

ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE: THE IGBO RESPONSES SEEN FROM ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND ETHNOGRAPHIC DATA

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Abstract

The paper highlights the impact of trans-Atlantic slavery in Igboland, Nigeria, using both archaeological and ethnographic sources documented in parts of Igboland to show the people's reaction to the unfortunate socio-economic crisis in Africa. Even though the Aros collaborated in the inhuman trade, they were put in check by the activities of the Eze Nri who abhorred human slavery. The people's traditions and folktales are replete with this ugly phase of human experience. However, most of the archaeological features that relate to this event have given way to modern development except the watch tower which has been re-built to cope with the modern challenges of robbery and kidnapping as a result of its benefits during the slave trade in the past.

Introduction

The Atlantic slave trade, which the Aros played a middleman role in the course of their long distant trade, has been rightly described by Onwuejeogwu (1987) as the Dark Age in Igbo history. This ugly development in human history left in its wake impacts of great magnitude the imprints of which were recorded in some archaeological features and to some extent still remembered in our oral traditions and folktales. It is believed that the concept of slavery did exist in traditional African society. This is informed by the presence of the word for slave in some African language (Austen 1995; 129). The argument was that the Arab and Trans-Atlantic slave trades in human were a follow-up of the traditional slavery in Africa. However, during the early periods of the Trans Saharan trade, slaves were such important commodity that foreign merchants in Bornu markets refused payment of their goods in any item but slaves. As a result, slaves became the major currency for business transaction at that point in time (Bovil 1933).

In parts of Igboland, powerful individuals or warlords enjoyed the services of people as porters in long distant trades, farm workers and domestic servants. For instance, they enjoyed his protection and food. These peoples were his kinsmen and distant relations not really slaves in the strict sense of the word. This is different from both the trans-Saharan/Atlantic slaves trades. In my community Adazi-Ani, I grew up to see a man was nicknamed "Ukpa" (an oblong woven basket for carrying farm products). On enquiry, I was told that he was such a dedicated servant of Igwilo Okpalaeze a warrant chief in our village. He dutifully carried the chiefs farm products to the Eke markets. Such was his dedication at the time that the unwary would misconstrue him as a slave. In this case, however, *Ukpa* was not a slave but a fellow kinsman of the warrant chief. It is important therefore to take into consideration the socio-cultural contexts of various African societies in discussing the existence of slavery in traditional African societies.

Types of Slavery

The following types of slavery have been noted by Andah, et.al. (1996). They included traditional slavery which is rooted in man's cultural evolution and seen as a product of the rise of the

state civilizations the world over. This type of slavery Andah opined is not peculiar to any people, country or continent. Another type is the one that involved the outright “theft” of human beings from African continent and their exploitation as cheap labour in the American plantations and their treatment as being less than human. There is yet another type which was referred to as the “new slavery”. This represents an advancement of earlier forms of slavery which include the dependence of African economy on the whims and caprices of Europeans. As well as the brainwashing of Africans to look down or abandon their cultural heritage, a source of pride and driving force for sustainable development.

There is yet another type of slavery observed by Bovil (1933) in Sahel region amongst the Bomu and Mossi people. This is “Traffic in Eunuch”, which was in high demand in North Africa and Arabs where eunuchs served as harem keepers. In this case, healthy young boys and youths were raided, captured and gelded. The Mossi were known to be specially skilled in the operation which was shrouded in secrecy. This type of treatment is given as punishment to social miscreants, such as, thieves and other criminal activities (Bovil 1933). This may have been the first early signs of inhuman treatment of slaves which was encouraged on religious grounds. This practice was common in Arab world and long observed in much of Europe in the middle ages.

In this case Africa may be seen to be responding to external stimuli to curb the incidence of deviant behaviours in the society. For example, the Jews maintained large establishments in France for the supply of eunuchs to moslem Spain. This type of slavery was strongly condemned by Lord Lugard as the most serious charge against Islam in Africa because of her encouragement of slavery on religious grounds (Bovil 1933).

The Atlantic slave trade on the other hand was a different ball game in the sense that economic factors rather than religion played major roles in the buying as well as the treatment of slaves. The capitalist oriented economy of Europe found willing African traders who aided in their bid to penetrate the African hinterland. And at the same time, the Africans still tried as much as possible to preserve their middleman role in the increased demand for labour in the New World which guaranteed a steady market for slaves. It was this demand factor that oiled this iniquitous traffic in human beings (Andah et al 1996). It was the same demand for slaves Ekejiuba (1986) observed, led to considerable economic activities in Arochukwu and by 1750 a pattern of long distant trade was well established with the Aro traders reaching as far as Awka and Nsukka.

