A Study of the Slave and Palm Produce Trade amongst the Ngwa-Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria.
M. J. N. Oriji

Résumé
Le passage, au XIXe siècle, de la traite négrière au « commerce légitime » (palmiste et huile de palme) a provoqué une révolution socio-économique dont les effets n'ont guère été étudiés que dans les sociétés côtières. L'auteur décrit la réorganisation commerciale chez un peuple de l'intérieur, en insistant sur le rôle joué par les associations politico-religieuses dans la mise en place et le fonctionnement tant de la production que des réseaux d'évacuation.

Citer ce document / Cite this document:

Document généré le 02/06/2016
A Study of the Slave and Palm Produce Trade amongst the Ngwa-Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria

The 19th century marked a watershed in West African history. For nearly three hundred years, slaves constituted the major commodity which the peoples of West Africa exported overseas. But as from the first decade of the 19th century, the slave trade was gradually abolished and replaced with legitimate commerce in vegetable oils.\(^1\) Although much has been written about the internal economy of those societies which changed from slave trade to legitimate commerce, most of the researches focused on the coastal towns or State systems.\(^2\) Little is known about the Igbo and other groups in the hinterland which participated actively in international trade in the 18th and 19th centuries. A study of these groups may enrich our knowledge and sharpen our analysis of the economic history of West Africa before the colonial period.

Using the Ngwa-Igbo of southeastern Nigeria as an example, this paper will examine the organization of trade between the Igbo hinterland and the coastal towns of the eastern Delta during the period of the slave and palm produce trade. It will identify the major trade routes which linked the various ecological zones by then. In addition, an attempt will be made to differentiate the groups which were engaged in the production and distribution of export commodities. The profits which each derived from the slave and palm produce trade will be discussed in order to shed some light onto the impacts of international trade in southeastern Nigeria.

1. For information on the slave trade and its abolition, see Williams 1964: 154-196; Dike 1956: 24-96; and Hopkins 1973: 87-116.
2. As examples, see Dike 1956: 24-127; and Hopkins 1973: 58-64. See also Latham 1973: 25-39; and Meillassoux 1971: 49-60.
Location and Ecological Background

The Ngwa are said to constitute the largest clan in southeastern Nigeria. They occupy an area of about 512.8 square miles, enclosed by latitude 5° and 5°30' N and longitude 7° and 7°30' E (see Map 1), and their population in 1963 was estimated to be 314,840 people. Ngwaland is bounded on the west by the Imo river, and from that river the northern section now known as Isiala-Ngwa stretches to the east until it joins the Ahi

3. Information obtained from the Survey Division of the Ministry of Town Planning, Enugu, in 1971. The figures do not include the size and population of Ngwa towns in Aba township.
river about two miles east of the Oloko-Umuahia road. The eastern boundary runs roughly northeastwards and joins the 'no-man's-land' which separates the Ngwa from the Anang (Ibibio). Northwards and adjacent to the Ntigha and Nsulu village groups are the Ubakala and Olokoro clans. The northeastern neighbors of the Ngwa are the Isuorgu, and westwards, the Imo river which separates them from the Mbaise also serves as a boundary between them and the Omuma-Etche clans. The Asa and Ndokki clans share a common border with the Ngwa in the south (Oriji 1977: 11-50; Allen 1933).

Because of their location in the southeastern peripheral region of Igboland, the Ngwa were able to establish commercial ties with the middlemen on the eastern Delta before many other groups of the hinterland. As will be noted later, they exported slaves during the period of the transatlantic trade, and subsequently became major producers and merchants of palm oil and kernels. The pattern of traffic in the 18th and 19th centuries will show how the Ngwa changed from a highly exclusive trade in slaves to legitimate commerce, which broadened their base of participation in the international exchange economy.

