

CHAPTER 8

Igboland, Slavery, and the Drums of War and Heroism

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IGBOLAND IS AMONG THE AREAS of West Africa that experienced the most intensive slave-trading activities during the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Although the total number of Africans enslaved remains unknown, available estimates suggest that about 637,500 Igbo slaves, amounting to 75 percent of the total shipments from the Biafran hinterland, landed in the Americas between 1640 and 1800 (see Oriji 1986). Furthermore, ex-slaves of Igbo ancestry constitute a majority of the population in Bonny, Okirika, and many other eastern delta states that served as depots and exchange centers for European merchants.

Much is already known about how the slave trade was organized in the Igbo hinterland and its impact on local communities (Oriji 1986; see also Oriji 1982; Dike 1956; Ekejiuba 1972; Northrup 1978). But the growing literature on the slave trade provides little insight into the responses it elicited in the hinterland. My research uses oral traditions and other sources to examine how individuals, families, and communities responded to the slave trade and enslavement.

Igbo response differed from one area to the other, and it is necessary to distinguish between the various ecological zones of the region, and explain the degree to which they were either involved in slave trading or subjected to slave

raids and the other forms of social violence they engendered. The major ecological zones relevant to this study are

- western Igbo communities, which offer us some of the earliest evidence of slavery in Igboland;
- northern Igboland, including Okigwe, the Enugu-Nsukka area, and the Awka-Onitsha axis, which experienced the most intensive raids and provided the most diverse forms of resistance;
- riverine and coastal towns, whose middlemen sold captives to European traders;
- southeastern Igbo communities, including the homeland of the Aro slave traders and their Abam warriors, who were the main slave dealers in the hinterland;
- southern Igbo communities of Owerri, Mbaise, Ngwa, Asa-Ndokki, Ikwere-Etche, and other places, which were occasionally raided by Abam warriors.

WESTERN IGBOLAND

Cult Slaves, Exiles, and Escapees

Cult slavery is probably one of the most ancient forms of enslavement in Igboland. Its genesis lies in the holistic cosmology of agrarian Igbo societies dominated by the earth deity (Ala/Ana), in which there was no separation between religious power and the judicial and other arms of government. Major laws that were of common interest to a society were then ritualized with the earth force to transform them into the sacerdotal realm. Thus, individuals who violated the sacred laws of Ala involving homicide, incest, and stealing of farm crops were accused of committing acts of sacrilege (Iru Ala) and held liable and responsible for their actions (Meek 1937, 5; Oriji 1989). The Igbo system of jurisprudence was similar to the Mosaic law in that it did not provide much leeway for those found guilty. An individual, who committed homicide for example, might be killed or sold into slavery, unless he/she paid adequate compensation to the injured family, and carried out a protracted and expensive ritual cleansing ceremony in Ala shrine (Isa Ihu, or washing one's face) (Orijı 1989). The tragic fate of Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1984) after he had committed manslaughter, clearly illustrates how rigidly the laws of Ala were enforced. In spite of the towering heights he had attained in the Umuofia clan, Okonkwo had to go into exile with his family to his maternal home, undergo ritual cleansing, and pay painful penalties, including the destruction of his yams and his compound (31–33, 113–18).

Individuals who wanted neither to take refuge in Ala shrine and become Osu (cult slaves) nor to go into exile had an option left for them to save their

lives. They might escape say at night to a distant place to found new homes, and continue to live as free citizens. The escapees are associated with the origins of many communities like the Ogwashi-Ukwu and Ibusa of western Igboland, the Ugboko of Udi, the Osu clan of Mbano, and the Umuru and Umogba of the Ikwerre-Etche axis (Oriji 1992, 1994, 33–34).