Methods of Slave Procurement

Early writers amongst whom were Sir Alan Burns (1955) and Talbot (1969) were of the view that the prime motive of early Igbo warfare was for the purpose of procuring slaves. This wrong notion of the Igbo intergroup relations was punctured by Harris (1942) in his study of the Bende people of Ozuitem. Harris observed that the people of Bende had no recollection or traditions of raids or war to obtain slaves. He noted however that a few war captives were sold as incidental products of battles and never the prime motives of waging war. Land disputes remained, and still remains, the main cause of war in Igboland. As early as 1682, Barbot quoted in Ekejiuba (1986) described the long distant trade between the coast and hinterland thus:

“all the vast number of slaves which the calabar traders sell to European nations...Are not prisoners of war, the greatest part being brought by those people of their inland neighbours who also buy them from the nations more remote from them...”

The Aro traders were said to have manipulated the *Ibini Ukpabi* deity of Arochukwu for the procurement of slaves (Latham 1973). Nevertheless, other Igbo deities did protect rather than support slavery. For example, people who are threatened to be sold into slavery readily surrendered themselves and sought the protection of a particular deity. Henceforth they became the children and property of the deity in question and nobody dared touch or sell them into slavery. What the Aro merchants did was to advance credit facilities to some non-Aro traders and when they defaulted in paying back, a *prima facie* case is then established to demand for a slave as ransom. For instance there is this oral tradition collected from Adazi-Ani of how a prosperous woman tobacco seller who failed to repay her Aro creditor because unknown to her, her son smoked away the tobacco. Consequently, she could not make full returns to the Aro trader. When the trader threatened and gave a deadline, the woman had no option than to take her only son to a deity called *Nwaocha* located in Oraukwu in a neighbouring community, for protection.

In some cases, most Igbo communities got rid of some of their undesirable elements by selling them into slavery. They may have found this as a better alternative than spilling the blood of their kinsmen on their land. The spilling of blood is an abomination among the Igbo and calls for ritual cleansing of the land by Nri priests (Onwuejeogwu 1981; Okpoko et al 2005). The number of slaves contributed through these methods may amount less when compared with the prevalent technique of slave raiding and kidnapping as the major and more regular source of slave supply (Ischei 1973). It has been observed and rightly, too by Izuakor (1993) that the usually misconstrued idea of "Slave raids" can be better understood if viewed as a practice whereby small parties of slave hunters deviously laid ambush and captured unsuspecting travelers, traders, strangers or children who were hurriedly spirited away from their immediate vicinity and sold to slave traders.

The method of procuring slaves by Aro traders, Ekejiuba (1986) observed was to start a small settlement in the community they penetrated. Thereafter, armed with fire arms they would attack the local inhabitants for slaves or intimidate them into supplying a given number of slaves. This nefarious activity of some Aro traders in Igbo communities that welcomed them may have been misconstrued as regular warfare for slave procurement by early writers. It was in response to the notorious activities of such Aro slave merchants like Okoli Ijoma who settled in Ndikelionwu that some vulnerable Igbo communities developed the strategies with which to check or ameliorate the ugly incidence of kidnappers in parts of Igboland especially in the Awka area and Nnewi areas.

The Igbo Responses to Atlantic Slave Trade

Following the activities of the Aros who were purveyors of European Atlantic slave trade in Igboland, the impact of the Atlantic slavery was adversely felt in Igbo hinterland. To reduce the menace of slavery in the region, some powerful community leaders built watchtowers (*Uno-aja*) one of which still survived and was observed at Awgbu. This fact was also recorded in oral tradition in Ibeanu Odenigbo compound in Adazi-Ani. These watch towers were built in the compounds of some influential and powerful personalities in their respective kindred (Ibeanu 1989; 1991).

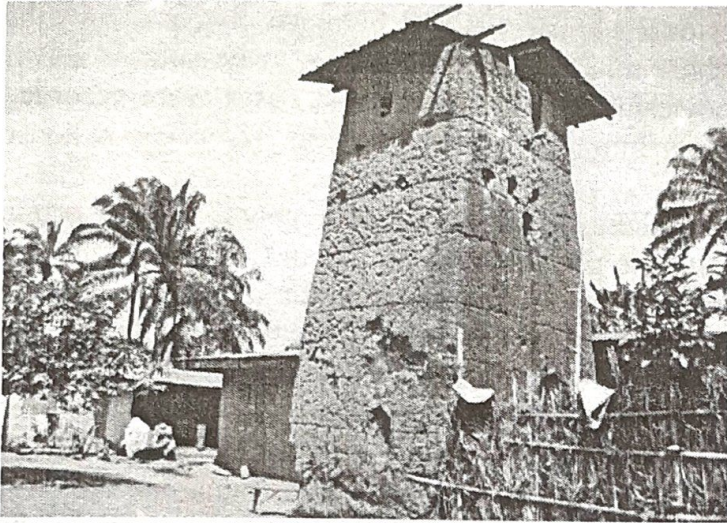


Plate 1: Dike Mmadueke *Uno-aja* from Ukpok.