The Okonko Secret Society and the Aro Trade Network in the 18th Century

It is difficult to understand the pattern of traffic in Ngwaland in the 18th century without discussing the role the Aro played in the transatlantic slave trade. According to Ukwu (1967: 651-652) and Ekejiuba (1972: 13-15), long-distance exchanges amongst the Aro began in the second half of the 17th century. It appears that they used the early phase of their involvement in the overseas trade to compete with other groups which had dominated that activity and to consolidate their position in the Igbo hinterland where, from the first decades of the 18th century, they had emerged as the leading long-distance traders. Although his work has aroused some controversy, Curtin did note that the demand for slaves from the Bight of Biafra increased greatly at that time: he showed (1971: 267) that the total number of slaves the English and French shipped from that region alone from 1711 to 1810 amounted to 823,700, or 25.1% of the total number of slaves they exported from Africa during the same period. The high demand for slaves had far-reaching consequences in southeastern Nigeria. It created the need for the Aro to expand their commercial operations from Aro-Chukwu and

4. I have studied other groups which dominated the overseas trade before the Aro. They include agents of Kamanu oracle at Ozuzu and of Igwe-ka-Ala at Umunneoha (see Oriji 1977: 161-175).

5. Curtin's estimates have been criticized by Rodney 1972: 103-124. For my critique of his estimates, see Oriji 1977: 180-214.
its environs, which were connected with the port of Old Calabar, to different parts of Igboland.6

The Aro expansion was also occasioned by the emergence of Bonny as the leading slave market in the Bight of Biafra in the 18th century. In order to be able to sell slaves from the Igbo hinterland to Bonny middlemen, the Aro established a trade network linking the hinterland to the eastern Delta (see Map 2).

Evidence from oral traditions suggests that they came to dominate long-distance trade in Ngwaland as a result of their links with leading Okonko members.7 According to Jones (1963: 19-23), Okonko was

6. Vansina (1962: 375-388) has distinguished between local, regional and long-distance trade. Network merchants are usually linked to major exchange centers along trade routes by their partners or agents (see Meillassou 1971: 71-74).

7. Some of my informants include Kanu Gogo, president of Okonko society, Ngwa-Ukwu village group, H. Ama, priest of earth deity of Obikabia village, and E. Njoku, president of Okonko society, Umuchima village. (These interviews, as well as those hereinafter, were conducted in 1976.)
derived from the Ekpe society of the Efik-Ibibio. Ekpe originated from the Eko area and by the early 18th century, it had spread to the Cross river estuary. During the same period, Ekpe might have diffused into Aro-Chukwu, a neighboring region where it was known as Okonko. It was from Aro-Chukwu that Okonko spread to other parts of Igboland and members of the society occasionally call it ‘Ekpe-Aro’ to emphasize its Aro origins.

Founders of the Okonko society were associated with the Long-Juju oracle of the Aro (Chukwu). As Ottenberg (1958: 304) has pointed out, pilgrims to Aro-Chukwu expected the oracle to solve their problems connected with ‘poor crops, continued illness, epidemics and lack of children’. In addition, the Long-Juju was recognized as court of appeal not only in southeastern Nigeria but in parts of the ‘Middle Belt’ region in northern Nigeria. Communities therefore referred difficult cases which might threaten their stability to the oracle for arbitration (ibid.: 303-306). But, when a case was referred to the Long-Juju, leaders of community usually appointed a few local traders with some experience in travelling to accompany litigants to Aro-Chukwu: they were expected to inform their leaders about the decisions of the oracle when they returned home.

In order to strengthen their relations with the local traders, the Aro received them hospitably. They gave their leader a symbol of the oracle (Ihu-Chukwu) so that he could act as its agent in his area. A local agent of the Long-Juju received fees from people of different communities who wanted him to accompany them to Aro-Chukwu. In addition, those who had minor problems gave him gifts such as yams, chickens and goats so that he would offer sacrifices to the oracle.

Tradition claims that these local agents of the Long-Juju oracle were pioneers of the Okonko society. They were in fact called ‘friends of the Aro’ (enyi ndi Aro). As the need arose for the Aro to expand from their homeland to the eastern Delta, they used local agents of the oracle as a spring-board for establishing direct commercial ties with different ecological zones. It is claimed that the Aro gave them a secret symbol of Okonko (ngbara) which enabled them to found the society in their localities.

8. Latham (1973: 35-36) has noted that European traders first mentioned Ekpe in their sources in the 1870s. He claimed that 1720 might be the earliest date the society was founded.

9. It is noteworthy that my informants such as K. Gogo of Ngwa-Ukwu and H. Ama of Obikabia referred to Okonko as ‘Ekpe-Aro’ in tracing its origins.

