

## THE SYSTEM OF SLAVERY IN BAKOR, SOUTH-EASTERN NIGERIA, 1850-1960

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**ABSTRACT:** *The subject of slavery, especially the status of slaves in African societies, has understandably attracted scholarly attention. Using Bakor society in south-eastern Nigeria as a case study, this paper seeks to contribute to existing knowledge about slave systems in Nigeria. On the basis of fieldwork carried out in Mfom, an Ekajuk community in Bakor area, in conjunction with relevant written sources, it has been established that a sizable percentage of Bakor population is of slave origin. These slaves were originally recruited from outside Bakorland and the primary reason for the purchase of slaves was to augment the population of matrilineages which appeared to be declining during the period covered by this study. It was for this reason that female slaves were preferred. The study also shows that there existed an efficient traditional method of intergrating slaves into the society. This, in addition to the fact that slaves never suffered any form of discrimination made it difficult to distinguish between slave and free born.*

**KEYWORDS:** Slavery, Mfom, Bansara, Cross River, Nigeria

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### INTRODUCTION

Slavery in one form or the other is as old as human history and there is hardly any society where this institution did not exist. Its ubiquitous nature notwithstanding, the definition of the term 'slave' is as varied as the number of scholars who have dealt with the subject. Part of the reason for this is that slavery presented characteristics that were unique to the social structure and political economy of each society it existed. Each scholar attempts to articulate characteristics peculiar to the particular society under study. Indeed some scholars have even suggested that with reference to some African societies it would be inappropriate to use the term 'slavery'. (Lovejoy 1981:12; Imbua 2012:4-5).

The problem of definition has been comprehensively dealt with by countless scholars. We shall only present a synopsis of the main features here. Paul Lovejoy (1981) summarizes the characteristics of slavery to include, among others: that slaves were human property; that the labour and reproductive power of slaves were owned by the master; that the master/slave relationship was based on coercion; that slaves were outsiders who were kinless in the societies they found themselves; and that emancipation was achieved either through an act or process of gradual incorporation into the kingroup.

On the basis of information obtained during fieldwork between March and May, 2014, this paper seeks to highlight the peculiar nature of slavery as it existed in Bakor, South-eastern Nigeria from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century to about 1960. It will be demonstrated that apart from implicit stigma, slaves in Bakor enjoyed equal social, economic and political freedoms as any other citizen.

The first part of the paper is a summary of Bakor social system especially the lineage system. This will provide the context for the understanding of slavery as an institution. The second part concerns the sources of slaves to Bakor as well as the motivation for the acquisition of slaves. The third and final part deals with the process of integrating slaves into the kingroup as well as the status of slaves in society vis-à-vis the free born.

### **Bakor Social System**

The Bakor, a sub-group of Ejagham ethnic nationality, consist of eight clans in what used to be Ogoja Province in South-eastern Nigeria. In the modern political arrangement Bakor is in Ogoja and Ikom Local Government Areas of Cross River State of Nigeria. The eight clans are Nkim, Nkum, Ekajuk, Nnam, Abanyum, Nde, Nta and Nselle. The first three clans in the list are in Ogoja while the remainders are in Ikom. The Bakor trace their origin from the modern Nigeria – Cameroon boundary. They migrated north-westward until they arrived and settled in their present abode in about the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was here that their existing social structure was fully developed and consolidated (Majuk, 1995).

Like the rest of Ejagham, the Bakor practiced, and still practice, a matrilineal descent system within which property was inherited. Indeed matriliney was one of the most prominent cultural features that distinguished Bakor from all her neighbours. As can be seen from the map below, the Bekwara, Yala, Ukelle, Mbembe, Mbube and Boki who today live all around Bakor were and still are patrilineal. The explanation for this is beyond the scope of this paper but it may not be too far from the fact that Bakor, with the rest of Ejagham, are a Bantu stock. In fact Ejagham has been described as the ‘most truly Bantu’ of all the groups in the Cross River region (Ejitiwu 1990:29). Studies have shown that in most cases matriliney distinguished Bantu from other groups. (Kupedr and Van-Leyneele 1998:336). In this system children belonged to the mother’s lineage.

