

**THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE AND DEMOGRAPHIC
CONFIGURATION IN SOUTH-EASTERN NIGERIA**

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ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the place of the Atlantic slave trade in the demographic configuration or composition of southeastern Nigeria, drawing mainly on data from the Igbo area of the hinterland of the Bight of Biafra. It shows that in both the short and long terms, the trade affected the configuration not only among the rather well known Aro settlements, but also among coastal and hinterland communities, with varying degrees of social, economic and political effects.

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INTRODUCTION

Demographic history is yet to receive formal and comprehensive attention in the historical studies of the Igbo and the rest of Nigeria. In the context of the Atlantic slave trade, scholars under various persuasions have focussed largely on the *human exports* or slaves carted away from slave supplying areas like Igbo land to the New World, the number that died either en-route to the New World or during slave raids sponsored by dealers and the survival challenges and strategies of the slaves (freed or unfreed) in the diaspora. This focus generated much controversy among scholars because of contradictory perspectives which can easily be appreciated by Curtin's characterisation of the exercise as the *numbers game*. Significantly, the game has an enviable line up of serious minded scholars including, Curtin (1969), Lovejoy (1982:501), Manning (1990:172) Klein (1978) Zeleza (1997:54-56). And Inikori

(1982:37).

In spite of the controversy, it is arguable that the **numbers game** would be more complex in the context of the role of the Atlantic slave trade in the determination of demographic configuration in Igbo land. The grounds for this seem obvious. The generation of data shall draw a lot from speculation or extrapolation. Precise data may thus be unattainable. Records by or reports taken in the slave trade era by European dealers do not focus on the internal demographic mobility within and among communities and states. Furthermore, cultural and customary considerations compel contemporary informants to be reticent in divulging information. For instance, up to the present, the **social stigma** which memories of the slave trade re-enact makes it ~~difficult~~ ^{necessary} for the descendants of victims and beneficiaries of the trade to be extremely reserved in divulging information. Even so, both written and oral sources have enough data to enable us reconstruct the main issues, patterns and trends in the demographic configuration.

INDIGENOUS SETTING

One element which affected the slave trade in Igbo land, southeastern Nigeria, was the indigenous setting. By this we refer to the socio-political environment as well as the Igbo perception of slavery. Admittedly, there were variations in the Igbo cultural theatre on these subjects. But the features of similarity would seem to be overwhelming. Hence, we identify them and draw attention to significant exceptions.

The socio-political situation in Igbo land before and during the slave trade was one in which kinship played crucial role for both men and women. It was a situation in

which the social, economic and political structures were closely knit together on the basis of common lineage or common kinship. Solidarity or **ERIMA** was the bedrock of the socio-political system. The solidarity or **ERIMA** drew inspiration from the awareness that all members of each unit or segment of the Igbo socio-political structure were ~~was~~ kins-~~man~~ or kins-~~woman~~ whose rights and privileges were the concern of all. Every socio-political unit was thus a corporate organ which served as instrument for the attainment of individual and group interests. Thus for the Igbo, solidarity or **ERIMA** [an abstraction contracted from **ERIRI OMUMU NWA** or the umbilical cord] implies family-hood and this symbolises the organic link between people of common ancestry (Osuagwu 1989:52). That is, the individualism usually associated with the respective socio-political units did not negate the concept and practice of **SOLIDARITY** or **ERIMA**. Yet it must be stressed that it did not point towards a pan-Igbo socio-political organisation ^{until} ~~that~~ the forces of change from outside made this unavoidable from the late nineteenth century through the missionary-cum-colonial period (Anyanwu 1993:38-39). It is thus not surprising that there was no pan-Igbo response to the demographic challenges posed by the Atlantic slave trade. At that phase, **ERIMA** served the collective interest of the constituent groups that made up Igbo land. This type of collective action gave expression to the individual perceptions or interest of each group in the trade. In this way the socio-political situation also facilitated variations in the demographic configuration as well as other matters inspired by the Atlantic slave trade.

