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Some Reflections on Relics of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in the Historic Town of Badagry, Nigeria

By Alaba Simpson¹

In recent decades, expanding studies of oral histories and documentary evidence concerning the trans-Atlantic slave trade have undoubtedly improved our understanding of that system and its effects of African cultural diasporas. Interesting oral history information from past indigenous slave dealer communities in West Africa also provides new dimensions to our knowledge regarding past economic and socio-cultural relationships and the existence of diverse mechanisms of the enslavement system that were used to enforce captivity during the period of the trade.

Badagry and a Resurgence of Interest in the History of Slavery

The slave port of Badagry in Nigeria provides us with insights into the history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, particularly from the view point of contemporary perspectives and appreciation and exhibition of relics from the system of enslavement. The foundational history of Badagry, which is situated in the Lagos State of Nigeria, dates back to approximately 1425 A.D.² It is predominantly inhabited by the Egun people, who are both the politically dominant and numerically preponderant ethnic group in the area.

In recent times, the Egun in this area have been a subject of debate with particular regard to their social group name, or ethnonym. Notable scholarly publications and relevant literature

concerning this ethnic group have largely adopted the Egun title when referring to this cultural group (Asiwaju, 1979; Avoseh, 1938; Hodder, 1962; Newbury, 1965). However, some recent publications about this population have adopted the ethnonym of “Ogu,” which raises problems of consistency, particularly for scholars working in the area.

Presently, the conventional ethnonym of “Egun” is preferred by the vast majority of the people. Any sudden break in the use of this conventional ethnonym in the historiography of this cultural group would likely cause confusion, especially in regard to their place of origin, which they typically trace the neighboring Republic of Benin.

Material culture remnants of the trans-Atlantic slave trade survive within Badagry town. The availability and use of such relics as exhibits within local tourist sites provide reminders of the material aspects of the slave trade. The interest that has recently been rekindled in the history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade thus offers interesting avenues for an expanded focus on indigenous responses to issues relating to the physical remnants of enslavement.

Remnants of the Enslavement Experience

As a community that actively served as a slave port in Nigeria during the trans-Atlantic slave trade period, Badagry has demonstrated the continued transfer of memories of the slave trade through oral traditions. In particular, relics of the enslavement system have been preserved to the present from the time of the abolition of the slave trade in the area and are currently the subject of increasing focus among local community members. These material remains and current activities include the display of slave chains and shackles, cannons, baracoons quarters, seventeenth-century wells, a seventeenth-century Portuguese umbrella and pottery gifts, a slave route door post called the “door of no return,” a slave ship anchor,

development of dance performances to commemorate the perseverance of captive Africans, and diverse literary expressions that are related to the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

The Cannon and the Agbalata Market

At the Wawu Quarters³ (*Koh*) in Badagry of Nigeria (headed by *Ahovi Wawu*), the cannon that was used to enforce compliance with the instructions that promulgated the abolition of slave trade activities in the area is still highly visible in a permanent display in the entrance to the Quarters. An accompanying sign post has the following inscriptions: “Instrument of slave abolition and war donated to Aholu Wawu by the British govt. 1843.” An inscription on the cement seat on which the cannon is mounted reads as follows: “The seat of the British cannon Donated to King/Aholu Wawu of Badagry for the abolition of slave trade in 1843.” Although the date inscribed on the cannon seat is 1843, the treaty that was actually signed between the traditional rulers in Badagry with the Queen of England regarding the abolition of the slave trade in the area was 1852.

Another interesting feature in Badagry that relates to the cannon is its link, in the present day oral history of the people, with the etymology of *Agbalata*, the name by which the popular Badagry traditional market is called. This is a notable development in the historiography of Badagry as the topographical location of the cannon confirms remarkably close proximity to the *Agbalata* market. It is also worth noting that earlier explanations that were given regarding the origin of the name *Agbalata* had been varied (Simpson, 1994), with none of these being directly linked to the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Presently, the Yoruba expression “Agba Olota,” which implies “the cannon with ball,” is increasingly associated with *Agbalata*.

Baracoons and the Gate of No Return

Baracoons played important roles in the gruesome treatment that were meted out to slaves in the area during the trans-Atlantic slave trade era. Baracoons served as makeshift houses in which many captives were imprisoned while others were taken into the slave market at the site of the Vlekete shrine within Badagry. By the time captives were sorted into groups within that marketplace, a slave ship would have arrived at the nearby Gberefu beach. Enslaved persons were then transferred to the ship for the horrific voyage of the Middle Passage across the Atlantic Ocean and on to the plantation fields of the Americas.



The Vlekete shrine and venue of Badagry slave market.

Some of the surviving baracoon structures are located in the Anwajigoh Quarters, under the rulership custody of the Jengen of Badagry. One other baracoon was located in the basement of the family house of the former slave dealer, Chief Seriki Abass of the Boekoh Quarters. That chamber was in the shape of a normal room but extremely small in size.