Bakor matrilineage was headed by the most senior male in whose compound were placed a collection of stones representing the spirits of lineage ancestors (*Akwansi*). These ancestral spirits were responsible for the fertility of female lineage members. The lineage head was responsible for regular sacrifices necessary for this to happen.

Another condition that required sacrifice was when a member took ill and a soothsayer identified these spirits as being responsible. At the death of the lineage head one more stone was added to the collection and the position passed on to the next man on the basis of seniority.

Of more relevance to this discussion, however, is that the lineage was a corporate entity. Radcliff-Brown (1950:41) regards an association or group as corporate if its members come together occasionally to perform some rites, or if its head is seen as acting as representative of the group or if it owns property in common. Other anthropologists restrict the term to a property owning group (Onwejeogwu and Harris 1975:287).

Funeral rites required the presence of all adult members. Of importance, however, was that the lineage owned property in common. Although each member owned his/her own farm, it was their collective responsibility to work on the farm of the lineage head. The lineage thus constituted an important means for the organization of labour. In addition members who earned some income from their farms or trade in excess of their immediate needs were obliged to hand over the money to the head who kept all such wealth in trust for all. From

this common fund he paid funeral bills, assisted young members to start or increase their farm size, paid bride prize for young males when they got married, settled debts for members and bought slaves when the need arose. What this meant was that the financial strength of the lineage depended on the population of its active members. This explains why measures were taken to check any decline in the population of the lineage. Such measures included regular sacrifices to ancestral spirits to ensure fertility of women as well as the acquisition of slaves where the fertility rate was seen to be declining.

What has been presented so far should not be taken to mean that a man was not entitled to the services of his children or that he owed no responsibility to them. Children grew up under the father's care. Even in case of a divorce children remained under the custody of the father. Since farm labour was gender-based male children accompanied the father to farm and performed whatever tasks that their ages would allow. At the age of adolescence male children were mature enough to perform such tasks as making of yam mounds, staking yam vines and trimming tree branches. Females were always close to their mother helping out in weeding and other less tasking duties.

As they came of age it was the responsibility of the father to provide them initial seeds to start their own farms. Females got married and joined their spouses as economically independent women. The males got married and built their own huts within the father's compound. Where there was no space for expansion within the compound the father chose a spot in another part of the village and planted a fig tree where his son established his own compound. In theory this was considered an extension of his father's compound (Anthony Enyua, personal communication 26/3/2014).

A young man who earned an income, provided his father was still alive, had first of all, to present the money to his father who took just a token and advised him to take the remainder to the brother-in-law, that is, the son's lineage head. Similarly a married woman had to present money from the sales of her crops to her spouse. Thereafter both husband and wife took the money to the woman's maternal uncle, that is, her lineage head. Thus, although a man was entitled to the labour of his sons and sons-in-law, his children's savings did not accrue to him but to the children's maternal uncle. It was for this reason that children did not inherit their father's property. Their inheritance lay where their savings were custodied. It is within the context of Bakor social system presented above that their attitude to slaves should be appreciated.

### **Sources of Slaves**

Those who found themselves as slaves in Bakorland came from diverse origins. Rosemary Harris (1972), for instance, stated that as from 1912 onwards, Ikom (Okuni) traders at Bansara occasionally procured slaves from Sankula middleman and that the slaves came from Yakoro (Bekwara) a few miles north of Ogoja. Slaves were also procured from Tivland, Egedde and Idoma in the Benue region as well as Izzi in Abakaliki Division. The bulk of the slaves especially in Ogoja Bakor came from the slave markets of Idoma and Egedde. Slaves in those markets were housed in a section of the village different from that of their masters. A potential buyer first went to the *masters'* quarters and was then taken to the slave quarters to make his choice (Nicholas Majuk, personal communication 30/5/2014).

