

The Aro, Host Communities And Continuities In Intergroup Suspicion In The Oguta Area Since Pre Colonial Times

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Abstract

The history of the Igbo is incomplete without the Aro. The common interest of the Aro and its host communities has continue to be two sides of the same coin. First the reason for various Aro settlements are not the same, yet mutual suspicion seems to be a factor affecting the co existence of the two groups. The Aro and host communities in Oguta are not without these challenges. Hence this paper uses historical evidences to demonstrate that these two groups have benefitted from each other and if the challenges ahead(Nkiru) can be subdued, then emphasis must not be laid on identity question in all spheres of politics and other social configuration in their domain.

Introduction

Oguta attracted attention of early European expedition such as AF Mockler Ferryman and Dr W. Balkie. In his description of the Oguta geographical area, Balkie remarks that behind Egboma stands Uguta, the inhabitants of which come to the river for fishing and trading.¹A.F Mockler Ferryman on 26 October 1889 remarked that: the lake (Oguta Lake) is situated about thirty miles (48.27km) from the junction of the Ndoni and Orashi and is a fine piece of water, being about five miles (8.05km) long from east to west and a mile and half (2.41km) wide.²

Sabine Jell-Bahslen in her book *The Water Goddess in Igbo Cosmology: Ogbuide of Oguta Lake* accounts that the town of Oguta 1, her neighbors across the lake including K-Beach and all

of the other Oru-Igbo towns-Orsu Obodo, Ezi Orsu, Nnebukwu, Nkwesi, Mgbelle and Izombe-as Oguta 11.³ The Oguta communities consist of Oguta(Amaeshi generally referred as Oguta 1 or the Oguta of the Lake)Egwe, Izombe, Ejemekwuru, Obudi Agwa, Mgballa Agwa, Kalabari beach(Also referred as Aro Quarters),Nkwesi,Mgbelle,Ossemotor, Abiaziem, Egbuoma, Orsu Obodo,Ezi Orsu,Nnebukwu and Ejemekwuru .As a matter of geography and demography, Oguta lies north west of Owerri. It is 40 kilometers from the state capital. It has two sections,Oguta 1 and Oguta 11 separated by the Oguta lake.Oguta had a population of 15,310 in 1963 but the projected population for 1987 is 27,692.⁴

For V.H Moulton in his Intelligence Report on Oguta in 1933-1934, classified Oguta into the following groups:

1. Agba:Obudi,Mballa,Obakuma,Umuofoke,Umuokpo,Umuome,Umuekpu,Obama,Umuoma

11. Izombe Village groups:Izombe,Ejemekwuru,Akabor,Awa,Abiaziem,Mbelle

111. Oru village groups:Oguta,Nkwesi,Nebuku,Ossu Obodo,Ossu Obahu

1V. Ebu(Egbu) and Egwe village groups.⁵

Furthermore, thus noted Moulton, Ebu and Egwe are related strongly and ought not to belong to the Oguta native court system. A letter written in 1924 by the Oma village group comprising of

Mgbidi,Awo,Ozala(Ozara) and Uli for a sack letter to be issued to Mr Shaw of the Oguta native court for gross incompetence to interpret their language attests to this view.⁶ The place of Oguta in the trade of the lower Niger has attracted a lot of scholarly attention like Isichei (1976)⁷, Ndupu(2001)⁸,Afigbo(1987)⁹,Nzimiro(1972)¹⁰,Agorua(1989)¹¹,Nnani(1998)¹²,Ifeoma Agorua(2002)¹³ just to mention but few. The above writers concur that Oguta was the route to the core hinterland of Orlu, Owerri and Okigwe respectively.

