
The Impact of Missionaries on Slavery and Slave Trade to the Development of Oron People – Nigeria 1800 – 2000: A Historical Imperative

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Abstract: *Slavery is as old as the human race and in every civilization in history there was always remained one form of slavery or another especially where man had inhabited; in history, there is a record of Jewish slavery in Egypt. The Jews were under strict bondage in Egypt where they labored in the various construct/on works which included the pyramids and irrigation canals. Also in the Arab world, Slavery existed providing services to the kings of Babylon, Persia, Assyria and so on. And in Africa, the various rulers made use of slave services in their courts and palaces. The same was replicated in Oron where slavery became a recognized social institution. Those who were involved in domestic slavery used them for various services such as cooks, gardeners, errand men and women and as farmers. This situation affected the personality and general outlook of Oron People at the time and many years to come. Oron people continued to struggle in order to come to terms with the realities of the present circumstances.*

Key words: *slavery, slave, trade, economy, indigenous*

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous slavery and slave trade had been in Oron, Akwa-Ibom State long before Nigeria existed as an entity. It soon became a recognized institution where the wealthy and the affluent perpetuated it openly such that it became an acceptable norm in the society.

However, this situation did not start in Oron neither did it stop there. During the historical period, the ancient empire of Greece and Rome practiced it to improve their local economies in which was found more slaves than free men in the empire. In the mean time, the practice of slavery and slave trade helped to inculcate civic education in the citizenry and it also taught them to appreciate hard work and discipline. It indeed paid well for them as those in slavery became more civil, skillful in certain trades and crafts and then possessed a dunt of hard work.

In fact, the situation was the same in all communities of Oron as most slaves became more skillful and enterprising having been educated by their owners or masters. According to Patterson (1982:1) Slavery has been in existence before the dawn of human history even in the most primitive of human societies and in the most civilized. In early centers of human civilization such as Egypt, Mesopotamian, Babylon etc slavery was firmly established. To a large extent, slavery and slave trade in Oron constituted some of the dehumanizing practices in the area. Slave owners were seen as masters or Lords while those in slavery were petty humans to be used in all menial and degrading jobs or services. At the time, these slaves were subjected to the whims and caprices of their masters without any right of resentment. In that position, they were looked upon as inferior subjects to the wealthy class who kept them for their dehumanizing use.

Indeed, most Oron people during the period did not go to school neither did they engage in business nor could they establish homes of their own. The means was not there as they labored for the up keep of their masters alone. The situation created some social problems as their master took their female counter parts as concubines who, once pregnant remained at home to nurse their babies and do house work. At the time, Oron people became so marginalized and unable to enforce their rights as individual humans. But when slave trade ended, domestic slavery continued unabated because of the benefits derivable there from.

LOCATION OF ORON

Oron is located in Akwa-Ibom State, Nigeria. The people can be found in Bakassi Local Government Area of Cross River State, Nigeria. Other locations where they could be found include Oron itself, Udu-Uko, Mbo, Urue Offiong, Oruko and Okobo. By this spread; it became the third largest ethnic group in Akwa-Ibom State. The land is intersected by numerous creeks, rivers, streams and tributaries which flow consistently into Cross River. The entire coastline is said to stretch from Uya Oron to Udu-Uko.

Oron is within the tropical region with a uniformly high temperature all year round. It has two main seasons which include the dry season which starts in early October and ends in March whereas the Wet or rainy season stretches from April to October each year. Two prevailing winds exist such as Southwest trade winds from the Atlantic Ocean crossing to up North bringing rains and the North-East trade winds across the Sahara Desert which bring dry dusty winds up to the South across Nigeria. It brings harmatan.

Oron has a population of about 300,000 people living in it. It has a seaport, Maritime Academy etc. The people, especially those outside the city have fishing and farming as their predominant occupation even though there are traders, artisans and crafts men that dominate the local economy.

CONCEPT SLAVERY AND SLAVE TRADE

According to Lovejoy (1983:2) slavery was fundamentally a means of denying outsiders the rights and privileges of a particular society so that they could be exploited for economic, political or social purposes. Again, in an attempt to define slave trade, Klein (1998:15) explained that in any struggle to define the status and conditions of slaves, the very definition of slavery, is a battle ground. He claimed that the intellectual battle is between those who define slavery in terms of kindness or natal alienation and of those, indeed, who define it as property in man. Whichever way, slave dealers have always looked at slaves and slavery as business, sometimes, more profitable than those of legitimate trade in palm produce. They remained in it because society needs it to make the world of classes than of equals.