Strategies against the Slave Trade

The earliest documented account of slave raids and kidnapping in the Igbo area comes from the memoir of Olaudah Equiano, which happens also to be the first “slave narrative” in the New World (Edwards 1969, 9). Although Vincent Carretta has, in a recent study (1999), raised issues about Equiano’s nationality and date of birth, he affirmed the historicity of some of the events he recorded. In addition, Equiano’s account of his capture and enslavement in his homeland did not differ remarkably from the nineteenth-century oral accounts of the slave trade collected in parts of the Igbo hinterland by G. I. Jones (1995) and other ethnohistorians. The memoir provides some insight on the diverse measures the Igbo were taking to prevent the depredations of the slave raiders. According to Equiano, he had undergone some military training, including shooting and throwing javelins. Presumably, he and other young boys, after their training, were expected during their adolescent years to become members of the local militia responsible for defending their community against the incursions of slave raiders and other agents of violence. The militia was equipped with “fire-arms, bows and arrows, broad two-edged swords and javelins” (Edwards 1969, 9). Equiano also revealed that some children acted as scouts, helping in the absence of their parents to reconnoiter the movement of the slave raiders (Jones 1967, 84–85).

Admittedly, we do not know if the slave raiders Equiano discussed were from communities in his homeland, which some believe lies in western Igboland (Jones 1967, 61). The notorious Ekumeku society — if it existed by then — is known to have carried out intensive raids in the area during the nineteenth century. It is also likely that the raiders were the Abam, whom the Aro used in recruiting slaves in parts of the Biafran hinterland. Equiano did affirm that his people were already linked with long-distance traders he called “Stout Mahogany-colored men,” or Oye-Ebo (“Red Men”), who sold commodities like firearms and gunpowder, probably in exchange for slaves (85).

Jones has hypothesized that the red men, who probably rubbed themselves with camwood as a disguise, were Igbo traders (65). Presumably, they were the

Aro, who in fact used camwood and sold it in the hinterland with other commodities Equiano mentioned in his memoir.

NORTHERN IGBOLAND

The organization of the Aro trade network and the symbiotic relationship that existed between Aro traders and their Abam warriors have been examined by many researchers (e.g., Oriji 1980; Ekejiuba 1972; Dike 1956). It is necessary, however, to point out that the Aro adopted diverse methods in recruiting slaves, including their oracle (Ibini Ukpabi), and the Okonko (Ekpe) society, which served as major judicial institutions in the hinterland. But recent historiography confirms that the Abam constituted the primary organ of violence the Aro used in dominating the slave trade during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A majority of the slaves they recruited were obtained by raids, kidnapping, and at times, slave wars involving the Abam.¹ The success the Abam achieved in warfare lies primarily with the skillful guerilla tactics they adopted during an incursion, and is not due to their superior weapons. Lightning raids were often conducted at night against an unsuspecting community, enabling the Abam to return safely to their base. As this study will show, there were some cases when vigilant communities that caught Abam spies or had inklings of an impending invasion routed the invaders.

As I have argued elsewhere (1986), Abam raids were not evenly spread in Igboland. They were largely concentrated in the northern section, which was distant from the Arochuku (the homeland of the Aro), lacking the Okonko society and other networks of trade the Aro had helped in spreading in parts of southern Igboland. The semisavanna environment of the north also helped in facilitating the movement of the Abam in the area. Each community the Abam invaded, however, devised its own methods of responding to the raids, as evidenced by the following examples.

According to oral tradition, Enwelana, the priestly king of the Nri (Eze Nri), was so deeply touched by the loss of human lives and the socioeconomic dislocations caused by the Abam that he appealed to Okolie Ijoma of Ndiikelionwu, the leading Aro slave dealer, who engaged the Abam's services to end the slave trade. But as Okolie Ijoma failed to heed the warning, the Eze Nri is said to have pronounced a ritual curse on him and the Abam, declaring them unwanted persons in his domain (Osuala 2000, 10–11). The curse may not have stopped the raids, but it put the Aro and Abam in greater physical jeopardy, since anyone in Nri was free to attack and even kill them without being accused

of committing murder and forced to carry out a ritual cleansing ceremony in the shrine of the earth goddess. In addition, if a variant of the tradition is correct, the curse may have had some psychological effect, since Okolie Ijoma was said to have been so troubled by the calamities that might befall him that he had to apologize to the Eze Nri for his nefarious activities (*ibid.*).