Nevertheless, the origin of Aro Settlers communities throughout Igbo land dates back a period a little above 1634.This was the Aro conquest of Ibibio that enabled them to assume ownership of

the famous oracle Ubini Ukpabi which was known as Ibiratam. Beginning from this era, the oracle started to enjoy a pan Igbo recognition.¹⁴This led to a situation that warranted the Aro people to move freely inside and even beyond Igbo land unmolested. The Oguta town is at the heart of palm oil belt and Aro embarked on trade sojourn and established settlements in the area. The river route from Ogbuide lake via Awo omama, Urashi, Ndoni, Abonema, River Benue, and coast made Oguta an important commercial centre of trade. Hence this paper will focus on the following:

- i. The emergence of Aro in Oguta
- ii. Aro Settlement Patterns ,Politics and Trade

In trying to address Aro activities in Oguta economic history, other influences such as the activities of traders from kalabari, Ndoni, Abonema, Buguma, which had impact in the development of the areas. In addition, several issues that constituted barriers to the Aro which include colonialism and missionary enterprise which of course worked in parripassau to checkmate the slave trade which was the Aro chief economic earner will be addressed. Other issues such as world wars, decline of palm oil produce, and the British Aro expedition of 1901-1902, are not left out in this study.

In addition, efforts are made to highlight some of the post independence mutual distrust of the host communities over the Aro settlers in land, politics and even in the church, to such an extent that even most clans which migrated later after the Aro had settled, appears to be leading the bandwagon that suggests the Aro settlers have an original home in Arochukwu and not in their present place of abode. Unfortunately, nothing occurs in the memory of this group that the Aro settlers in Oguta area didn't come by conquest except agreements and brilliant diplomacy. It is that cultural history that brought the Aro settlers in Oguta in the first place as well as developments that create mutual suspicion among them that this paper is set to achieve.

The Emergence of the Aro in Oguta

The Aro emergence as well as settlement cannot be placed in a specified date. In her survey of the Aro settlements in Oguta, Chizoba Nwaka admits that dating of the Aro settlement in Oguta is difficult because of the absence of written records as well as archaeological evidences.

Nevertheless, she maintains a position that trade between the Aro and other Igbo groups predated the Trans Atlantic slave trade and that Aro settlement spread cut for a longtime and even some settlements according to her may be dated as late as the second half of the 19th century.¹⁵ In my field work in this area for over a decade, I tried to use the genealogical charts of the Aro families and I have arrived to a conclusion that by the beginning of the 18th century, the Aro had already settled. To justify this claim, there is substantial evidence to demonstrate that Oguta played a remarkable role in the voyage of an Igbo ex slave Olaudah Equiano discovered by Professor Catherine Acholonu to have come from Isseke in Ihiala area of Anambra state. Even thou there are serious historical indications that it was not the Aro that kidnapped Equiano in the first place rather his kinsmen but he must have passed through Oguta to the sojourn to the new world. According to Equiano:

I was sold for 172 kauri shells by a merchant who brought me there
In this town I was discovered by a rich widow who bought me from
the merchant and i became her slave. Her house and premises were
situated close to one of those rivulets I have mentioned and were the
finest I ever saw in Africa.¹⁶

Furthermore, Acholonu observes as follows:

Olaude's description of this lady merchant and her premises, "they (her
Premises) were extensive and she had a number of slaves to attend her,"
smacks of Oguta and Onitsha women. But whether or not this lady's
house was in or around Oguta or Onitsha, the fact remains that further
travels brought the slave boy through several riverine lands...he must
have passed through either or both of these towns, for it is only in

Onitsha or Oguta and environs that Olaude could have encountered the
Igbo speaking women merchant who owned the house with a large premises
by the riverside.¹⁷

This simply suggests that merchant in question who sold to an Oguta woman was probably an Aro and by 1756 when Equiano was kidnapped, the Aro slave network has been established in the Oguta area thus helping in so many ways to address the problems of the origin of the presence of the Aro settlements in Oguta area to date.

The Arochukwu kingdoms (home of the Aro both home and Diaspora) is comprised of 19 villages namely Utuhugwu, Ugwuakuma, Amangwu, Agbagwu, Asaga, Amasu, Ugbo, Ujari, Isimpu, Amaofia, Atani, Amukwa, Ugwuafu, Amankwu, Amaoba, Ibom, Obinkita, Amangwu and Oror.¹⁸ Hence the Aro movements came from these aforementioned village groups and so do they pre occupy their dominated village groups in Oguta area as we shall see later in this paper. More importantly is that they still maintain a strong link with their ancestral homes in Arochukwu. According to Chizoba Nwaka, the Aro founding father in Oguta came in batches. The first batch of settlers was Okoronkwo Ohu a well known trader from Atani village of Arochukwu. He arrived with his three Sons-Awa, Owanibe and Aromenyeforonye. The descendants of Awa make up Aro Izombe while Owanibe forms part of Izombe and Egbu as well as Aromenyeforonye forming part of Egbu and Izombe. A later batch led by Igwe formed Ndiabiziem while another batch from Ibom village from Ndi Udegwu lineage forms Ndi Nyemobi. A later batch of Aro immigrants settled in Ohakpu where they are known as Ndi Okwara and their father was known as Okparaeke in Atani village of Arochukwu.¹⁹