Relying on the records of Captain Clapperton's last expedition, Burns (1929) recounted that in 1828 Richard Lander observed baracoons at Badagry which contained more than one

thousand captives. As part of the contemporary contribution of the local community in Badagry to information relating to the trans-Atlantic slave trade, oral histories in the area relate how the interim slave houses could not, for example, contain the full height of an average enslaved person and that the captives therefore were forced to stoop over throughout the period of waiting transfer to Gberefu village, from where they were placed on a slave ship for the Middle Passage.

Although Thomas (1997: 713) described the baracoons that were used in Africa as “flimsy constructions,” which he claimed were typically made of bamboo, the baracoons in Badagry were quite solid in structure and built with concrete aggregate materials. Oral history reports in the Badagry area also emphasize that these baracoons presented captives with very poor physical conditions of the interiors of such structures during their wait for shipment across the Atlantic. The location of the transfer facilities at the Gberefu beach is largely overseen by the current Village head of Gberefu village in Badagry. Gberefu is situated by the coast along the Atlantic Ocean and its popularity for cultural heritage tourism is strongly linked to the role it played in the transfer of captives across the Atlantic to the slave fields in the Americas. The “gate of no return” is located on this beach. As one of the relics of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the gate serves as a cultural heritage tourism attraction in Badagry today. Such a “gate of no return” is common to slave ports along the West African coasts, where the reality of separation between the captives and their native land is made evident. The gate remains to date as a tear-provoking relic which both the local community members and visitors confront with sadness and trepidation.



Captives were transported through the “gate of no return” in Gberefu village to the awaiting ship on the Atlantic Ocean. Remnant posts of the structure are shown above.

Custodians of Slave Trade Relics

There are a few families who serve as custodians of important historical relics in Badagry. In the Boekoh Quarter of Badagry, the Mobee family inherited from Chief Sunbu Mobee, a prominent slave dealer, artifacts of slavery which are kept in the family museum close to the house. The museum is run on a day-to-day basis with selected members of the family serving as tour guides. The museum exhibits include captive neck chains of approximately 50 meters in length. The chains were used to hold about one hundred captives at once. The chains connected to clasps around the necks of captives. A hip clasp is also used to tie the left leg of each captive to the right leg of another person adjacent to them, and this facilitated the slave dealers’ ability to pull lines of captives in one direction or another. The museum also displays a cistern from which captives drank water.



Slave chains in domestic museum in Badagry. Dr. Simpson is standing third from the left.

Just a few houses away from the Mobee compound, there exists another private museum which belongs to the descendant family of Chief Seriki Abbass, who was also a notable slave dealer in Badagry. Among the slavery related relics that were inherited was a Portuguese umbrella gift which was presented to him in the seventeenth century. A photograph of the umbrella taken in the year 2001 showed that the umbrella was still relatively usable, with a covering cloth material being quite colourful and a fairly firm and intact handle. However, another photograph taken in the year 2005 revealed a fairly tattered state of the same umbrella. Remarkable deterioration has therefore occurred to this artifact of the slave trade. This deterioration may have resulted from frequent handling of the object as it was brought out over and over again each time its story had to be orally related by the museum representatives.



Seventeenth-century Portuguese umbrella given as a gift to a local slave dealer, Chief Seriki Abass. Photo taken in 2001.



Seventeenth-century Portuguese umbrella gift being examined by the author and colleagues in the year 2005.

Ethnonyms and Anthroponomy of Traditional Rulers

Apart from the physical evidence that is shown by the material remnants of the slave trade, research activities among communities that were greatly impacted by the events and practices of that system have continued to reveal useful historical information through oral history reports. For example, the naming histories, or “anthroponomy,” of traditional rulers, slave dealers, and slave descendants, are increasingly becoming subjects of interest to members of such indigenous communities. One of the kings of Badagry was called *Soton*, which in Egun language means “the guns are out.” This is an aspect of the history of the Egun of Badagry that is likely to shed more light on the connection that existed between traditional rulers in the land with the use of guns in slave raiding. Also in the nearby Republic of Benin, Prospere de Souza, a direct descendant of the prominent indigenous slave dealer, Cha Cha de Souza, has explained the etymology of the name “Cha Cha” as depicting the manner adopted by this famous slave dealer when walking, the sound “Cha! . . . Cha! . . . Cha!” being directly associated with the cadence of his stride.