In his own explanation, Asante (2005:5) states that the English word slave originated from the Old French word "Escalve" which is found in Medieval Latin, "Eclavus". And for Imbua (2002:2), Slave exploitation is inherent in slave business. A common denominator to all definitions of slavery is profoundly exploitation which involves someone exploiting the labor of another for his own benefit. In fact, Gbenenye (2004:79) explained that although slavery was a common institution throughout the ancient world, no people possessed more slaves or relied so much on slave labour as the Romans. Most of Roman slaves probably came from Italy. This is because before the 3rd century BC, a small farmer in Rome could acquire slaves to assist him in the farm. The rich held more slaves who became part of the family household. Some of which

were integrated into the family of their masters. Here, they soon became free citizens, still others remained subjects.

Similarly, Hopkins (1973:25) describes slaves as subjects who later became trustees who often possessed numerous slaves of their own and that a few privileged ones held senior civil and military positions. Again, Taylor (2006:17) discusses how slaves were made bulls of laden in the New world. He explained how slaves were whipped, manacled and sometimes laden with heavy weights such as pieces of woods weighing as much as thirty pounds attached to their wrists or ankles to prevent flight.

Slavery is in most instances referred to as *escalvage* in French, *Sklaverei* in German, *Servetus* in Latin, *Esclavitud* in Spanish, *Escradidao* in Portuguese and *slavery* in English. According to Imbua (2012:1). This system has existed in one form or another throughout human history. For this reason Patterson (1982:5) disclosed that nothing is actually peculiar about the institution of slavery. Moreover, Finley (1968) in his works had contended that the slave is an outsider and that alone permits his being owned not only his uprooting but also his reduction from a person to a thing that can be owned.

Slaves belong to their masters who control them, slaves were outsiders by origin who lacked kinship ties and therefore could be exploited. Indeed, the old French word *esclave* came from medieval Latin *sclavus* which is related to the Greek *Sklabos* which was taken from the word *Skalbenoi*. This is in reference to slaves of Slavic Origin. The word *Sklabeno* is closely linked to the old Russian word *Slovene* and the modern word *slave* is indeed related to the Slavic people many of whom were sold into slavery,

TYPES OF SLAVERY IN ORON

Slavery has been a complex term to actually define definitely, However, this can be attributable to some complex and peculiar social and economic circumstances. In Oron, people have been subjected to various forms of slavery which have over the years dehumanized the people. Among such include but not limited to the following;

CHATTEL SLAVERY

This type of slavery existed in two ways. First, under the Islamic system with the trans-Saharan slave trade and two, with the European slave system through the trans-Atlantic slave trade. In Oron, Chattel slaves were usually treated as the personal property of an owner and were bought and sold as commodities. It is for this reason that customary law considers this form of indigenous slavery as property or chattel who are usually in deprivation of such rights as ordinarily held by free persons. In several circumstances, they (slaves) were reserved for farm labour, house work, sex and for breeding. In the ancient time, they can be made to exchange for trucks, guns, camels and money. Their offspring remain the property of their master and in any case they are born, live or die as slaves.

FORCED LABOUR

They are most of the time referred to as unfree or compulsory labour which include works or services exacted from persons under any issues of penalty and where one did not offer himself voluntarily. This is usually enforced through threat of violence or punishment with restrictions on the freedom of the labourers.

DEBT BONDAGE

This type of slavery is referred to as bondable labour or peonage arising from a pledge by a debtor of his personal services or those of a person who is under his control as security for a debt of the value of those services which are not meant to liquidate the debt. Meanwhile the services required and the duration are undefined. They could pass on from generation to generation depending on the debtors' inability to repay the loan. It was not easy, however, for bonded labourers to escape their debt since there could be further costs attracted to such an action.

PAWNSHIP

This is indigenous to Africa. The pawn was held as collateral for debt and the labour provided was seen as interest on the debt. The situation was witnessed in the old Calabar province which included Oron in which captains of Merchant ships held free African men and women as Pawns in lieu of trading goods.

SERFDOM

Serfdom was somehow practiced in medieval Europe but saw its appearance in the old Calabar province and Oron region of Nigeria. It was a system whereby a tenant by law, custom or agreement was bound to live and labour on land belonging to his master. At the same time, he was to render some services without any reward. He was not allowed to change his status.

Serfs were able to sustain themselves and families through the cultivation of their master's farm land. Secondly, they were by law required to get permission to either marry, sell goods or to change their occupation.

HUMAN TRAFFICKING

This is a situation where persons could be recruited, transported, transferred, harboured and received by means of threat or the use of force or through coercion. It is a form of slavery which involves non-ownership of one's person or labour.