Since Aro migration involves different dyads of the Aro village groups, the pre occupation of a particular area by the Aro seems to be dominated by people of the same village group be it Atani, Obinkita, Ibom etcetera as we shall discuss later in this paper. It is important to reflect our earlier view that not every Oguta town accommodates Aro settlement. Few of them like Oguta (lake Oguta) and Ezi Orsu have an organized central political and monarchial system which is not found in most communities the Aro settled at that period. Hence my informant in Oguta Mr. Christopher .A Agorua told me in clear terms that the Aro settled and formed government where

there was no kingdom.²⁰ Most of these kingdoms in the Oguta area trace their origin to Benin which they left after Oba Esegie unleashed terror on them. These communities in Oguta were part of Ezechima migration in Igbo history.²¹ They were said to have settled in Ado na Oba before their eventual sojourn to their present place of abode hence they adopted the organized centralized political system found in Benin which made Aro intrusion into Oguta kingdoms impossible as already mentioned above. Works of Ikenna Nzimiro, Ndupu, Odigbo and Anozia upholds this view and will in the course of this study serve relevant point of analysis.

Nevertheless, V.H Moul Intelligence Report of 1933 refers to these kingdom groups as Oru (that is riverside dwellers) who came from the region of Aboh and Illah.²² In her novel titled *Efuru*, Flora Nwapa whose theatre of analysis (setting) in that historical novel was Oguta made an important remark in *Efuru*'s genealogy in a manner to reflect Aro incursion. According to her:

The daughter of Nwashike Ogene, the mighty man of valor. Ogene

Who single handed, fought against the Aros when they came to molest

us. Nwashike himself proved himself the son of his father.²³

It is possible judging from this account that early Aro attempt to settle in Oguta witnessed stiff oppositions. Nevertheless, Chizoba Nwaka's finding is contrast with this view. According to her, the Aro settlements in Oguta are located in suburbs because people in these villages are more inclined to farming than to trading, so that the Aro who were not good at farming could benefit from their harvests and at the same time transact their business with the commercial people of Oguta town. Furthermore, she accounted of an informant report that Oguta people are islanders, with very little land left for their own habitation. The Aro, on their own part are generally conscious of their own culture and guarded it jealousy. This is why they always asked for a separate and underdeveloped area for their settlement.²⁴ The small availability of land accrued to kingdom communities in Oguta could be responsible for the inability of the Aro groups to settle in the first instance.

The origin of the Aro factor in Oguta political history can be best described from four folds. First as slave merchants, next as oracular agents, third as war mercenaries for their host communities

and fourth as traders of European goods who enjoyed the navigational route from Awomama, Oguta to Ndoni, Buguma, Ukwuani, Onitsha etcetera. In the first place, it was the slave trade that brought the Aro to Oguta. This has led a prominent Nigerian historian professor G.I Nwaka to postulate that:

Oguta was also prominent in the slave trade. The presence of large Aro settlements in the Egbu and Egwe neighbours of Oguta suggests the involvement of the area in illicit traffic slaves which was controlled by the Aro.²⁵

The other factors responsible for the Aro settlement such as oracular agents, war mercenaries, and traders of other European goods will be discussed below in our quest to look at the Aro settlement pattern, politics and trade.