10. Information obtained from K. Gogo of Ngwa-Ukwu, H. Ama of Obikabia and E. Njoku of Umuchima. It was corroborated by other informants such as E. Oriji, 85-year old president of Okonko society, Eziama-Nvosi, and A. Akataobi, member of Okonko society, Umuobiakwa village.

Those who founded Okonko were recognized as its presidents (*ezengbara*). The *ezengbara* presided over the weekly meetings of the society and regulated its affairs with the multi-title holders (*ndi ochi aka-la-abu*). The multi-title holders constituted the second rank. Talbot (1926: 756-782) has noted that people invested their wealth in Okonko and other titled societies. But since initiation fees were shared according to the number of titles a man had purchased, the multi-title holders were amongst the richest members of Okonko. The single-title holders (*eze-Okonko*) and those seeking initiation (*okpo*) formed the third and fourth ranks respectively. Some of them were appointed members of the administrative organ of the society.12

As membership of Okonko increased, it began to usurp some of the functions of traditional authority holders in Ngwaland.13 As an example, Okonko members are said to have performed many judicial functions including the settlement of important disputes in a community. Since they were part of the Aro ‘commercial empire’, they were not only concerned with the maintenance and security of roads but with the enforcement of credit contracts.14 Okonko no doubt was the most powerful administrative organ in Ngwaland. Its masked men could terrorize an offender, burn his house and sell him into slavery.15

Because Okonko was firmly established in different areas, membership of the society could confer a pan-Igbo commercial passport on its holder. As Ekejiuba (1972: 26) has noted, Aro network traders from different parts of Igboland usually stopped at Okonko houses, ‘club houses’ which were located near the major trade routes in Ngwaland. They joined their colleagues in eating, drinking, dancing and other social activities which were regular features of Okonko meetings.

Besides providing accommodation and hospitality to their visitors, leading Okonko members purchased from them some commodities like

---

12. My informants included K. Gogo of Ngwa-Ukwu and Ukandu Ajaegbu, a leading member of Okonko society, Amazu village.
13. This was a major cause of tension between Okonko leaders and traditional authority holders of Ngwaland. As an example, my informant, A. Emetara, chief-priest of the earth deity of Ntigha village group, told me that many taboos were passed against Okonko leaders in his area.
14. It is noteworthy that Ekpe wielded similar powers amongst the Efik-Ibibio (see Latham 1973: 37-39).
15. Hitherto, the role Okonko played in Aro commercial expansion has been ignored. Instead, the tendency has been for researchers to stress the fact that the Aro were backed up by a group of warriors (the Abam) during the period of their expansion. This is an indisputable fact but it must not be imagined that the Abam had a monopoly of any weapon in Igboland. At times, communities successfully repelled their incursions and expelled the Aro from their areas. The Aro were aware that warfare and trade were contradictory institutions and this explains why Abam raids were very limited in Ngwaland. In fact, I have recorded only two such raids. The Aro preferred to establish friendly commercial ties with a community through its Okonko members instead of expanding by violence.
salt, cloth, beads, guns and ammunitions, and iron tools. At times, Aro traders granted them credit facilities. Since the major commodity the Aro wanted was slaves, some Okonko members specialized in travelling around their area to purchase them for their customers.16

Okonko was thus an important arm of the Aro trade network. During the early period, it seems that the number of people whom the Aro sold into slavery was comparatively small, and consisted mainly of litigants found guilty by the Long-Juju. But with the establishment of Okonko, the Aro were able to travel from one section of Ngwaland to the other.

Two major trade routes connected Ngwaland during the period of Aro network trade (see Map 2). These routes which linked the Aro-Chukwu subdivided at Bende. Depending on the prospects of trade, some Aro traders moved from Bende to Azumiri and other areas. Others travelled through the second route across Umuahia to Umuajuju where a section continued their journey to Orauta and Owerri and other towns in the Igbo hinterland. The rest proceeded to Aba and later to Akwete, Ogwe, Diobo and other towns where they exchanged their goods with coastal middlemen.17 The Aro were then able to increase the volume of trade they conducted during each trip since they bartered their commodities in the major exchange centers against slaves whom they sold in bulk to the middlemen.