Like the Nri, the people of Enugu-Ukwu town were constantly exposed to Abam raids. Their response was to adopt the strategy of the fox and wage a cold war against the Abam by avoiding direct military confrontations with them. The strategy involved dropping poisoned food, water, and wine for the Abam in strategic routes and other places they often used to invade the town. This strategy terrified the Abam, who mysteriously died in large numbers before an invasion, and in consequence, they excluded the town from future military operations (Isichei 1977, 84–85; Oriji 1992).

Abam incursions into Awka elicited a different response from its inhabitants. They mobilized themselves, forming a local vigilante group armed with Snider rifles to repulse the incursions. The sound of the guns alerted the local population to an invasion and thus helped in aborting Abam raids. The Awka also built high walls around their houses to foil kidnappers. During slavery the walls not only had perforations for firing guns but towers for monitoring the movement of intruders (Oriji 1992).

Some communities, however, reasoned that due to their limited manpower and material resources they could not effectively defend themselves against the Abam. Such communities allied with their neighbors for their mutual defense. Typical examples are the Umuchu, consisting of Iwhite, Ogwugwu, and Okpu-na-Achala — autonomous communities that are said to have collectively hired the services of a native doctor, not only to cement their unity but to prevent Abam incursions with his medicine, called Ichu (*lit.*, prevention, driving away). It was from the medicine that the community derived its present common name, Umuchu (children of Ichu). The native doctor, the tradition further claims, buried symbols of Ichu in strategic places like the central Nkwo market and Odere Lake, which are currently called Nkwo Ichu and Odere Ichu, respectively (Oriji 1994, 47). Similarly, the Isuochi and Nneato of Okigwe formed confederations that helped them in warding off Abam invasions (Isichei 1976, 85).

RIVERINE AND COASTAL TOWNS

Unlike northern Igboland, the slave trade in the riverine and coastal towns was dominated by their middlemen, who purchased slaves primarily from the Aro

and other hinterland traders. The Aro, however, refrained from raiding the towns because they were landlubbers, unskilled in canoe warfare. In addition, the Aro realized that it would be suicidal to mount military operations against the towns fortified with cannons and other imported weapons that were unavailable in the hinterland. Slavery in the area was thus conducted by riverine towns like Aboh, which took advantage of its superior weapons to raid nearby towns on the Niger, such as Onitsha, forcing its king to transfer the central market to a more secure place near the Anambra River in the middle of the nineteenth century (Henderson 1972, 86).

SOUTHEASTERN IGBOLAND

Abam raids in southeastern Igboland are relatively few because the Aro discouraged military incursions in their homeland to avoid the disruption of trade and the large number of pilgrims and others who were visiting Arochukwu to consult their oracle. In addition, the Abam and other communities in the so-called Aro confederacy are said to have formed a pact not to raid one another. They also used the Ekpe/Okonko society associated with the Aro to promote their commercial interests. According to Jones, Ekpe evolved during the eighteenth century among the trading elite of the Ekoi and the Efik-Ibibio of the Cross River region. Ekpe later diffused into nearby Arochukwu communities, whose leading traders were the first Igbo people to be initiated into the society. The Aro then began to propagate Ekpe (Okonko in Igbo) during their expansion, seeking out leading people in strategic exchange centers who served as their commercial agents and founders of Okonko in their localities (Eze Ngbara). Local leaders of Okonko, for example, provided security and hospitality to itinerant Aro traders and also sold slaves to them, in exchange for firearms, gin, and other imported goods. Okonko helped the Aro to trade and at times settle in communities where they would have encountered some stiff resistance (Jones 1964, 19).²

In spite of the peaceful method the Aro adopted in their expansion, the Igbere example suggests that they and their Abam warriors engaged in kidnapping and raids in some southeastern Igbo communities. Igbere traditions claim that their community, originally called Ebiri, after their eponymous ancestor, was targeted on two occasions for enslavement by the Aro, known in local parlance as Aro Oke Igbo (Ukaegbu 1974, 13; Oriji 1992, 181).