Before the advent of *Uno-aja*, it is most likely that tree tops were put to limited use. For instance in my community, oral traditions point to some particular Iroko and *Uku* trees *Chlorophora excelsa* and *Austranella congolensis* where in the distant past wooden platforms were made for surveillance and protection of the women and children during wars. This practice was also recorded in Agulu. In 1906, Agulu warriors mounted tree tops in anticipation of the advance of the British soldiers to their town, when the watchman sighted the advancing British column, he alerted the people of an imminent danger through coded message using a wooden gong, *ekwe*. Although the watchman lost his life in the process, Agulu people were not disgraced as there were casualties on both sides before the superior weaponry of the British held sway (Onwuasoanya, 1984). It is important to note that the watchman had completed his assignment of alerting his people of the danger lurking in their territory before he was shot down. The tree top could not provide him with adequate security as *Uno-aja* would have done.

The activities of slave raiders may have compelled some Igbo communities to secure their settlements by fortifying boundaries with earthen perimeter walls of some 1.5 meters thick and 2.5 meters high. This is known as *Ekpe Enyi*, that is, elephant fort as observed between Adazi-Ani and Neni communities. The relics of some of these features could still be traced. Also, impregnable forests were deliberately left between communities with local hunters maintaining adequate surveillance. These forests were dotted with pit traps, *ovu*, where unsuspecting marauders and animals got trapped. Atterton (1983) had hinted on the importance of these features in settlement studies in Africa.

On individual levels, each man took adequate steps to secure his household. For example, in Awka area, with the threat of Okoli Ijoma most family compounds were and are still walled with higher perimeter mud walls of 2.5 meters high and 60cm thick. The wall is usually capped with *Igbegulu* (palm frond with thorns) to deter any person from scaling through the walls. Most powerful personalities and chiefs in Igboland modified their settlement patterns and structures to meet with the exigencies of the time. Some of them built *Uno-aja* (watch tower) or/and such other structure like *Ntuchi* or *Mkpa* noted in Chief Igwilo Okpalaeze of Adazi-Ani similar to modern prison cells. These

structures were built in the inner recess of the individual's house which is permanently dark. Only the owner can locate any of his valuables. This is where miscreants and captives to be sold as slaves were temporary kept for Aro merchants. Such powerful individuals in most cases were accorded great respect in their communities. The people render him also services such as, farm works, house construction and assistance in domestic chores.

In Nsukka, Udi and Awgu areas of Igboland, there still exist hill settlements. And the origin of which according to oral traditions, has to do with the period of instability in the society such as wars and slave raiding. In Nsukka for example, Hartle (1967) had documented a number of defence forts locally known as *Okpe*. About eleven of such forts were recorded and their functions in the past are still not clear. One of such forts close to the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, known as *Okpe-Igala* is located on a low hill called Uguwu Odenigwe. This fort consisted of a ditch and wall which is elliptical in shape. It measures about 80 meters in length and 45 meters wide. No one could say whether this was used for protection against slave raiding groups or a place where war captives/slaves were temporarily kept before embarking on their final journey is yet to be determined. However, Nsukka oral tradition is replete with the activities of Onojo Oboli, an Igala warlord who mounted military expeditions in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to expand Igala influence in the area (Oguagha 1988; 148). It may well be that these forts were meant for Onojo Oboli's soldiers/slave raiders for the safe keeping of war captives in Nsukka area. On the other hand, these defense forts could be the response of Nsukka people to marauding Igala warriors/slaves raiders.

Uno-Aja Architectural Design

The *Uno-aja* in both concept and design conformed with the Igbo traditional architecture. However, it differed from others as a result of its unique function(s). Our observations and reconstruction from oral tradition point to two types of watch tower the circular and the rectangular. The rectangular types conform to the traditional architecture of southern Igboland. The raw materials were all locally sourced and with adequate care and maintenance, the Okpala Obinagu in Awgbu town still survives (Ibeanu, 1991). See Fig. 1.