In some societies particularly Izzi, men sold their biological children. In 1958, for example, one Ogbuebule Urom, an indigene of Izzi in Abakaliki, sold his six-year old daughter to

Ezangbo Ode, an Izzi middleman, for a price of £30. The latter resold the girl to a Bansara (Bakor) man, Ashado Njok, for £50 thus making a profit of £20. The girl was rescued by the police when Ashado Njok was negotiating to sell her yet again (Pepple 1958).

Indeed, by the middle of the twentieth century the Izzi were the main suppliers of slaves to Bakor land, a practice that caught the attention of the press which reported that (Pepple 195:12):

*In the Abakaliki region of Ogoja Province, East of Enugu in the Eastern Region of Nigeria, lies the heart of a flourishing slave traffic .... Fifty miles to the South in the Cross River area inhabited by the Bansara. Akajuk (sic), Ntara, Mfom, Ngulia and Ntulop tribes, lies the centre of the slave – buying area.*

Whenever an individual desired to buy a slave two options were available. The first was to take a trip to the source of supply. The advantage of this option was the opportunity it provided for one to make a choice out of the many that were available. The second option for those unwilling to make the hazardous trip on foot was to engage the services of ubiquitous middlemen. In Mfom, an Ekajuk community, for instance, there was one Agbor Eki who, with his Aro friend simply known as James Arochukwu, played that role. The middleman collected the money and supplied the slave upon returning from the trip, (Egbulu Mokpume, personal communication 6/4/2014). Apart from having to pay a higher price the main disadvantage of using a middleman was the loss of the power of choice. The primary motivation for desiring to buy slaves was to increase the population of one's lineage. This was why Bakor preferred female over male slaves. The age bracket sought after was between six and fifteen years. The older the slave the lesser her chances of reproduction. Sometimes women in their late twenties and thirties were sold off at cheap prices because they were considered barren. The middleman who was concerned with profit margins would go for older ones and, of course, the buyer would have no choice but to accept what had been supplied.

Circumstances did warrant the procurement of male slaves. This was so when the male population in the lineage was declining. In spite of matrilineal descent system Bakor was a male dominated society. Apart from the fact that lineages were headed by men, the political system was male dominated. The interest of the lineage was better protected, if it had members in the village council where political decisions were taken. Moreover, a lineage needed active able bodied men who would be able to protect lineage farmlands against encroachment. Age grades and by extension the community at large, cherished a large population of strong men to boost its fighting force in the event of war. For these and many more reasons wealthy lineages found it necessary to have male slaves.

There was always the presence of violence in the process of slave procurement, some slaves were kidnapped or stolen in their tender ages. There was an old woman who narrated how she was lured into slavery at a very tender age. A stranger offered her some oil palm nuts and kidnapped her in the process (Majuk, 1984). Similarly, Gboshe Egor who later in life became a wealthy slave owner was kidnapped from his father's millet farm in Yatche (Emnang Ejong, personal communication 20/4/2014). Even in the slave markets of Idoma mothers protested vigorously against the sale of their children. Being slaves themselves such mothers were simply ignored or threatened with death. Gboshe Egor referred to above narrated an encounter he had with a woman whose two sons he bought in an Idoma community. The

woman insisted on going to wherever her sons were being taken. Their owner gave the approval to have her murdered outside the village if she insisted on following the buyer. Gboshe refused shedding blood and was given the option of paying for the woman which he did. The woman became his third wife (Emnang Ejong personal communication 20-4-2014).

The Izzi who sold their own children committed acts of violence against such children and their mothers. This was what poverty could lead people into. According to Pepple (1958:12).

*At the root cause of the problem is family instability or a grinding poverty which makes a profit of £30 on a daughter as a means of existence for a whole year. Behind it, too, is a conception of children not as human beings to be loved, cherished and cared for, but as pieces of property to be bought and sold like cattle whenever the family is in financial difficulties.*

Contrary to the impression conveyed in the second part of the passage however, men who sold their children were compelled to do so by life-threatening economic hardships, not because they regarded such children as pieces of property.