During the first wave of the incursions, the Aro deployed the Abam to kidnap Ebiri people, forcing them to flee from their original homeland in Oroni to

a new location presently called Eke-Igbere. The flight of the Ebiri might have helped them become more vigilant in safeguarding their new settlement. They mobilized and armed their warriors, who patrolled their community regularly. It is then not surprising that when the Abam mounted their second raid against the Ebiri, which took the form of a full-scale military invasion, they were routed and forced to retreat. The heroism the Ebiri displayed during the invasion is remembered in local folklore, and they have continued to proudly preserve their collective identity by calling their town Igbo Erughi (“the town the Aro could not reach/capture”), which was anglicized as Igbere during the colonial period (Ukaegbu 1974, 13; Oriji 1992, 181).

Abam raids in southern Igboland were, for a variety of reasons, relatively less widespread than in the northern section. The dense tropical rainforest presented logistic problems for the Abam, deterring their movement from one place to the other. As already mentioned, the Okonko society, which served as an arm of the Aro trade network, was well established among many communities stretching from the Owerri-Orlu and Mbano-Mbaise axis to the Ngwa-Ikwerre area and elsewhere. Moreover, some of the communities were known for their martial culture and vigilance in warding off invaders. The Ikoro war gong, located either in their common cultural center or in a compound of the traditional holder of authority, was an important institution in the area. The martial music of Ikoro alerted a community of an impending Abam invasion. Its secret messages, which could be decoded only by elders and warriors, helped them mobilize for civil defense and informed them of routes the invaders might take. The defeat of the invaders was celebrated with much fanfare, and warriors and others who had distinguished themselves in battle danced joyously to the lighter music of Ikoro played for their entertainment.³

SOUTHERN IGBOLAND

Oral traditions collected from Mbieri and Egbu indicate that the arrival of the Aro aroused much alarm and hostility from their inhabitants. Ikoro music was played and warriors armed themselves and quickly moved to the town square, where the Aro hoped to negotiate with the traditional authorities and elders for a place to settle. Their request was denied by the communities, who suspected that they were spies of the Abam, who would soon embark on kidnapping and enslaving people for the immigrants. Warriors were then ordered to expel the Aro from the two communities, forcing them to flee the Owerri axis.⁴

As in other parts of southern Igboland, Abam raids in the Aba-Ngwa axis were largely sporadic, excepting the invasions of Umuajuju and Ohia-Ukwu, the densely populated cultural and commercial centers of the Ntigha-Uzo and Ohanze communities. The magnitude of the raids and the massive population movements they engendered suggest that the Aro probably hoped to settle and colonize the two strategic market centers. Some Umuajuju people, for example, are said to have fled to nearby communities like Ngwa-Obi, Amaise, Amavo, and Amasa, while those of Ohia-Ukwu dispersed to Ibeme, Ndiakata, and as far north as Ngboko-Amiri (Oriji 1998, 43–45).

The invasion of the two communities and the horrifying stories refugees told about their experiences spread to various parts of the Ngwa region, arousing in their remembered history an unparalleled degree of vigilance and military preparedness among the people. For example, women carried out economic activities like farming in groups (Oru Ogbo), and those who attended distant markets were accompanied by their husbands or armed male escorts. As in other places, Ikoro was used to alert people of an impending Abam incursion. The increasing militarization of Ngwa society during the Atlantic slave trade is further evidenced by the consecration of war gods like Ike-Oha (lit., the power of the community), and the initiation of young men into its cult to protect them from bullet wounds. The young men, after their initiation, were given military training and drafted as warriors to defend their community against external aggression. Also consecrated was Udu-Agha (lit., war pot) carried by the head warrior, who alerted people of an invasion and led other warriors to attack the invaders. Warriors were also involved in other civil defense activities, including the policing of their communities. They mounted roadblocks to fend off Abam infiltrators, and in places like Ikem Elu village of the Nvosi community, stones and other deadly weapons were used to chase off Aro traders crossing the area. Interestingly, the Aro, who avoided the Ikem Elu route, nicknamed the village Ndi Olu Mbe (those who throw stones at us), a popular name the village continues to bear.⁵