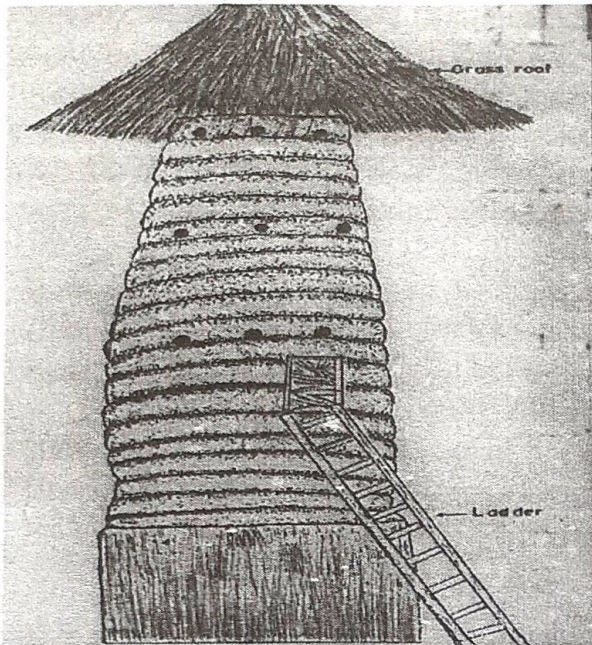


Plate 2: Okpala Obinagu from Awgbu.
(Reconstruction of the *Uno-aja*, based on oral information)

The approximate height of the watch tower was 10m with three floors and was capped with either woven grass or thatch made from raffia palm. It has a circumference of 8.5m at the base which is further preserved and reinforced in recent time with cement concrete. From the threshold of the entrance to the ground measures 3.35m. It was designed in such a way that the user would make use of a ladder to get into the watch tower which he pulls up and lets down on disembarking. The first compartment of the *Uno-aja* measures 6.5m in circumference and would conveniently accommodate about six men at a time. The man-hole provides access to the second compartment with a flight of stairs made of hardwood studded on the wall. The spy holes serve dual functions, namely monitoring and proper ventilation so as to ensure effective communication to the public.

The entrance door is fitted with traditional Igbo carved door with perfect joinery. The door is adorned in Igbo motif the zigzag geometric pattern known as Agaba (Ibeanu, 1989). From available oral traditional sources, it seems the *Uno-aja* was built for protection against the menace of slave merchants and their agents. As a result, we may place the emergence of *Uno-aja* defence tower between the 17th and 18th centuries. This period marked the high point of slavery in Igboland. Thus, some responsible Igbo leaders rose to the occasion by keeping surveillance from *Uno-aja* located on major access routes to the villages monitoring suspicious movements or strangers towards the villages. And when need arises children would be taken up in the *Uno-aja* for safe keeping.

Continuity and Change of Watch Tower

It is important to observe the current resurgence of watch towers in petrol stations, banks and compounds of some *nou-veaux riches* in cities and commercial centers in Igboland and parts of Nigeria today. The question is what led to the renewed interest in building watchtowers and making it relevant to the present society. It simply shows that the socio-economic conflicts of the past which led to the emergence of *Uno-aja* has not quite been resolved. Instead the new type of slavery as

earlier discussed has created a new contradiction of life. The capitalist economy being practiced in Nigeria has created what we may refer to as “internal slaves”. And the *nou-veaux riches* are doing everything to save their lives and properties. Today, it is no longer slaves raiders but army of frustrated and unemployed youths rubbing it in on the society as armed robbers/kidnappers. As a result, most of their business interests especially fuel stations; homes have watch towers in different forms and shapes. This is where security personnel stay to ward-off criminals. See Plate 3.



Plate 3: Watch tower at *Ogige* market Nsukka.

The theatre of war has changed from the village in 17th and 18th centuries to the urban centers where thieves and armed robbers hold sway. The new watch towers have everything in common with the *Uno-aja* of Atlantic slavery period except the raw material. The former is built with modern building materials and better designed. While *Uno-aja* offered better protection against bullet penetrating the mud walls.

In conclusion, the Europeans who demanded for slaves for their plantation must have realized that forced labour was more practicable outside the people's own setting. Andah et al (1996) is of the view that if the slaves were made to work in Africa, they would easily have found their way back to their original homes given their knowledge of the terrain. But with their transfer to such distant places away from Africa, they would have no alternative than to resign to fate. Because, it is said in Igbo folktale that when an individual crosses seven rivers and seven wilderness—“*Mmiri n’asaa n’agu n’asaa*” then the person has reached the land of the spirits. To be able to go back to the human world will depend on his ability to wrestle and defeat the spirits. This feat can only be accomplished by extraordinary man like *Ojadili*, but not without scars by the spirit (Odonke 1977). These folktales were probably woven around the people's experiences with the Atlantic slavery. Those who were sold never came back and when they did they were not the same again. If the people were to know and see the kind of treatment of the slaves en route to America as well as the inhuman treatments in the plantations, they would think twice before giving out their kinsman into slavery or would have made a choice between the local and export slavery.

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