Aro Settlement, Patterns, Politics and Trade

After the defeat of Ibibio by the Aro in 1634, a new hegemony was created by the Aro slave trading. The defeat of Ibibio by a combined effort of Igbo groups and the Akpa warriors from Akamkpa opened new vista in human trafficking by the Aro.²⁶ The Aro man who took the Ibibio oracle retained its priest Loesin to initiate Aro indigenes and as well teach them the expertise.²⁷ Beginning from the period, Ubini Ukpabi began to enjoy pan Igbo influence.²⁸ In his book, *The Igbo and their Neighbours*, professor Adiele Eberechukwu Afigbo notes that:

Each member of the juju has his messengers who go and reside in the various districts under guise of traders. Those men are the principal messengers of the chiefs. They each have a number of minor messengers under them. The chief messenger after having settled in many districts make friends of the people of the district in which they reside. Though the friends made the messenger hear of all palavers and the trouble of the people. He then goes to the people and advise

them to go to the long juju and consult Chukwu. The people ask him to lead them to Chukwu.²⁹

With this development, the Aro never lost for such a sojourn. This is because if they are not paid for consulting Chukwu (God) the customer (the person who wishes to see Ubini Ukpabi) may end up becoming the product instead of the buyer he proposed to be. The flimsy excuse given in this circumstance was that the sacrifice was unacceptable to Chukwu and in punishment he eats up the person offering the sacrifice.

Nevertheless, all about Ubini Ukpabi was not in the negative realm all through. Ifemesia for example described the oracle as a famous fertility god of Igboland.³⁰ My informant in Oguta confirms this as follows:

My father Agorua was in Aro to visit Ubini Ukpabi in order to get a male son. After visiting for the seventh time, my mother Adiberi conceived and gave birth to me.³¹

The fertility of Ubini Ukpabi still reflects in Oguta personal names such as Uzoaru-the road to Aro. The distant of Arochukwu home of Ubini Ukpabi made the Aro to establish other oracles such as Igwekala of Umunneoha as a way of safeguarding their economic activities. The Igwekala of Umunneoha which is very close to Oguta is not the only Aro established oracle outside Ubini Ukpabi. Others such as Agballa Awka and Kamalu in Ozuzu also existed. Of particular interest to this study is Igwekala of Umunneoha. Early European ethnographers described it as Alla, meaning ground and I'gwik one who lived before coming down. According to the report by Balkie in 1856, in Isuama, if a man is sick, the doctor often tell friends to Igwikalla and he is also worshipped by person wishing to injure others. His supposed abode is generally in a bush which has been well cleared all rounds but occasionally huts are dedicated to him.³² For Basden, Igwe ka-Ala of Umunneoha was regarded as second in importance to the Chukwu of the Aros.³³ The strategic position of Igwekala Umunneoha is not too far from Oguta. The oracle is situated strategically between Ogbaku and Owerri axis in a calm environment in Umunneoha. Basden observes that: footpaths led to this concealed centre from different

directions, each being used by different quarters of Umunneoha, the villagers exercising their own prerogative to conduct clients seeking counsel to the oracle.³⁴The placement of the oracle in and around Igbo land helped in boosting morals in wars of conquest and pillage.³⁵The importance of Igwekala for Aro settlers in Oguta was justified by Ofonagoro who recall that:

The Aros recognized the commercial importance of Ogbaku, the oracle Igwekala they established at Umunneoha was the pivot of Aro influence in the whole of southwestern Igbolands and the backdoor of Nembe-Brass. The smaller Aro settlements of Aro Izombe near Oguta played a supporting role in enhancing this influence.³⁶

However, the Aro at Oguta axis recognizes the strategic position of the Njaba river where they placed Igwekala Umunneoha near the Awomama town of the Njaba river which is a tributary to Oguta lake. The Oguta Lake provided the slave merchants avenue to sail to the Niger Delta. In the heyday of the slave trade (18th century) thus wrote Ekechi “Oguta was one of the very important slave market in the Igbo hinterland. It was from here that Aro slave dealers who dominated the Igbo slave trade transported slaves to the delta markets like Isiokpo, Ikwerre, Opobo, Bonny and Ukwa.³⁷ Hence E.J Alagoa recall that:

The Aro excelled in the manipulation of an oracle for the purposes of advancing the economic interests of a group. The most significant innovation was their use of mercenaries to enforce their will and to collect slaves for sale. The neighboring Abam, Ohafia and Edda lived themselves out to the Aro as mercenaries. By these means the Aro build up a network of markets, trade routes and agent communities

round the greater portion of Igboland.³⁸

It was in cognizance of the Aro slave network in Oguta that Izombe was destroyed in 1902 by the Aro field force and Ejemekwuru was partially destroyed by the columns sent against the Igwe Juju of Umunneoha in 1903.³⁹ Many writers like Onwukwe saw nothing wrong with Aro involvement in the slave trade. According to him, it was the Whiteman's insatiability that prolonged the trade while the Aro only exploited the situation.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the Aro utilized flaws in cultural laws as a means of acquiring slaves. In the Igbo customlogy of the 18th century, given birth to twins and children with upper teeth(ezulu) was a very big taboo. The Aro acquired these victims in the pretence of taking them to Ubini Ukpabi via Umunneoha from where they are sold to the coastal areas through Njaba route, Oguta lake to Abonema, Buguma, Brass area of the Niger delta to the Atlantic.

The next reasons for the establishment of Igwekala of Umunneoha by the Aro was to create trade route from the Njaba river to the coastal area, a situation that represents the same mission of Ubini Ukpabi of Arochukwu hence justifying Nwabara's view that Igwekala fulfilled almost the same function as long juju.⁴¹ It must be noted that Aro settlement in Oguta must have been attracted by the place of Oguta as an important slave market in Igbo land.

Third, it is important to note that Aro settlements in most places were peaceful. The communities under the peaceful settlement pattern of the Aro include Uzuakoli, Ihube, Achi, Umunneoha, Ihiala, Oguta Ngwa etc.⁴² There were cases of Aro settlements as a result of threats from neighbouring villages. Dike and Ekejiuba wrote that:

non-Aro groups either invited Aro traders to live among them
(if there was no Aro settlement in the vicinity) to ensure military
access to the Ubini Ukpabi oracle or entered into marriage alliance
with leading Aro chiefs, by giving their daughters in marriage. Non
Aro chiefs were, as it to be expected responsible for all the express
Involved in recruiting the warriors.⁴³

In Egbuoma town of Oguta, It is in their oral tradition that Aro settlement came on invitation. The Uli town neighbouring town often attack the Omadi village group of Egbuoma on the account that there meat was sweet. Severe attacks of the Uli against the Egbuoma continued until one of their prominent sons Madubueze was killed and they invited early Aro settlers such as Nwosu Akpiri, Ndi Nwaka, Okoronkwo Ohu, Ndi Anyiwo whose original home is Atani Arochukwu.⁴⁴ The presence of this Aro groups in combination with their Abam warriors stopped the incessant Uli attack.

The Aro Egbu is made up of nine kindred following their order of seniority. They are Uchenivu (Ndi Nwaka), Okoronkwo Aro, Ndi Anyiwo, Ndi Ikenga, Ndi Onyeorisa, Ndi Ugboguru, Ndi Okparaeke, Ndi Ajaero, and Ndi Igwe. They are referred as Umuchukwu literally meaning God's own children by their Egbu host.⁴⁵ The Omadi village group who invited the Aro settled them with a piece of land where they presently occupy known as Owerre Echi. The Owerre Echi land originally belong to Echi whose original mother was from Omadi. Before this period, the Aro groups invited such as Ndi Okoronkwo were living in a place known as Ubaramahi precisely Amaubilasos while Ndi Nwaka and Ndi Anyiwo lived in Ebeleano just as Ndi Osuochara lived in Umuorjinta villages in Egbuoma.⁴⁶ The west of Egbuoma is occupied by another Aro village group Ndi Igwe who were invited by Umuolowu and east of Egbuoma is another Aro village group Ndi Onyemobi. Ndi Onyemobi a mixture of immigrants from Amorka and Ibiasogbe has two groups namely Ndi Oti and Obi na Ugwu. The Ndi Ajaero came later but were more powerful that