Unlike other forms of trade which took place at the market, the slave trade was often conducted clandestinely. The secrecy surrounding it was due to the fact that many people who were sold into slavery were kidnapped. But kidnapping was a risky operation because once relatives or friends of the kidnapped learnt about it, they immediately demanded restitution. Failure to meet their demands could lead to a bloody war.18 Okonko members and Aro traders had to keep their transactions secret so that the identity of their victims would not be discovered. Little wonder, then, that they became successful slave traders since they belonged to a society which was shrouded in much secrecy. In fact, members of the Aro trade network system belonged to a highly specialized organization and, as Cohen (1971: 267) noted elsewhere, they formed ‘A moral community which [constrained] the behaviour of the individual and [ensured] a measure of conformity with common values and principles. [They were] a nation of socially interdependent but spatially dispersed communities.’19

18. A typical example is the village of Umundogo in Ngwaobi village group, which was almost wiped out by Umuokoro people who believed that its inhabitants had kidnapped a woman from their area. For details, see ORIJI 1977: 196.
19. Cohen examined only trading diasporas but his study is helpful in understanding the Aro trade network.
Trade in the 19th Century

Although the transatlantic slave trade had ceased in West Africa by the 1860s, the internal slave trade continued as a result of the introduction of legitimate commerce (Dike 1956: 47-64). In fact, the demand for slaves appears to have increased especially in the palm belt region and the coastal towns of southeastern Nigeria.

As will be noted later, the production and marketing of palm oil and kernels demanded much labor. Thus, privileged members of the society acquired domestic slaves to increase their output. The palm produce trade in Ngwaland was not, however, based mainly on slave labor. A typical production unit consisted of a man, his wives and children. The trading units were headed by men or women. While the former were assisted by their wives and domestics slaves, the latter depended greatly on hired labor (Oriji 1977: 220).

The total number of slaves who were sold locally or exported to the Americas by the Ngwa and other Igbo groups in the 19th century has not been determined. But Koelle was able to collect some data on West African slaves resettled by the British government in Sierra Leone. Even though he interviewed only a small number of these 'Sierra Leone recaptives', his work gives some insight into the pattern of the internal slave trade in Igboland during the first four decades of the 19th century. As illustrated in Table I, estimates based on his inventory show that most of the Igbo recaptives were from the central and northern Igbo areas which lie outside the palm belt zone and have been centers of high population density.20 On the other hand, the Ngwa and other groups located

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informant’s Name for his Country</th>
<th>Modern Name</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Number Present in Sierra Leone</th>
<th>Informant’s Date of Capture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Isoama</td>
<td>Igbo (Isu-Ama)</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>Many</td>
<td>1819</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isielus</td>
<td>Igbo (Ishelu)</td>
<td>»</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1838</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abadsa</td>
<td>Igbo (Abaja)</td>
<td>»</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>1819</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aro</td>
<td>Igbo (Aro)</td>
<td>»</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mboha</td>
<td>Igbo (Mboha)</td>
<td>»</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1819</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ngwa</td>
<td>Igbo (Ngwa)</td>
<td>»</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Source: Compiled from Curtin 1969: 163-203.

20. The proposition in Table I is based on an inference made from Curtin’s work summarizing Koelle’s. But for the Yoruba who numbered about 7,114 people, the Igbo, with a total population of 1,231 people, were the largest group of recaptives in Sierra Leone. Koelle interviewed only about 10% of the recap-
within the palm belt zone do not appear to have sold many people into slavery during this period. They probably needed labor for the legitimate commerce and the production of food crops. While the former groups provided slaves who were sold in parts of Igboland and the coastal States, the latter specialized in palm and food production and even imported slaves.21

As they had done during the period of the overseas slave trade, the Okonko society and the Aro played a leading role in the internal slave trade in the 19th century. Well-to-do members of a community purchased slaves from leading Okonko members who obtained them from the Aro. These slaves then joined the other members of a household either in producing and marketing palm produce or in purchasing and transporting it.

However, it is important to note that until the later part of the 19th century, palm produce trade was conducted along the same routes as those of the 18th century.22 Consequently, Okonko members who maintained and policed them were able to collect tolls from people who travelled to the 'beaches' or trading stations. This view is confirmed by Major Leonard, an adventurous British military expert who had penetrated into parts of Ngwaland during the later part of the 19th century. Leonard (1898: 191) was astonished by the large number of Okonko 'toll booths' he encountered on his journey: 'It appears that these Conko [Okonko] houses are nothing but toll-bars hence their close proximity to the roads [. . .]. The custom is for certain members to take it in turn to sit there and demand toll from all passing with goods for trade [. . .]. If this is refused, the club members plunder the goods, and in many cases seize the owners, or drive them away.'