GEOGRAPHICAL MOBILITY AND INDIGENOUS SLAVERY

We shall now focus on two additional elements in the indigenous setting, namely, Igbo geographical mobility and slavery in Igbo land. They are part of the

inheritance which provided the environment or setting within which the Atlantic slave trade impacted on demographic configuration. On geographical mobility we accept the suggestion by Dike (1956:28 and 30); Isichei (1976:29); Ottenberg (1959:133 and 140); and Udo (1964:326) that a contributory factor was population pressure on farmland. This engendered migrations by groups like Mbaise and Awka. Some like the Aro emigrated in the interest of long-distance trade and in the service of their oracle - **Ubiniukpabi**; often establishing settlements which were not less than ninety-eight by 1700 - as pointed out by Jones (1961:124-125); Basden (1921:171-176); Isichei (1976:29); Meek (1937:18); and Leonard (1906:78). Also, ritual agents and crafts specialists, particularly from Awka and Nri engaged in regular mobility (vide: Basden, (1921:27 and 78-79); Henderson, (1972:371-373); Onwuejeogwu, (1972:41-53), Talbot (1926:596). All the forms of mobility so far indicated were **voluntary** on the part of the participants. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that for centuries before the intervention of Europeans in Igbo land, the people had developed networks of commercial, religious and economic relations not only among individuals but also among groups-a reality brilliantly discussed by Webb, (1995:35-39).

On slavery as part of the indigenous inheritance we briefly state that the phenomenon existed. However, as Uchendu (1977:126-127) and Anyanwu, (1990) emphasise the situation of slavery indigenous to the Igbo does not conform to the elements stressed in the western concept and practice of slavery. While the western concept presents the slave as property of the slave owner without rights, the slave in Igbo land is seen differently. Uchendu aptly captures the distinction when he asserted that slavery constitutes a continuum of status disabilities and the disabilities ~~and the disabilities~~ vary with the number of "commodity rights" in a person acquired (1977:123).

In brief a slave in Igbo society has relative rights and could be assimilated into the family of his or her owner. Female slaves could become wives while male slaves could assume leadership roles in the lineage depending on the capacities they possess and manifest. Some slaves like the Pawns could be redeemed, and their owners usually took great care to ensure their safety and protection. Ultimately, slaves were perceived as the **adopted children** of their owners whose situation or condition was largely determined by the "**adopted mothers**" influence. But it may be ^{an} exaggeration to talk in terms of rights. It seems more accurate to talk in terms of privileges for slaves in Igbo land.

THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE IN IGBO LAND

The slave of this era was visibly and crudely advertised as property without kinship and other rights. The slaves were bought at the coast, having passed from the sellers to the European merchants through middlemen. Igbo land was the source of the highest supply of slaves in the eastern Niger Delta centres of Bonny, Elem Kalabari and Calabar, with the climax in the eighteenth century when according to Isichei (1976:43) a report by Captain Adams indicated that over 20000 slaves were sold annually at Bonny and 16,000 of them were Igbo.

The key explanation for Igbo land's vulnerability was that

With its dense population and many small independent states (it) was particularly susceptible to exploitation of this kind. The essentially local nature of their loyalties led the little Ibo States to make war on each other, frequently kidnapping each other; Isichei (1976:47)

It is, however, easy to appreciate the view that the Igbo had economic convictions for their, albeit desperate, sustained involvement in the slave trade. Perhaps, the view that slave raiding was the basis of Aro Economy in the peak period

of the trade may be valid for other Igbo groups even if the degree of its importance differed or varied- vide: Igwegbe (1962: 75) Emphasis on variation highlights the truth that some Igbo cultural and/or geographical areas were more involved in the buying and selling of slaves than others. For instance, the Aro, Oguta, Ohambele, Bende and Uzoakoli were more involved in it than the Okigwe, Orlu, Mbano, Mbaise and Obowo whose locations were farther away from the Niger Delta and Cross River border. Similarly, because of pressures engendered by external forces like Aro presence, some like the Nike in present day Enugu State became key participants in the slave trade. But in all the Aro in both their homeland (Arochukwu) and in their several settlements in and outside Igbo land within the Biafran interior were the prime movers of the scope and nature of the Atlantic slave trade in southeastern Nigeria. In a "global" review with particular reference to the labour process in Igbo land, Thomas-Emeagwali (1990:1-8) established clearly how the overall state of Igbo economy was promotive of slavery in the *indigenous* and trans-Atlantic periods.

