and document events, whereas in other contexts, such detail is not considered necessary and perhaps is even not desirable. Does the effort to restrict knowledge as "secrets" of titled societies interfere with historical memory? Can we talk about the interior of the Bight of Biafra as an area that was "without history" in that historical details were secondary to the focus on attainment, as measured in titles and membership, in which inheritance and tradition were tailored to the future rather than to chronicling the past? How did such constructions of knowledge and society affect those who were taken to the Americas as slaves? Nwokeji attempts to confront these questions in a provocative new interpretation of the history of the interior of the Bight of Biafra.