Ajaero's another name Onyemobi was used for the community name as Ndi stands for People, hence Ndi Onyemobi meaning Onyemobi's people. The legend of origin has it that Ajaero a powerful slave merchant travelled to Arochukwu but on his return home, he was told that one of his slaves slept with one of his wife, surprisingly, instead of killing the slave, he made it possible for the barrier between slaves and masters to be broken. This encouraged many migrants into the area.⁴⁷ A great number of these groups came from Ozara in a place known as Umunwabuezihe.⁴⁸ Most of the Aro settlement that stayed back in Ozara can be traced to the Onwukeme Ukeje family group in Ozara.⁴⁹ The fact remains that prior to Ajaero arrival, most of the batches of settlers in Ndi Onyemobi came from Ibom village group of Arochukwu from the lineage of Ndi Udegbu.⁵⁰ Hence Obi na Ugwu (dwellers on the hill) and Obinaikpa (forest

dwellers) earlier mentioned is a clear manifestation of indifference on settlement date and arrival. The essence of allowing more people into the town was for strategic reasons as they checkmate against Oguta expansionist drive by the Obi na Ugwu group just as Obinikpa guards against the Ozara group. A report in 1925 from the District officer Owerri to the District officer Okigwi has it that:

The people of Ebu-Oguta have complained about persons from Ozara trespassing on their land and cutting palm nuts. I do not know if there is anything in the complaint, but would be grateful if you would be kindly advise the Ozara people to keep to their side of the boundary.⁵¹

Onwukwe was right to say that the Aro acted as buffer zones for areas of high insecurity.⁵² The Aro in Egbuoma are in most cases referred as Aromenyeforonye that is the Aro that has pleased everyone.⁵³ As it stands, it must be emphasized that inter group disharmony necessitated the movement of the Aro group out of Ozara. This is an important area of research in family history that interested academics should not hesitate to do. Most of these Aro group found their way to Egwe eg Ndi Okwara in Aro Egwe.⁵⁴

In Egwe community, the Aro occupies strategic position of the slope of the hill (Ugwu Egwe) of the neighbouring Oguta Amaeshi (oguta 1/Lake Oguta) and north of the town by Umuehi Mgbidi. Professors Dike and Ekejiuba in their book *The Aro of Southeastern Nigeria* recalls that:

In places like Oguta and Udi, Aro settlements were strategically placed and acted as a buffer between the larger and weaker groups. Thus Aro Egwe, an Aro settlement was placed between Egwe and Oguta while Aro Izombe was situated between Oguta and Izombe groups whom high records

were dislodged by Oguta in their bid to settle. In this position Egwe and Izombe allied with the Aro settlers and this alliance which assured Egwe of the regular military aid to prevent further encroachment by Oguta.⁵⁵

The Aro settlements in Egwe include four villages out of the present fourteen villages that constitute the town. They are as follows: Ndi Okwara, Ndi Mazi, Ndi Agbara, and Ndi Okorie.

Ndi Mazi's original home in Arochukwu is Amaukwa while Ndi Okwara's Arochukwu home is Atani and Ugwuakuma. The incessant attack on Egwe hosts which include Amansima, Okwuekili, Ezioha, Okwuduru, Imo, Umuokwanta, Umuehi, Ihitte Egwe, Amangbulu, and Eziamma village groups by the Dike village group of Mgbidi led Egwe people to contract the Aro Ndi Okwara and Ndi Mazi to stay and defend them in the Umuehi boundary north of Egwe town. For the Oguta people who were intruding Egwe town, the Ndi Okorie and Ndi Agbara Aro village groups were contracted to stay in the hilly part of Egwe town. These Aro group in the hilly side of the Egwe town are referred as Ike bi ni ugwu-power that lives in the hills.⁵⁶

It was albeit of loopholes emanating from social insecurity and more especially the Oguta quest for more lands that made Awa, Izombe, Mgbelle and other towns to checkmate their territorial expansion. When Oguta people arrived from Benin, they have to depose the king of Awa by Eneke Okitutu group being the fisherman who discovered Oguta.⁵⁷ The chased Awa across the lake and the fear of further attack by the Oguta people led to the invitation of the Aro groups by the Awa people for protection against Oguta incursion.

It is important we reflect on the fact that it is not every Aro settlement in the Oguta area that has a host group. The Abiazim case study is exemplary. Certainly, Abiazim town is dominated by the Aro and they have no host. This reflects in their name Abia-zim which literally means I have now come to stay signifying an entirely area dominated only by the Aro. Writing in 1933, V.H Moulton observes that:

All the towns in Izombe group with the exception of Abiazim, claim always to have occupied the land where they now live.