The unevenness in economic status among groups or individuals affected the geographical mobility and other aspects of the slave trade in Igbo land. Subsequent discussion elucidates how these elements affected the configuration of populations in Igbo land, southeastern Nigeria, under the impact of the Atlantic slave trade.

CATEGORIES OF DEMOGRAPHIC CONFIGURATION

The elements or factors of variation make it possible for us to consider in terms of categories of demographic configuration, namely, the covert and the overt. The covert category refers to configurations that are largely invisible to the uninformed because the migrants (either as individuals or groups or both) do not have separate social, political and economic identities from their host communities. In short, they are

configurations based on integration of former slaves and erstwhile slave dealers in the life of host-communities or groups in Igbo land and the rest of Eastern Nigeria.

On the other hand, the overt category refers to configurations in which emphasis on separate identities for the host communities and migrants is maintained. The separate identities in this way became active forces in the historical evolution^{of} the communities._k

OVERT CATEGORY

Written and oral sources indicate that the Aro represent the ideal of the overt type of configuration. As prime-movers in the definition of trading frontiers, the Aro engaged in several movements out of their Arochukwu home land. They migrated and generally initiated new settlements within or in the neighbourhood of pre-existing Igbo communities. Each such settlement retained its Aro identity and continued to maintain links with the home land. Thus, the phenomenon of *Aro diaspora* evolved largely but not solely out of the Atlantic slave trade. In fact, it is extremely difficult to separate the expansion of the Aro and their influence in Igbo land and the rest of Eastern Nigeria in the period before 1900 from the impetus derived from the impact of the Atlantic slave trade in which (as in other aspects of trade in the period) they were the chief controllers, or indeed dictators as has been suggested by Ekejiuba (1972:20). The consensus among scholars and informants confirms this perception of the Aro as engines of the Atlantic slave trade as well as other aspects of trade.

Therefore, the distinction between Aro settlers inspired by the desire for the slave trade and those inspired by other forms of trade or economic advantage (land, for example) remains illusory. This is why the Aro settlements in Igbo land represent the ideal of demographic configuration resulting very much from the impact of the

Atlantic slave trade. These settlements are estimated between ninety-eight and one hundred and fifty-five, Chuku (1993:175) which are located in Igbo land's existing administrative units designated states, namely, Enugu, Ebonyi, Imo, Abia and Anambra as well as the non-Igbo states of Akwa Ibom, Cross River and Rivers. It is also to be stressed that the predominance of **Ubiniukpabi**, the Aro oracle, agents and associated settlements did not diminish the importance of the Atlantic slave trade as a major factor in Aro migrations and settlements. The oracle itself was both directly and indirectly a facilitator of the slave trade. According to Isichei (1976:64), the traditions of various groups relate that it was in travelling to oracles, such as **Ubiniukpabi**, that they first learnt that ~~men~~^{people} could be sold. As it happened, the apogee of what Afigbo (1981) described as the **Era of Aro Ascendancy** in Igbo cultural evolution also corresponds with the peak period of the Atlantic slave trade-the eighteenth century. Other researches by Chuku (1989), Dike and Ekejiuba (1990) confirm this verdict.

We still need more evidence to reduce possible doubts on our view that Aro settlements are the ideal of overt demographic configuration accentuated by the Atlantic slave trade in our area of study. Most of the settlements are traced to persons or groups who came either as slave dealers ~~or~~^{or} slaves. This is true of Aro settlements in Arondizuogu, Ndikelionwu, Ngwa land, Afikpo, Umulolo, Bende, Ihube and Nsukka, Isichei (1976:64) asserts that both Arondizuogu and Ndikelionwu were founded by slaves. In the case of Ndikelionwu, the slave-founder was Ikelionwu, a trusted and gifted slave in the control of an Aro trader. For Arondizuogu, it was IHEME who was later joined by his master, Izuogu.

In all these places, each Aro settlement was seen as a group with its own identity and aspirations. Host communities usually recognized them as migrants just as

the Aro themselves also remained faithful to their links with the Aro settlements ^{which} were also linked to one another in a manner that was not easily noticeable by the non -Aro settlements in a way became **bold reminders** of the era of the slave trade; usually treated with awe and trust in a way that suggested that they had a stigma which host communities and neighbours must reckon with.