Besides the Aro and the Okonko members, the producers of palm oil and kernels were also engaged in legitimate commerce. Palm trees are believed to be indigenous to West Africa. Although Buchanan and Pugh (1955: 132) confined their study to Nigeria, their observations about the importance of palm trees amongst the peoples of the forest region are informative. According to them: 'Leaf-ribs [of palm trees] are used in building, the leaves in thatching, the fibre in rope making [. . .] palm wine obtained by tapping is a pleasant, intoxicating drink, the palm oil is a valuable source of vitamins in the indigenous diets.'

---

21 Information on the commodities the Aro marketed in the 19th century was obtained from Ukomadu Obiagu, priest of Opi-Owerri deity of Owerinta, Isiala-Ngwa. He was about 95 years old and was interviewed on February 11, 1976. Another informant was A. Akataobi of Umuobiakwa.

22 Information obtained from N. Alozie of Umuajuju, priest of the earth deity of Ntigha-Uzo village group. This information was corroborated by H. Ama of Obikabia and S. Ordor of Akwete, a paramount chief of the town.
It was probably because European traders recognized that palm oil was an important indigenous food item that they started to purchase it. It was not only used as provisions for slaves but was redistributed along the West African coast. Indeed, as early as the 16th century, the Portuguese had started to buy palm oil from the eastern Delta. While slaves consumed part of the palm oil, the rest was sold at Elmina in the Gold Coast. By the 1780s, Liverpool merchants were said to export about forty tons of palm oil annually from Bonny and Old Calabar (Northrup 1974: 82).

However, it was not until the 19th century, when Europeans discovered that palm oil could be used in manufacturing soap, candles and lubricants, that they imported it in commercial quantities. As Table II shows, Old Calabar dominated the palm oil trade until the 1840s, when Bonny became the leading exporter in West Africa. Bonny's supremacy was undermined in the 1870s by that of the newly founded town of Opobo, which lasted until the end of the 19th century. By 1883, Opobo was exporting about 8,000 tons of palm oil annually.

**Table II. — Palm Oil Export from Old Calabar and Bonny from 1812 to 1875 (in tons)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Old Calabar</th>
<th>Bonny</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1812-17</td>
<td>1,200</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1821</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>very little</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1828</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1833</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1847</td>
<td>5,217</td>
<td>7,773</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1848</td>
<td>4,634</td>
<td>8,450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1849</td>
<td>4,782</td>
<td>8,227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1850</td>
<td>4,260</td>
<td>6,730</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1851</td>
<td>4,288</td>
<td>12,421</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1855</td>
<td>4,090</td>
<td>16,124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1854</td>
<td>4,500</td>
<td>16,170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1871</td>
<td>6,000</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1875</td>
<td>5,085</td>
<td>5,658</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Little is known about the quantity of palm oil which the Ngwa sold to Bonny and Opobo traders. But the accounts of Bonny chiefs in 1873 suggest that three quarters of the palm oil marketed in some of their leading depots like Akwete and Obunku (see Map 3) were produced by the Ngwa (Northrup 1974: 281). The Ngwa also produced a substantial quantity of the palm oil which was sold at Ohambele and Azumiri, the
main palm produce markets of Opobo traders in Igboland. Furthermore, the fact that the western and northern neighbors of the Ngwa such as the Mbaise and Umuahia located in the fringes of the palm belt region hardly marketed palm produce is significant. It reinforces the view that the Ngwa and other southern Igbo groups like the Asa and Etche were amongst the leading producers of palm produce exported from the eastern Delta in the 19th century.