During the period of slave trade, Oron men and women were recruited and transported to parts of Europe through the Atlantic Coast with a promise to get a better life over there. They soon discovered that they had been recruited as sex workers in Europe. However, this system of slavery has recently been declining.

SERVILE MARRIAGE

In ancient times, this type of marriage existed which was oppressive and exploitative, Here, a woman is denied the right to refuse the marriage. She is then promised or given in marriage on payment of a consideration in money or in kind to her parents. The husband then sees the woman as property over whose productive and reproductive powers he exercised absolute control. The case where a woman is inherited against her will after her husband has died is nothing but absolute slavery.

In Oron, slaves were recruited in a variety of ways. Since Oron borders the Atlantic Ocean, it became at a time the seat of commercial and trading activities within the cross line estuaries. As slave business became more profitable, African merchants doing business within the old Calabar Province became more engaged in it. For this reason, Imbua (2012:37) recounted how these slave merchants recruited slaves in the old Calabar Province. In his explanation, he stated how king EYO II of Creek Town Calabar testified to Rev. Hope Waddell, a British

Missionary residing in Calabar, that slaves were acquired in various questionable ways. First, that slaves who came from different countries were in the first instance sold for breaking their country's laws. Second, that some were sold by some great men who hated them.

According to Olu (2003), majority of such slaves were the prisoners of war and in some cases, convicts and debt slaves. He further stated that these slaves could be brought into the open and transferred after purchase and that peonage- a system of near-slave involuntary servitude under which peasants and farm labourers were dependent on big land owners who became a source of slave supply.

Indeed the most common source of slave supply was the debt slavery system which begins with some form of financial assistance and sometimes ending in debt bondage. This is still practiced in some nations today. Before this period, some Coastal cities of Opofo, Oron, Bonny etc were organized on fishing and salt-panning basis which were the main economic activities. Being inhabitants of Mangrove swamp with salt waters, they had to contend with the coming of Europeans into their domain. For purposes of economic gain, the Europeans influenced the construction of war-canoes in order to transport seized slaves from the hinter land. Soon the need to get crew men to paddle the canoes arose. The system of house canoes eventually developed which comprised the father or head and dependants. These coastal towns or cities used the War canoes to obtain slaves from the Igbo country and Ijo which border the hinter land areas.

On several instances, scholars have contended that to trade in slaves at that time was purely the business of Local Chiefs, Kings the wealthy as well as audacious merchants who obtained slaves in two ways:

1. By kings' decree to raid neighbouring communities who were less powerful. The kings were enticed by exotic gifts from foreign trading merchants.
2. By occasional or random pillage by powerful persons or wealthy middle men who ensnared unsuspecting members of the family or the other on economic activities either in the markets or farms. It is less wonder when Barkindo, Omolewa and Madukor (2006:100) stated that by the 20th century several people were convinced that slave trade has to stop. Indeed, slaves suffered in the hands of their masters so cruelly that many died. Those who survived, such as Equiano an Igbo, recounted their ordeal in the hands of their masters. In Oron, modern slavery is still practiced and obtained in varying dimensions. According to Michael (2017:142) modern slavery existed in the form of house helps, sex workers and business apprentices. This became a source of slave supply in most African societies especially in Oron, Nigeria. And therefore, one can agree with Uya (2006:6) on this note that slavery and slave trade were part of the Akwa Ibom state people's tradition dating back to several centuries. This is because most of slave practices such as house helps and sex work still exist in several parts of that area which includes Oron. However, Noah (1980:142-143) argues that there is no justifiable basis to put African indigenous slavery and the horrific Atlantic slave trade on the same level. There is less pain and horror on the African indigenous slavery than the Atlantic slave system.

IMPACT OF SLAVERY ON ORON PEOPLE

The impact of slavery on Oron is enormous, first Slave business dehumanized and decapitated

the people of Oron. Oron people as a matter of fact, became subservient to the whims and caprices of their masters.

Again, it caused dislocations and family units lost their kinship while others forgot their family ancestry and took up foreign kins. Furthermore, slaves in the home of their masters were forced to adopt foreign names and dialects rather than their home names. Therefore, cross cultural values emerged and consequently new and different cultures were adopted by those in slavery. In fact, slavery brought about inferiority complex on the part of those enslaved. In Oron, there was the creation of this inferior status against the people which made them to believe that it was impossible to attain some levels of authority in the society. The slaves were discouraged from aspiring to some higher levels of economic and social maturity. For this reason, many individuals in Oron did not burden about going to school to improve themselves since they were satisfied with their low level status at the time. The impact was so great on the population of some families and communities. While some families were depopulated and made smaller, others benefitted by the increase of their population as those brought in from outside helped to increase the population of families that adopted them.