We still have to stress that, some demographic configurations in the overt category were not just classic instances of Aro settlement borne out of formal and conscious decisions. Instead they could be seen as the unintended results of activities associated with the Atlantic slave trade. The reference is to the overt configurations which developed at slave trade routes and market centres. Most of them acquired visibility in the post-abolition era because the migrants which included both the dealers and the 'liberated' or integrated slaves reasoned that their future survival would be more predictable if they settled in their new locations than when they returned to their original home lands. These included both the Aro and non -Aro. Notable examples of this kind of overt configuration were Oguta, Nike, Uzoakoli, Bende and Onitsha (cf. Isichei (1973:62), Horton (1964:22) and Klein (2000) Their action was a reflection of the fact that the post-abolition era did not lead to the end of the internal slave trade. Slaves were still used by indigenous dealers in the labour demanded for the production of palm oil and palm kernel which the so-called **legitimate trade** depended on - a phenomenon that applied to the west of West Africa and which scholars including Ajayi (1990) have drawn attention to.

Finally, we add that the overt category had manifestations in non-Ibo speaking areas: Bonny, Elem Kalabari, Okrika, Brass and Old Calabar-all at the coastal area where they served as slave trade centres for European buyers. Oral history conducted

by Anyanwu (1998) revealed that in Obowo, Mbaise and Okigwe memories of slaves (with particular emphasis on girls and women) who settled in the coastal area were still alive. In the years after the British abolition of the slave trade, girls and women who found going ^{back home} very unsafe and insecure were quickly married into the households of either fellow male slaves or of the slave dealers or owners. Indeed, in January 2000, two adult children (a son and a daughter) whose mother was the wife of man in the Obowo area made a **search** or **tracer** visit to Obowo trying to locate the family of their mother. They carried pictures of their mother and her Obowo husband who had died many years ago. Reports reveal that some people recognized the husband in question and made useful efforts to connect the children with contemporary members of the family. My informant insisted on anonymity and the present writer/researcher continues to oblige. Our emphasis is that contemporary oral history adds strength to the written accounts which indicate overt manifestations of demographic configuration involving Igbo migrants at the coastal towns as a consequence of the Atlantic slave trade. A summary of the recorded accounts for the nineteenth century shows that: more than half the population of old Calabar were Igbo and that most slaves in Brass were from Igbo land, vide: Pratt (1905:147). It is thus likely that European visitors to the coast who reported in styles that suggested that the coastal area was part of Igbo land were led into such conclusion by the reality of the covert presence of the Igbo in the area at the time of the visits in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

COVERT CATEGORY

It is extremely difficult to get accurate census of the covert category of demographic configuration due to the Atlantic slave trade because affected individuals either as former slaves or former slave dealers bear continuing social stigma in Igbo

demographic configuration due to the Atlantic slave trade because affected individuals, either as former slaves or former slave dealers, bear continuing social stigma in Igbo society. A dimension that strengthened that difficulty is that many slaves or would-be slaves who faced the increased insecurity and humiliation that followed the abolition measures opted for voluntary or forced sale to the *gods*, thereby becoming Osu or outcast, a status that became worse than that of the slave or OHU. And, since by law, as Osu, communities whose former slaves moved into the status of Osu are ill-positioned to discuss the status of slaves in their communities. Consequently, the covert manifestation of their demographic configuration became even more real. The overall result is that it is only in cases that former slaves and ex-slave dealers have positive image as a result of other forms of achievements such as in education and politics that we easily get to learn that such families or persons have antecedents traceable to circumstances associated with the Atlantic slave trade.

Most of the covert demographic configurations easily talked about are those whose life encounters do no longer bear the social stigma associated with the slave trade or slavery. As it is, one may with justification insist that the existence of covert situations of demographic configuration in Igbo land or south eastern Nigeria is more widespread than the overt situations which have greater visibility. The response given by respondents who were questioned on the subject in five randomly chosen Igbo towns which are presented in Table I below is quite instructive. Respondents were required to give the number of families of former slaves or slave traders in their towns, indicating their occupations.