But the introduction of legitimate commerce did not alter the earlier method of administering the palm trees within the clan. This method was interwoven with the traditional land tenure system of the people. Within each compound, every adult male was allowed to harvest the few palm trees located near his house (nkwu azu ulo). Besides, on a fixed day, he was entitled to harvest the palm trees which grew in the ‘communal’ land administered by the heads of lineages (okpara-ukwu), villages and towns (eze-ala). These authority holders had more palm trees to harvest than the other members of their community because they were granted usufructuary rights over the comparatively large ‘ancestral land’ which was attached to their office (ohia-ofo-ukwu).23

23. This pattern has continued till the present time in some communities. For an
There is no doubt that the introduction of legitimate commerce linked small-scale farmers (the common men) as well as large-scale producers to the overseas exchange economy. The Atlantic slave trade has been justifiably criticized because it was predatory and monopolized by warriors, kidnappers and a professional group of traders. Small-scale farmers hardly played any significant role in the export economy during that period. In addition, in the 18th century, the family was mainly a unit of production of subsistence crops rather than export commodities. However, this trend changed in the 19th century because the production, marketing and transportation of palm produce reinforced the division of labor in the family. For example, after the men had harvested palm trees, their wives helped in carrying their fruits to the compounds. While the former were responsible for shredding the nuts from their clusters and for pounding them after they had been boiled, the latter and their daughters were in charge of extracting oil from them. Women were also assisted by their children of both sexes in cracking the nuts of palm kernels.

After palm oil and kernels had been produced, women carried them to the 'beaches' in calabashes and baskets respectively. Until the establishment of Opobo in 1870 when the Ngwa in the eastern part of the clan sold most of their palm produce at Abala, Azumiri or Ohambele (see Map 3), Obegu, a town located near Akwete, was the leading produce buying centre in Ngwaland. Because women had to travel such a long distance, they were usually accompanied by a few men. Some of these were their husbands, while others could be domestic servants of influential men. They acted as guards of the women and paid the tolls at the various Okonko houses on the trade routes. After much haggling with palm produce traders, the women might be paid with iron bars, stockfish and textiles. When they returned home, they gave their husbands the proceeds from palm oil while they kept those from palm kernels.

Because different groups of people, particularly small-scale farmers, the common men, were involved in legitimate commerce, Hopkins and Northrup have tended to overemphasize the benefits they derived from it. These scholars have created the misleading impression that those who were marginalized by the slave trade were 'rehabilitated' as a result of the introduction of legitimate commerce. In fact, in order to show that the palm produce trade was not dominated by any group, Northrup has even postulated that the benefits of that trade were shared in the Biafran

24. Information obtained from H. Ama of Obikabia and A. Akataobi of Umuebiakwa. For a valuable report on the methods of production in Ngwaland, see JACKSON 1930; also USORO 1974: 1-12.

hinterland in an ‘egalitarian way’ (Northrup 1974: 271, 299; Hopkins 1973: 125-126). Superficially, this might be true, but in reality this notion cannot be substantiated. The production of palm oil and kernels demanded much labor which heightened social differentiation. For example, it has been estimated that 300 pounds of palm fruit (25-30 clusters) are required to produce a 36-pound tin of semi-hard oil, and the labor involved is about 3 to 5 person-days per tin (Northrup 1974: 269).

The total population of Ngwaland in the 19th century is unknown but, from all indications, the density of population in the northern part of the clan (where most of the palm oil was produced) was comparatively higher than in other sections. Thus, the palm trees which the ordinary man in the village could harvest might have been few. Granting that he had access to many palm trees, his productive capacity would have been low since he and his wife would not have been able to withstand the rigorous tasks involved in a large-scale production.

Besides these obvious limitations, the small-scale farmer was also handicapped when marketing his produce. Since the ‘beaches’ were located in the fringes of the clan, his wife had to travel a long distance to sell their produce. In some cases, a journey of about thirty-five miles might last three to four days (round trip) and, even if he accompanied her, they could only carry about two to three tins of palm oil. They paid tolls along the trip and might have to buy food on their way. Thus, by the time they had returned home, they would have spent about 5-10% of their ‘sales income’ as ‘incidental expenses’.

Because of the various difficulties small-scale farmers encountered, heads of lineages, villages and towns were the major producers in Ngwaland in the 19th century. Despite the absence of extensive plantations during that period, they could harvest the palm trees located in the ‘ancestral land’. They had many wives and domestic slaves. In addition, these authority holders were entitled to tributes of free labor from members of their community on each orie day of the four-day Igbo week (oru-orie). It was thus possible for them to produce palm oil and kernels in commercial quantities.

