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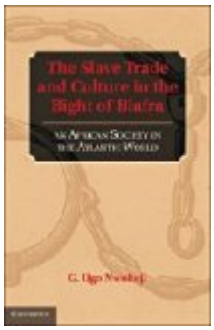
G. Ugo Nwokeji. *The Slave Trade and Culture in the Bight of Biafra: An African Society in the Atlantic World.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. xxiv + 279 pp. $87.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-88347-4.



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Commissioned by Dennis R. Hidalgo (Virginia Tech)

G. Ugo Nwokeji provides an important contribution to the scholarship on the impact of the transatlantic slave trade on African societies. Based on extensive archival research and a collection of oral histories, the author shows the interaction between the inhabitants of the Bight of Biafra, extending from the Niger Delta to Cape Lopes, and Atlantic slave traders. African slaves were mainly exported to the Americas from the ports of Bonny and Old Calabar. Making use of the online Transatlantic Slave Trade Database, Nwokeji shows that Jamaica, the Carolinas, and Virginia were the major receiving areas. More revealing is the fact that between 1750 and 1800, 182,066 people, or 12.4 percent of all African slave departures, embarked from Biafran ports. The dramatic increase and importance of the region in the second half of the eighteenth century led to a series of political and social transformations that Nwokeji explores in detail.

The book is organized in eight chapters that explore the transformations that the Bight of Biafra, especially Aro merchants, endured from the early seventeenth to the late nineteenth centuries. An area profoundly affected by migrations of Igbo and Ibibio groups, the landscape also favored the formation of Arochukwu confederacies. These confederacies maintained direct links with the Atlantic market even though they were not under any central authority. By the mid-nineteenth century, more than 150 Aro trade settlements had been established in the interior of the Bight of Biafra. Nwokeji shows the power struggles and militarization within the Aro confederacies over time, although internal disputes did not affect their ability to control coastal and hinterland trade. Aro power was based on accumulation of wealth through trade and military power. Due to Aro merchants' tight control of the commercial organization of the slave trade, the Bight of Biafra became the third most important supply region of African slaves, after West Central Africa and the Bight of Benin.

Through a vivid account, Nwokeji makes an important contribution by focusing on noncentralized societies. Like Walter Hawthorne, whose

study focuses on the Upper Guinea Coast, Nwokeji shows that the slave trade could and did develop despite the absence of a strong centralized power. According to the author, Aro were successful commercially in part because their trade diaspora was not tied to the political agenda of an expansionist state. In contrast with the studies of Walter Rodney, K. O. Dike, and David Northrup, he demonstrates that the lack of a central government did not prevent the formation of a complex commercial network, in part supported by private enterprise. Nwokeji continues scholarship initiated by Philip Curtin and Jan Vansina, and maintains the importance of understanding trade diasporas and merchants as cultural brokers, connecting small communities to a wider world. The study examines African societies in a wider context, discussing how the transatlantic and the trans-Saharan trades were connected to the Aro networks. Nwokeji shows that "Aro history makes sense only in the context of regional and Atlantic history" (p. 21).

Nwokeji's study is the first to focus on the ability of Aro merchants to retain and select captives to be exported. Covering over two hundred years of history, the author stresses that Aro traders seized and enslaved populations very close to the coast in the 1501-1650 period. In the eighteenth century, the increasing demand for African slaves in the Americas provoked changes in the Bight of Biafra and its interior. To participate in the Atlantic economy, Aro merchants started moving their trade inland, establishing settlements along the Cross and Imo rivers in southeastern Nigeria and creating a trade network of people connected to the Atlantic economy. Furthermore, he demonstrates that imported goods from the Netherlands, India, and Chesapeake Bay were consumed by Aro and also distributed inland in exchange for captives of war and judicial criminals. Unlike the states along the Niger River, Aro merchants perceived the interior trade as essential to supply large numbers of captives to coastal slavers. Their control of the trade rested in their ability to incorporate non-Aro into their trade diasporas. Nwokeji writes a fascinating account of political and cultural changes in Aroland demonstrating how Aro became dependent on slave exports that generated luxury goods and increased their power and prestige with their neighbors. Wealth attracted poor immigrants and refugees in search of protection, inevitably reinforcing the power of Aro merchants who showed interest in retaining people while exporting slaves. He confirmed studies by Dike and Adiele Afigbo that Aro power was only challenged in the early twentieth century, when the British Aro expedition (1901-02) dismantled its slave trade and agricultural production and imposed colonial rule.

This study also makes an important contribution to understanding the gender structure of the slave trade. Higher proportions of the African slaves exported through the Bight of Biafra ports were women, in numbers superior to any other African region. Nwokeji convincingly shows that Aro traders retained men, despite the demand for male slaves in the New World economies. Yet the author could have explained in greater detail the interactions between Aro and Efik traders, since the latter controlled coastal trade. The author demonstrates that warfare generated more captive women and children, most of them from Igbo and Ibibio groups. In sum, it was the local conceptions of the sexual division of labor, rather than the Euro-American demand, that shaped the slave exports in this region. Nwokeji also explores how the bad reputation of Igbo slaves was limited to slaves exported from Old Calabar, not from Bonny. Moreover, while Carolinas and Saint-Domingue planters resisted buying Igbo slaves, Jamaican, Barbadian, Louisana, and Virginian planters were eager to accept them, in part because of their perception of Igbo women's fertility. His contributions will certainly resonate with specialists on African history, African diaspora, slave trade, and slavery, as well as Atlantic history. Nwokeji explored archives in Nigeria, Ireland,

and England. He also used oral data collected in his fieldwork to reveal the connections between African coastal elites, inland merchants, and British planters in Jamaica and North Carolina. Nwokeji recognizes the difficulties of writing a history focused on change in a region characterized by the lack of centralized institutions, which limits the availability of oral traditions. Yet he uncovered memories and traditions in addition to European documents in English, Spanish, and French that allowed him to write an important study with an innovative methodology, filling the silence gaps. The importance of Nwokeji's contribution relies on the fact that he explored slave trade export records, slave narratives, and a variety of sources from the Americas to write a valuable and important study on the social and political changes among the Aro, and he was able to do it not with African sources but with historical evidence from the diaspora. His study emphasizes the implications of trade expansion, mechanisms of credit, and the importation of foreign goods to the social, political, and cultural organization of the people who lived in the Bight of Biafra and its interior.

Nwokeji challenges our understanding of decentralized societies and offers tools on how historians can address the gap of historical evidence when reconstructing the African past. An important book for anyone interested in the Atlantic slave trade, precolonial African history, and slavery in West Africa, it is a major contribution to the scholarship and a fresh look on how to write the history of noncentralized societies, in part because of its innovative methodological approach to written and oral documents. By challenging the vision that New World markets imposed exports on male slaves, Nwokeji raises important questions on gender, identity, slave trade, and the organization of labor in the Bight of Biafra that future studies of the slave trade, Atlantic world, and precolonial African will have to consider.

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