Table I

NUMBER OF EX-SLAVES AND DEALERS IN IGBO TOWNS		
TOWN	NUMBER	
	Ex-slaves	Dealers
A	150	10
B	114	16
C	170	15
D	320	24
E	130	16

Statistically, when it is known that the population of each town was estimated at above 20,000, we may be inclined to suggest that the figures are not significant. To do so would amount to overlooking facts which are not stated in the table. By some curious coincidence most of the leading families in terms of wealth, education, Christianity and other elite positions including those of the high civil-cum-public services belong to both categories. In town 'A' for instance, the most powerful political family is that of a former slave dealer who became a polygamist-with over ten wives- and whose children, grandchildren and great grandchildren have the money, the education and civil service positions. In addition to possessing the traditional rulership of the town, the family has for decades been very influential in the voting behaviour of the town during all elections. This high achievement record is true of all the other towns and an informant tried to rationalise it thus:

being conscious of the stigma which their involvement in the slave trade placed on them, they quickly took to endeavours and opportunities by Christianity and education and in many cases became the pioneer elites in various facets of life-business, industry, civil services, religion especially Christianity... (Onyeka: 2000).

In other words, though numerically low, they are widespread and qualitatively high. Under their covert image they represent a significant component in their communities. The Imo State of Nigeria survey revealed that every local government area (if not every town) has reasonable number of families linked with former slaves and former slave dealers who have become integrated in the life of their communities and constitute the covert category in the demographic configuration under consideration.

EFFECTS AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CONFIGURATION:

The preceding paragraphs might have revealed that for Igbo land, southeastern Nigeria, the Atlantic slave trade was a major factor in the demographic configuration of the land. We have tried to stress that there were other influences, notably, the environments, geography, other forms of trade, etc. But we are firm in the view that in both the short and long term perspectives, the Atlantic slave trade is significant in the demographic configuration of the region.

A consideration of some of the effects of the configuration in the development of the region shall further enhance this assertion.

First, we consider the impact on the relations between the coastal communities and the hinterland Igbo. The trend by which the Igbo moved to the coast was accentuated during the Atlantic slave trade period. The demands of the abolition which led to trade in sylvan products further intensified contact between the coastal peoples and the hinterland. At the same time, the Igbo slaves in the Niger Delta and Cross River areas faced economic, political and social problems as they sought to win acceptance and incorporation in the communities. A few achieved social and political mobility (Jaja of Opobo, for instance) but many remain at the level of servitude, being

exploited by the wealthy in the coastal communities.

Despite the pains of the slave trade (even in the abolition phase) the contact between Igbo land and the Europeans in the *regime* of legitimate trade was via the middlemen of the Delta. It took the incursion of missionaries, traders and colonial authorities in the last years of the nineteenth and the opening years of the twentieth centuries before direct contact between the Igbo and the Europeans. The immediate result of the penetration was the laying of foundation for the formal incorporation of Igbo land into the economic, social and ultimately political orbit of Britain in particular and Europe in general. As is well known, in the colonial setting, the British policy intensified the differences in ambition and aspiration between the coastal peoples and the Igbo of the hinterland. Both peoples became subservient to British interests or domination.

Attempts to survive in the colonial setting often put the two into unhealthy competitions and rivalries that have perpetuated the syndrome of new forms of slavery in southeastern Nigeria; a slavery that can be contextualized both nationally and internationally. In other words, just as the coastal peoples and the Igbo were not far sighted enough to engage in joint action to resist the Atlantic slave trade so have they proved short-sighted to engage in collective action to up-turn the lingering forms of slavery occasioned by their membership of the Nigerian state on the one hand and the world community on the other. They appear to be hostages of uncomplimentary and unhelpful stereotypes of mistrust and prejudice nurtured in the, socio-political and economic landscape by local surrogates and external promoters of the old (trans-Atlantic) and new (colonial and post colonial) forms of slave trade and slavery. In this sense, the demographic configuration which emerged in Eastern Nigeria during the

Atlantic slave trade has had repercussions that have remained dysfunctional to the promotion of inter-ethnic harmony in the region.