The fact that wives of heads of lineages, villages and towns in Ngwaland like Egege Nwannenta, Nwagalasi Oguikpe and Olujie Egbulefu eventually became leading palm produce traders is significant. It further demonstrates that legitimate commerce tended to strengthen the authority of the heads of various communities. Indeed, the major role which women played in the economic life of the Ngwa during the period

27. This element of Ngwa socio-political organization has been described in detail, see ORIJI 1977: 106-110.
28. Information obtained from S. Ordor of Akwete and B. Adindu of Eziukwu Aba, a trader and businessman.
of palm produce trade is one of the most outstanding developments in Ngwa history.

It was probably because coastal middlemen who traded in the towns located on the fringes of Ngwaland recognized this dominant role of women that they started to give 'credits' (goods) to the wives of leading men of towns such as Akwete, Ohambale and Azumiri. Thus, unlike in the period of the transatlantic slave trade when credit facilities were granted primarily to chiefs and other influential male traders, their wives received most of the credits in the 19th century.

Having obtained credits, women from Akwete, Ohambale and Azumiri travelled to nearby Ngwa towns like Obegu, Aba and Abala. On arrival, they in turn gave credits to wives of prominent leaders of these communities, who bought palm oil and kernels directly from the producers. After buying sufficient produce, traders in Obegu dispatched it to their creditors at the nearby town of Akwete. The produce purchased at Aba was shipped through the Imo river either to Akwete or Ohambale, while that of Abala was transported through the same river to Azumiri and Ohambale. From these towns, coastal middlemen collected palm produce from those to whom they gave credits and returned to their base at Bonny or Opobo via the Imo river (see fn. 28).

Three tiers of exchange zones can then be differentiated in Ngwaland by the later part of the 19th century. The first one consisted of towns and villages in the northern, eastern and southern parts such as Okpuala-Ngwa, Ohanze and Amavo. People in these communities were primary producers of palm oil and kernels. They travelled to the 'beaches' to exchange their commodities for stockfish, salt and other goods. The next zone coincided with the 'beaches'. It comprised a few towns like Aba, Abala and Obegu, whose inhabitants specialized in purchasing palm produce. Akwete, Ohambale and Azumiri, located within the last zone, were the major centres for obtaining credits and for storing, bulking and shipping palm oil and kernels to the eastern Delta.

The degree of prosperity of a trading town in the 19th century could be an index for determining the level of profits its traders acquired from legitimate commerce. There are no available figures which would enable a researcher to quantify 'costs and profits' amongst the palm produce traders. The different units of measurement like calabashes, tins, barrels, gallons and puncheons which they adopted and the fact that trade was often conducted by barter have compounded this problem. However, a few inferences can be made from the sketchy data contained in some sources. Even though the official price of palm oil in Britain (see Table III) did not necessarily determine its cost in the hinterland, it might give some insight into the fluctuations in the prices of this commodity during the 19th century. Owing to economic crises and the competition from petroleum in the 1860s, the price of palm oil reached its peak from the 1850s to the early 1860s when it was sold between £40
and £50 a ton. But for a short recovery in 1883-84, when it rose from £35 to £40 a ton, prices did not regain their 19th century highs until 1906 (see Latham 1973: 68-69). European traders who gave credits to the coastal middlemen are known to have made a turnover profit of 100% per trip (ibid.: 71). From a rough calculation, it is likely that the turnover profit of Aba, Abala and Obegu traders after receiving credits in each period was 40%. Their creditors from Akwete, Ohambele and Azumiri made a profit of about 55% per trip, while coastal middlemen netted nearly 65% profit after each trip.29 If the turnover profit of palm produce traders was so high, there is no justification for stressing the major benefits the common man derived from legitimate commerce. Besides, European traders seemed to have imported an excessive quantity

### Table III. — Buying Prices of Oil, London, 1823-1891*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>£</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1823</td>
<td>£27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1824</td>
<td>£20-24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1842</td>
<td>£32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1843</td>
<td>£29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1850 to early 1860s</td>
<td>£40-50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1865</td>
<td>£35-40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1879</td>
<td>£30-35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1883-84</td>
<td>£35-40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1884-89</td>
<td>£20-24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>below £24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


### Table IV. — Ratio of Exchange of Iron Bars to Shillings and Pence in Eastern Delta*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Iron Bars</th>
<th>Shillings and Pence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1820</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2/6d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1840</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1/6d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1854</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1864</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1869</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6d</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* It is significant that manillas which were adopted as native currency continued to appreciate in value in the 19th century. Source: Jones 1963: 92-94.