In several of such cases the police was able to rescue the victims through the intervention of the victims' mothers who reported the cases. It was the fear of arrest and persecution of offenders that finally put a stop to the practice. From the foregoing we cannot but agree with Lovejoy (1981:13) that 'there is little disagreement over the initial importance of violence' in any system of slavery.

### **Slave Status**

It can hardly be over stressed that female slaves were more sought after than males. The children of female slaves belonged to the masters' lineage in accordance with the principle of matriliney. Children born to male slaves, on the other hand, belonged to the wives' lineages.

As soon as a slave arrived his/her new home the process of integration into the society began. A female slave usually lived in the household of a female member of the lineage even if the buyer was a male. This couple henceforth became her 'parents'. The woman into whose lineage she was being incorporated played the role of her 'mother' while the woman's spouse was her 'father'. She was given a family name like any other child and this became her identity for life. The bond that developed between her and her adopted parents and other children in the household was not different from that of free born members of the household.

Language was an important instrument of incorporation. A slave who was brought into the community at a relatively tender age would easily learn to speak the new language. The learning process was facilitated by the communal life that was characteristic of Bakor. The entire village was like one large household. Children of the same sex and age bracket did everything in common. They played together and so on. It was therefore very easy for new comers to learn to speak their new language fluently. After a few years a visitor to the village could hardly identify a new arrival among the children. The stigma of slavery was less visible for such individuals.

It was only those slaves who were brought in as adults that found it difficult to speak Bakor language fluently. These were slaves who carried the stigma for life. Of the five first

generation slaves that are still alive in Mfom three were never able to speak Ekajuk fluently. Even a visitor would easily differentiate them from the rest of the population.

A male slave was more usually brought up in the household of his master who become his 'father'. This category of slaves as well as those female slaves who were married to their masters had the misfortune of being stigmatized for life. The male slave would belong to the lineage of his 'father' making it clear to even strangers that the relationship was not biological. The same anomalous situation presented itself when a wife (female slave) was part of her husband's lineage. In each of these two cases stigma would only become less visible in the third generation.

Within the family slaves were as loved and cherished as every other member. There is a Bakor saying that 'blood and sweat are one and the same because both issue from the body'. The interpretation is that just as a free born was the product of one's body (blood) so also was the slave the product of one's body (sweat). This meant that both freeborn and slave were one's offsprings and should therefore be treated equally.

Also important in the integration process was membership of age grades which played very prominent roles in the political system. Every newly arrived slave would find individuals of the same sex and age bracket with whom friendship easily developed. As they grew up together and attained maturity they were constituted into an age grade. As part of the elaborate ceremony that marked the event the age grade was given a name which was retained until it became extinct.

Political authority in Bakor was vested on the village council of elders with the Chief (*Ntul*) being a mere titular head insulated from the affairs of the community by taboos. It was the most senior male age grade that constituted this council (Majuk, 2000). Since membership of age grades was not based on lineage representation it followed that the village council was not based on lineage representation. People of slave origin or free migrant settlers who were members of the most senior age grade could become important political functionaries if they possessed leadership qualities. Agbor Kunjok, a free migrant settler, and Eyeah Abum (Ochilebe), a slave, who were among the first set of community leaders to be appointed members of Ekajuk Native Court, in Bansara, in 1917 (Shuttle 1923) were examples of such individuals.

What has been said about male age grades accommodating slaves within their fold equally applied to females. Women of slave origin also played prominent roles in society.

An individual was considered a bonafide citizen by membership of the three most important groups, namely the matrilineage, the age grade and by virtue of these two, the village community. The lineage was the foundation because within it one's identity was founded. In addition inheritance of land, money and other forms of property took place within it.