Some communities also deployed their young men and professional hunters armed with Dane guns (also called flintlocks, these were the main guns imported to West Africa during the slave trade), machetes, and other deadly weapons to help in searching possible hideouts of the Abam in the forests. Young men who, for example, killed the Abam during the search or an invasion were entitled to dance and recount their heroic exploits while responding to the drum signals of Ese-Ike (lit., drum of men of prowess) played during the burial ceremony of distinguished elders and titled men (Oriji 1998, 43–45).⁶

The alertness of the Ngwa and the weapons they used in defending their

communities are affirmed by Major A. Leonard, an adventurous British military officer who had penetrated the Ngwa region by the late nineteenth century: "Although the people [Ngwa] who enroute turned out in thousands to look at us appeared to be very friendly and peacefully disposed, not a man apparently moved a step without carrying a naked sword in one hand and a rifle at full lock in the other. Even the boys, some of them not higher than an ordinary man's knee . . . walked out armed with bows and pointed arrows" (1898, 190).

The harassment of the Abam and Aro posed a threat to their lives and undermined long-distance trade. It is then understandable why Aro informants told F. Ekejiuba (1972, 26) that the trade routes crossing the Ngwa region were among the most dangerous in southeastern Nigeria. The increasing hostility and insecurity the Aro experienced in Ngwaland are also helpful in understanding why they later adopted a more peaceful method of trade in the area.



There were many factors that helped in determining how and why the Aro and their Abam warriors invaded Igbo communities. Among them was their location, alertness, and ability in defending themselves. The Abam certainly were a source of terror in many places, but as the Igbere and other examples show, they were not invincible. Their human losses, however, recede into insignificance if compared with those of communities they invaded such as Nri, Umuajuju, Ohia-Ukwu and other places.

The findings of the study are also helpful in raising fundamental issues on slavery at two levels of human dimension. The first one, dealing with the individual level, shows that slaves or would-be slaves who had an opportunity to escape to freedom, did so without hesitation even if it meant leaving their family members and other close relatives behind. The Osu and others provide a typical example of these escapees. At the second level associated with communities, responses to slavery varied ranging from "passive resistance," to mass mobilization, involving a local militia, scouts and others who were actively engaged in civil defense. The study questions the views of David Northrup (1978, 65) and others who argue that the slave trade was a normal commercial transaction which was conducted largely in the hinterland by peaceful methods. The Igbo example clearly shows that slavery and the slave trade were the primary cause of violence in the West African sub-region for over three centuries. It is also clear that without the stiff resistance mounted by many individuals and communities, slavery would have had a more devastating impact in the hinterland.

NOTES

1. For a discussion of the debate that has raged over the methods the Aro used in expanding in the Igbo hinterland, see Oriji 1986.
2. For details of the relationship between the Aro and Okonko leaders, see Oriji 1982.
3. *Ikoro* is the title of a journal published during the 1970s by the Institute of African Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The underlying functions of the Ikoro gong are stated in the journal.
4. I obtained information regarding the expulsion of the Aro in Mbieri and Egbu respectively in interviews with Eze H. M. Aguta, the traditional ruler of Mbieri, 26 February 1981, and F. Orisakwe, a schoolmaster at Egbu, 7 July 1980.
5. The village originally known as Ikem Elu has been called Ndiolumbe since its encounter with the Aro.
6. Details of Abam invasions of the two communities are also found at the Nigerian National Archives, Enugu, EP 7021, no. 68, J. G. C. Allen, *Intelligence Reports on the Ngwa Clan* (1933), 2:4–5.

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