29. The turnover profit of local traders reflected their profit margin in the later part of the 19th century. I computed these figures after interviewing some people who were engaged in the palm produce trade in the later part of the 19th century. Those interviewed included J. Nweke of Amavo and B. Adindu of Eziukwu Aba, as well as M. Ogbuka of Umuchima village, Ngwa-Ukwu.
of 'iron bars' which were used in purchasing palm produce in the eastern Delta and in the Igbo hinterland (see Table IV). Thus, the value of this 'trade currency' continued to depreciate because of inflation. Although inflation usually undermined the purchasing power of all social groups, small-scale producers are bound to have felt its impact more than large-scale producers.

* 

This paper has shown that Okonko members were able to adapt to the demands of legitimate commerce. They increased their purchasing power by collecting tolls and selling slaves. By the 18th century, the Aro linked them with different exchange centers in Ngwaland and other parts of the hinterland.

Excepting those of them who were members of Okonko, heads of lineages, villages and towns did not play an active part in the overseas slave trade. But they derived much income from the palm produce trade. They had the wherewithal to produce and market palm oil and kernels on a large scale. The few heads of some communities who became palm produce traders accumulated much wealth from legitimate commerce. A typical example is Chief Ananaba of Obegu. He dominated the palm produce trade in that town. He established special relations with Akwete traders, who in turn were the major trading partners of Bonny middlemen in the Igbo hinterland. Ananaba supplied over one quarter of the palm produce which was shipped at Akwete. Because of his towering influence in his community and neighboring settlements, the British recognized him as the 'king of the Ngwa' in 1895.30

It is noteworthy that women did not participate in the transatlantic slave trade. However the wealth those of them who were married to leading men in the trading stations acquired from legitimate commerce was probably considerable. These women who dominated the palm produce trade were said to be so influential that, when the British penetrated into Ngwaland in the latter part of the 19th century, they thought of appointing them warrant chiefs.31

30. Details of the appointment of Ananaba as the king of the Ngwa have been given by NWAGURU 1973: 41-52.
31. At Akwete, my informant, Chief Ordor, stated that many women accumulated so much wealth from the palm produce trade in the 19th century that they were invited to important meetings of the town. Some of them he mentioned were Egege Nwannenta, Mgbal Nwabu and Nmaru Egbe. At Abu, B. Adindu told a similar story. But for men's opposition, the British would have appointed warrant chiefs some rich women who were engaged in palm produce trade. Even after they had conceded to the wishes of the men, the British were said to have invited some of these women to the Native courts, when important marital disputes arose, to seek their advice. Some of these women were Nwanyo Egbulifu, Olujie Egbulifu and Nwagalasi Oguikpe, their leader.
Like some politico-religious authorities and women, the common man did not engage in the overseas slave trade. His lot might have improved slightly as a result of the introduction of legitimate commerce. But legitimate commerce did not offer him a ‘New Deal’. If compared with those of other groups, the benefits he derived from trade in the 19th century tend to recede into insignificance.

Nsukka, University of Nigeria.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ALLEN, J. G. C.
1933 'Intelligence Report on the Ngwa Clan' (vol. 1-2), Nigeria, National Archives, Enugu, Eastern Provinces 7021 no 68.

BUCHANAN, K. M. & PUGH, J. C.

COHEN, A.

CURTIN, P. D.

DIKE, K. O.

EKEJIUBA, F. I.

HOPKINS, A. G.

JACKSON, J.
1930 'Disturbances [. . .] Southeastern Provinces', Nigeria, National Archives, Enugu, NOC 53/192, vol. X.

JONES, G. I.
Latham, A. J. H.

Leonard, A. G.

Meillassoux, C.

Northrup, D.

Nwaguru, J. E. N.

Oriji, J. N.

Ottenberg, S.

Rodney, W.

Talbot, P. A.
1926 *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria: A Sketch of their History, Ethnology and Languages, with an Abstract of the 1921 Census* (London: Humphrey Milford/ OCP), vol. III.

Ukwu, U. I.

Usoro, E. J.

Vansina, J.

Williams, E. E.