Apart from the negative aspects, there were some positive impacts on the people of Oron. Some slaves who later returned to their original home land were better than when they were enslaved as a result of teaching and education from their foreign homes. Some of them went to school up to primary whereas others whose masters were wealthy enough were sent to learn trades of various categories such as carpentry, typing and stenography, electrical works etc,

Most indigenous slaves were granted freedom by their masters to marry and so had children. They also had freedom to own landed property, took Chieftaincy title and eventually became heads of their masters' families. Again at that time families sent their children in slavery with the aim to get support for food to feed their immediate families. Slave institution became a source of extra help for poor families to provide family needs to their homes as those who get their child/children gave them material and financial support. This system created inter-family relationships.

MISSIONARY ACTIVITIES IN ORON

The story of Missionary activities has to do with that of development of the society and human capacity. Having arrived the shores of Oron, Missionaries used evangelization of Oron natives as a tool to entrench Western civilization in the area. That began the congenial relationship between Oron and European colonial forces,

However, that relationship could be traced back to the period of the 15th century. During this period the Portuguese Missionaries arrived the shores of Benin and Warri in Nigeria for the purposes of evangelizing the people in such manner to make them Christians or Europeans. Their missionary activities did not take deep root until the 19th century when Hope Waddell of the Presbyterian church arrived Calabar on the 10th of April, 1846; He began missionary activities in several parts of Calabar province which included Oron, Ibeno etc. Rev. Hope Waddell was followed by Rev. Samuel Ajayi Crowther of the Church Missionary Society (CMS). He led a team of missionaries into the Niger region of Nigeria in July 1857 and came into Ikot Abasi in 1902. In 1887, another Missionary known as Pastor Samuel Alexander Bill came to Ibeno, a close community to Oron. The entire atmosphere seemed to be so infused with the spirit of competition among the missionaries. It did not take long when Oron People witnessed the

emergence of Methodists in their midst in 1893. The Lutherans then came and settled in Ibesikpo.

Consequently, the entire relationship between Oron people and missionaries became much more sustainable and a little complex as the missionaries cooperated with the European commercial and colonial enterprise in Oron resulting in the colonial conquest of the region and a tripartite symbiotic cooperation of such factors as missionaries, colonial administrators and traders flourished. This largely shaped the situation in Oron to a level where there was a situation of westernization of the area.

As missionaries established their foot hold in Oron, their activities were tailored to eradicating slavery and slave trade. First, schools were built alongside churches and adult education programmes were established. Then of course, a lot of young people were sent to mission schools to learn how to read and write. Simple arithmetic was also taught to enable them in tax collection and calculations. Several of them were taught skills which made Oron Youth to be empowered to engage in meaningful activities. As a result, human capital development ensured and the society became dynamic. Many people went to school while others went with the missionaries to study abroad such as Iyang Abasi etc.. Several qualified Oron people added values to their lives and commercial and industrial activities emerged.

Missionaries therefore assisted in increased awareness among Oron people. As the people became exposed, a good number were employed in government establishments, companies and industrial estates. Oron people became so hardworking to the extent of overtaking other nationalities in Southern Eastern part of Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

In Oron, Slavery was carried out in a variety of ways. Despite the abolition of slavery, wealthy Oron people had continued to practice it to the amazement and detriment of the people and local economy. In this study, it has been seen that the negative impact of this business far out-weigh the positive aspects. It disorganized Oron people and dislocations occurred which eventually became difficult to repair.

Slavery in Oron decapitated the people. Stress and distress became a burden on the people. Some families were depopulated to the advantage of others that were populated as a result of influx of slaves from other lands especially against persons from families termed wicked or from where witches and wizards were suspected to have come from.

Slavery, though created early marriages, most of those enslaved were deprived of the right to acquire western education except if they sought express permission from their masters to do so. There was serious punishment against those who could make an attempt. In the first place they needed sponsorship before they could venture into school to gain Western education which could open their eyes to the evils of slavery.

As a result of evil legacies left behind during the period of slavery for those who benefited so much in it, domestic slavery has continued to thrive in Oron till date in different forms. The system of indigenous slavery in Oron could help to increase the tempo of economic activities and bring about dynamism in the local economy as many of them could be employed to work in the farms and local industries of their masters.

However, freedom is the essence. All humans need freedom and until that freedom is totally granted, those in slavery will continue to suffer from the in-human treated meted out to them by their masters no matter the benefits derivable there from on both sides.

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