Abiazim is composed entirely of Aros, and the land on which they are now settled belonged originally to Izombe. More than half of Mbelle is also comprised of Aros, and there are Aro families settled in Awa and Izombe.⁵⁸

Another strategy adopted by the Aro was interlock marriages. This was designed by the Aro by making chains of close relations among the axis upon which they trail. This system affords them opportunity of carrying out long distant traders based on their relations living in their trade route. They engage in mutual satisfactory relationship with important leaders of their host communities. They went into judicious marriages with these communities as Aro men married daughter of powerful and influential leaders of these communities. By such marriages they protect bond of kingship made Aro population to increase and extend to a wide geographical area.⁵⁹ In our area of study, Ofonagoro recalls that interlock marriages ties between the leading families in the village along the Owerri-Ogbaku-Oguta trade routes were very useful in ensuring the security and convenience of traders from the villages operating along the route. The author gave instance with chief Nwauwa aka Okwara Egbula married a first cousin of Chief Odu of Ogbuke Ogbaku-a daughter of Iroegbu, chief Odu younger brother. One of Nwauwa's daughters was in turn married to Chief Egbuchulem of the Aro settlement of Umunneoha. Furthermore, Ada Nwauwa's daughter by the Iroegbu marriage was subsequently married to Ihenancho, an official of the native and a relative of the chief of Awa.⁶⁰

The intermarriages of Aro and non Aro alike was a prominent feature which boosted trade except marrying Oguta women. According to V.H Moul:

Oguta men will marry from Ebu and from Mbidi and Uri under Orlu and Ihiala under Onitsha, but Oguta women as has been said do not agree to marry into inland towns.⁶¹

It is important to note that economic activities in Oguta area encouraged Aro settlements. For the Aro in Egbuoma and Egwe were trading in a special kind of wrapper from Ukwuani known as

Olugwo as well as other goods.⁶² The Aro brought in new types of cassava, firearms and cloths through their agents into Oguta and automatically changed the economic horizon of the town.⁶³ Apart from the slave trade, Chuku listed the economic endeavours of the Aro as follows:

They engaged in the assemblage and the distribution of goods and services.

The locally made products which they distributed were obtained from the areas of Ututu and Ihe for foodstuff, Awka, Abiriba and Nkwerre for blacksmith implements, Ijo for fish and salt as well as several other goods from Idoma, Igala and Nike. They also traded in European goods in exchange of slaves and other minor crafts. Their imports were fire arms of all descriptions, beads, brass basing discarded sailors and soldiers uniforms, jackets, hats, umbrellas, scissors, razor blades, bed covers, tobacco, matches.⁶⁴

Apart from trade, the Aro established relationships with agricultural communities such as Ututo and Ihe which grew foodstuffs for communities engaged in full time trade.⁶⁵ According to Ndupu,

The Aro dominated grid of regional markets over Igboland, Ossomari and Oguta acted as terminal ports of call for Aro agents.⁶⁶ Justifying these further, Isichei remarks that:

The Aro held trade fair at Bende and further north at the salt manufacturing centre of Uburu. They bought food from neighbouring farmers such as the Ututo and employed the Igbere group as contract porters.⁶⁷

The popularity of Bende as prominent Igbo slave market need not to be over emphasized. For it has received scholarly attention from Pita Nwana's Omenuko as well as the account of Dr Balkie voyage to the Niger in 1856 already mentioned.⁶⁸ Professor V.C Uchendu remarked that with the abolition of the slave trade such as slave markets as Uburu, Uzuakoli, Oguta and Bende have fallen in importance. The end of the slave trade did not make Oguta a lost city. This is because palm oil got its prominence thereafter which still made Oguta an important Igbo economic centre of trade.⁶⁹

Conclusion

In this paper, we have x-rayed some significant aspect of Aro settlement in the Oguta area. First, it must be emphasized that Aro settlers in the Oguta area came strictly on invitation. The Aro provided security as well as European goods to their host in exchange for goods and services. A situation that accommodates the host communities to look at the Aro from the perspective of mutual suspicion is a demonstration of lack of historical incompetence.

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