Similarly, in terms of inter-group and other forms of relations among the Igbo themselves, the legacy of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in the sphere of demographic configuration has been anti-thetical to group cohesion in the pursuit of common objectives. It is true that in many cases of external threat, the Igbo have demonstrated high level solidarity. But when it comes to nurturing an enduring cohesion among the component parts, the demographic configuration arising from the Atlantic slave trade has been an obstacle. For economy of space and time, one gives a resume of a typical perception on the role of that configuration in Igbo social, economic and political life. The focus is on the Aro who we identified as the ideal of the overt manifestation of the demographic configuration.

An Owerri interview in June, 2000 states:

Many Igbo communities participated indirectly in the slave trade, primarily as victims but the Aro in Arochukwu and their settlements took part directly and gained from the trade. They were well located for the evil trade and they understood the evil in it more and earlier than many other Igbo in the interior. They used their oracle and craft to dominate the trade and occupy important land areas in parts of Igbo land. This facilitated the slave trade with attendant repercussions. In short, every Aro settlement was an outpost for the trade. Without them, the Igbo would not have been so devastated by the inhuman trade. You must remember that at times they used Abam warriors to force people into slavery. They operated very much like a cult; each colony was linked to the other and they were all linked to their base at Arochukwu. Even in the British conquest period, they served as guides to the conquerors. In the colonial period and since independence, they have been working together to ensure that only they or their relations and friends hold important positions. In some places they craftily took the land of the host communities and the present day descendants of such communities are in very

hostile contest with them over the land. Even in marriage, it is easier for an Aro man to marry a non-Aro girl than for the non-Aro man to marry an Aro girl. The Aro girl would cleverly trick the non-Aro man out. Recently here in Imo State, one of them ~~was~~^{is} the chief Executive appointed only people of their stock to all the key positions in government. Of course, it was during the military and all protests fell on deaf ears.

As hinted earlier, this focus on the Aro settlements is because they represent the ideal of the demographic configuration associated with the Atlantic slave trade. One may therefore miss the salient emphasis if one begins to think it is unique to the Aro. Furthermore, the image given by this informant in 2000 A.D. is not different from the images in works by some scholars, notably, Afigbo (1972:74) and Chuku (1993:181-184). The same is also true of the findings of Ijoma and Njoku (n.d. :24) with respect to Afikpo where the Aro were reported to comprise one third of the population. It will be extremely misleading to think that these elements apply only to the overt or typical areas that had the overt demographic configuration. In Nike the host communities are the ones who use the demographic configuration to subjugate the migrants or slaves. All told, in Nike the families with slave background are denied all the rights due to free citizens in the modern world. Additionally, though the law of 1956 in Eastern Nigeria provided that nobody can be treated or addressed as Osu, yet field reports would suggest that Osu phenomenon has not left its hold on the social, economic and political processes of the Igbo. Church leaders including Archbishop A.J.V. Obinna recently spoke against its practice. Clearly such appeals cannot be without cause. To the extent , (as we indicated) the Atlantic slave trade contributed to intensification of the Osu system of slave and increased its demographic location to that extent could it be argued that the configuration remains a constraint to social cohesion and advancement in Igbo

land. Or take this case which is typical of Igbo society. In one autonomous community in Imo State, a vibrant and articulate man who had been reputed for helpful and positive contributions to decisions on **public good** summoned fellow citizens to his house and after presenting the necessary kola-nut and other items, informed them of his desire to be a community leader - NZE. The position was vacant and was to be filled by election. Incidentally, this became the time for **his people** to inform him that he was the grandson of a former slave. The injury this kind of attitude does to public good in Igbo land cannot be adequately measured. This last example is derived from the covert category of demographic configuration.

CONCLUSION

This Atlantic slave trade is an important influence on the demographic configuration in Igbo land, southeastern Nigeria. Though it looks distant in history, its significance in the social, economic and political processes of the region has persisted. To a large extent it has provided veritable excuse for unhealthy policies in the historical evolution of the people. While other elements (like education, urbanisation and partisan politics) have their own impact, the significance of the demographic configuration should be fully appreciated in fashioning programmes for mutual harmony among component Igbo groups on the one hand and between them and their neighbours in Eastern Nigeria^{on} the other.

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