Similarly, the Dutch freelance captain and slave dealer, Heinrik Hertogh, known also by members of the local community in Badagry as George Frmingo, was popularly called *Hunto Konu*, for “the smiling ship owner” (Thomas, 1997). He was claimed by indigenes in Badagry to have achieved that name because of his seemingly perpetual smiling demeanor. The *Tabon* community of slave descendants who arrived in Ghana from Brazil following the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade is also known as the “Tabon” because of the popular Portuguese greeting which singled them out from the Ghanaians around them. Hence, the Portuguese greeting “Como esta?” or “Tabon” led to their being referred to by the Ghanaian community as the *Tabon* people.

The African Brazilians on the island of Lagos are also known as *Aguda*. Oral traditions have it that the word was coined from “Algudan,” the Portuguese name for cotton, which represented a familiar terrain of labor for captive Africans. In the same vein the word “Nago,” which was an adopted ethnonym for the Yoruba group during their sojourn as enslaved laborers in Brazil, was used as a group identification label for many captive Africans (Lovejoy and Trotman, 2003). According to Lovejoy and Trotman (2003: 158-159):

This terminology was part of the repertoire of geographical names used by slave-traders in Africa as well those used by the African populations that participated in the slave trade network, in order to classify the captives that arrived at the sub-stations before being sold. These denominations rarely corresponded to the forms of identification used by the slaves themselves to indicate their groups of origin.

Based on oral traditions in Badagry, the origin of the word “Nago” has a different and distinct derivation. This term is instead linked to one of the inspection parades at the Vlekete slave market in Badagry at the time when the trade was rife. The word has been explained as having entered the vocabulary of the trans-Atlantic slave trade when it was adopted by European slave dealers, who, on checking some female captives, discovered that the loin clothes worn by them for covering their privacy were in a most unhygienic and flea-infested state. Questions were then asked by the Europeans. The local slave dealers explained in the Yoruba language that what was being witnessed was “ina inu igo” which translates as “flea infested loin clothes.” This link of pest-infested clothing, as part of the sufferings that captives endured at the time of their enslavement, was also reported by Hodder (1962:81), who noted Lander’s documentation that in Badagry slaves were crammed together in a most uncomfortable manner:

Five hundred slaves at Badagri crammed into a small schooner of eighty tons, and the appearance of these unhappy human beings was squalid and miserable in the extreme. They were fastened in the neck in pairs, only a quarter of a yard of chain being allowed

for each . . . pulling them along by a narrow band, their only apparel, which encircled their waist.

The Dramatization of the Slavery Experience

One of the ways in which the young people in Badagry depict the pains and sorrows of the slave trade is through a re-enactment of a captivity drama through a “slave dragging” performance along the streets of Badagry. These actors are tied at the neck one to another with real or improvised chains, with their hands tied to their backs as they wail and grunt, being dragged by actors portraying local slave dealers. The captives are dragged to the staged area of a “slave market,” where other individuals portray European slave dealers, who then examine the captives to see the extent of their fitness and suitability for the labours ahead. Such dramatization of enslavement is usually performed during occasions such as the anniversary that marks the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, during guest entertainment at important community occasions, and most importantly when the Lagos state government hosts delegates and visitors coming from locations of the African diaspora.

A particularly poignant effect of this performance is that children within the community often begin to gather together to try to duplicate this performance among themselves as the slave act is paraded around the town in Badagry. The children often use ropes or clothes (*avoh*) tied in a long row and improvised to represent the slave chains (*Gede*). They often wail and cry as they do the “slave walk” around their houses or in their parents’ compounds.

Freedom Dance

Stories of slave experiences and the later abolition of the slave trade were transferred across generations to current descendants and have made it possible to have today in Badagry

the popular commemorative performance called the “Freedom Dance.” The dance, which continues to serve as local depiction and reminder of the experiences of slavery even in modern times, is usually performed at important occasions and celebrations in Badagry.

The dance plays an important role in national festivals and other celebrations and commemorations and still remains very popular in Badagry (Simpson, 1992). In current times, this performance serves the dual function of commemorating the freedom of Nigerians from the gruesome jaws of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and their eventual emancipation from the imposed domination of colonialism.

[T]he opening of the dance verbally indicates the idea of freedom. . . . One specific factor that may seem to have enhanced the level of awareness generated among the people of Badagry regarding the notion of freedom from the colonial masters is the unique position held by the area as a prominent slave port. The round-about movement of the dancers as presented in the initial part of the performance can be depicted as pointing attention to two major turning points in the in the history of Nigeria. The first is the period that marks the end of the slave trade era, while the second is the period when Nigeria attained independence from the colonial masters. (Simpson, 1992: 111)

Diverse forms of musical instruments which are local in their presentations are used by the dancers to add rhythm to their dance steps.

Although Adegbite (1981) has suggested an indispensable linkage between the survival of traditional African instruments among African captives in the Americas, his view that slave owners may have encouraged the transfer of light musical instruments from the African shores to the slave fields appears contestable as far as the case with Badagry is concerned. This is because the patterns of forceful captivity and transport of enslaved persons did not allow for accompanying transport of such personal belongings. In view of the forceful aspect that was involved in the movement of the captives, it does not appear plausible that enslaved persons

could have carried their musical instruments with them to the New World, however small or light such instruments may have been. Rather, the likelihood remains that enslaved Africans carried with them their cultural knowledge and skill, including both material and intangible aspects of their belief systems and traditions, which were reproduced over time as part of the strategies for survival on the slave plantations in the Americas.

The culture of Vodun among the people in Badagry provides an example of this aspect of sub-conscious retention of the cultural beliefs and practices among the people as they were carted away from their homeland in Africa:

The history of Badagry will in no way be complete without the overall hanging impact of the slave trade era and its concomitant influence on the culture of the people in that area. . . . The experience of slavery itself has been identified as providing for the captives great reliance on the ideas of culture which they carried in their sub-conscious into captivity. (Simpson, 2001: iii)

So entrenched is the notion of the “Freedom Dance” in the current cultural repertoire of the people in Badagry that students, particularly those in the secondary school, often perform a new version of this dance at the completion of the final writing of their graduating examinations to indicate their newly acquired freedom from the demands of secondary school requirements.

Slave Chains for Ogun Worship in Ikoga

Among the people of Ikoga community in the Badagry area, chains (*Gede*) that were used in keeping captives who were to be transported to the slave market were claimed recently to have been converted to use as material components in ceremonies of worship of the deity Ogun (known as *Gu* among the Egun). Ogun is the god of iron among the Yoruba and Egun, and devotees usually consider iron-based materials as being symbolically expressive of the powers and characteristics of that deity. Based on this belief, devotees often swear oaths of

truthfulness and fealty to Ogun. This adoption of slaves' chains within religious observations of Ogun has not yet been elaborated to fully articulate the symbolism of how the deity's characteristics are served by the use of such iron elements within enslavement. Nonetheless, the conversion of surviving examples of historic-period slave chains into ritual implements in Ogun worship is an indication of the preservation across the years of this remnant of the slave trade.

Conclusion: Artifacts, Commemoration, and the Abolition of Slave Trade

Two hundred years have passed since the trade in captive Africans across the Atlantic was abolished. Oral and written histories concerning the people whose ancestors experienced the effects of this trade are replete with accounts and narrations that call attention to the existence of material culture remnants from activities that formed outstanding aspects of the events which stood out in the annals of enslavement.

The treaty instructions from Great Britain that accompanied the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in Badagry in the year 1852 required that all the instruments of the slave trade be destroyed. Excerpts from the treaty as presented in Appendix 1 of the documents tendered by the Royal Council of the Akran to the Standing Tribunal of Enquiry into Chieftaincy Matters in Lagos State of Nigeria (1980) (entitled "Engagement between her Majesty the Queen of England and the Chiefs of Badagry for the abolition of the traffic in slaves. Signed at Badagry, March 18, 1852, pp. 35-36") read as follows:

The export of slaves to foreign countries is forever abolished in the territories of the Chiefs of Badagry . . . and all the implements of slave trade, and the baracoons, or buildings exclusively used in the slave trade shall be forthwith destroyed.

Ironically, those instructions were not fully implemented, and today the surviving artifacts of the system of enslavement provide a focal point for commemoration of the perseverance of

enslaved Africans. Such remnants are incorporated in contemporary oral narrations and are used to contribute to existing knowledge on the history of the slave trade. These efforts help to make new information available to interested academic, social, tourist, and governmental audiences and descendants of Africans in diaspora that keeps alive the memories of the trans-Atlantic activities in which Badagry became entangled.

Notes

1. Alaba Simpson (PhD), Department of Sociology, College of Human Development, Covenant University, Ota, Ogun State, Nigeria; e-mail: sunmisimpson@yahoo.com. I acknowledge the contribution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Paris, for the organization's research sponsorship and book publication of the initial work on *Oral Tradition and Slave Trade in Nigeria, Ghana, and Benin* (Simpson 2004). That publication, which is presently available on the UNESCO website, gave impetus to further research work on diverse aspects of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, including the present article.
2. This information was received from the palace of the Akran of Badagry, Wheno Aholu Menu Toyi 1. The same date is quoted in the *Supplement Memorandum to the Standing Committee Tribunal of Inquiry into Chieftaincy Matters in Lagos State of Nigeria on the Aholu of Ajara and other Chieftaincies*. The presentation was made by the Royal Council of King Akran. The date should therefore be seen as one that reflects the views of the incumbent monarch and one which is subject to variation when presented by other traditional ruling houses in the Badagry area.
3. There are eight of such quarters that make up Badagry town; *Wawu* is the title that denotes the headship position of the Prince (*Aholu*) of Ahovikoh, one of the ruling quarters in Badagry.

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