Of course to enjoy all the rights and privileges of a citizen one had to be a member of an age grade. If there was anything to be shared in the community, for example, meat, drinks or money, each age grade, beginning from the most senior, was given its own lump share. Each thereafter retired to a corner to distribute its share to members. Hence an individual was only recognized through his/her age grade.

The umbrella body was of course the village community which required absolute loyalty of all citizens. The village council in consultation with the *Ntul* had the power of life and death

over all citizens. Community laws took precedence over those of the lineage and age grades. It had the responsibility of protecting the interest of all citizens irrespective of status. At all levels, lineage, age grade and community slaves enjoyed equal freedom with the free born.

Nothing illustrates this point better than the story of two slaves who were presented an opportunity of rejoining their biological families but chose rather to remain where they were. One was Gboshe Egor who, as stated earlier, was kidnapped from Yatche. His parents were able to trace him years later. Rather than follow them back to Yatche he pleaded to be allowed to remain with his wealthy 'father', Efre Etim. He himself later became a wealthy slave owner and through occasional visits kept contact with his biological family.

Another was the story of a woman who is still alive and strong in Mfom. Her Izzi parents had sold her off as a teenager. She once went to Onuakpo market in Izzi where she ran into one of her biological aunts who promptly identified her. During that encounter she angrily turned down an offer to be taken to her biological parents insisting that if the parents had loved her they would not have sold her off in the first instance. Her refusal to be re-united with her family certainly stemmed from the fact that she was neither discriminated against nor stigmatized in Mfom where she was comfortably married with children.

The categorization of slaves in Africa by scholars (Lovejoy 1981:11; Uya 1910:59) as 'outsiders' who 'lacked kinship ties' in their new environment is quite appropriate in the Bakor context in the sense that they were recruited from outside Bakor. However, once fully integrated slaves could trace their ancestry to that of the lineage like every other member and it became difficult to identify their original ancestry especially as from the fourth generation. With the possible exception of royalty, where succession was paternal, ones genealogy was of little relevance to political leadership in Bakor. What mattered was the possession of leadership qualities and membership of the most senior age grade. This accounts for the fact that most people in Bakor today are not able to trace their genealogy beyond the third or fourth generation. This is unlike some societies like the Efik where genealogy was an important political asset.

Slaves, however, did suffer some psychological disabilities the sources of which were both external and internal. External negative influences came from neighbouring non-Bakor societies where slaves suffered considerable disabilities. The Yala, Bakor's northern neighbours, was one of such societies. For example, slaves were segregated in terms of settlement; marriage between a slave and free citizen was ridiculed; slaves were not buried on the same market day as free citizens; and so on. Because cultural practices diffuse easily across cultural boundaries, these negative practices against slaves tended to have some effects on neighbouring Bakor communities. There was, for instance, a Yala migrant who settled in Mfom. Unknown to the host community he had instructed his Yala kinmen to bury one of his slaves with him. Although this was averted by the staunch resistance of the slaves' age grade, the incident left a psychological scar on people of similar status.

Internally there was always the threat of exposure of the slaves' foreign origin especially during a quarrel. Although the slave could count on the support of his lineage and age grade, the threat could come from within these groups themselves especially when there were serious contentions. However, as studies in other societies have shown (Norman – Klein 1981, Derefaka, 2010) it was illegal in Bakor to call, or even make derogatory statements which implied calling, somebody a slave. In 2004 Awam Ejong of Akorfono village was fined for this offence (Anthony Ekpu, personal communication 16/3/2014). This, no doubt

served as a mitigating factor but, as Norman-Klein (1981) states, this ‘implicit stigma of slavery’ remained with this category of persons for a long time.

## CONCLUSION

Scholarly discussions on the subject of slavery in Africa has been concerned with characteristics that distinguished slaves from free citizens as well as the appropriateness of applying the term ‘slave’ in the African context. It has been demonstrated in the preceding paragraphs that like most African societies Bakor had a sizeable population of slaves. The primary motivation for recruiting slaves was to augment the population of the matrilineage which was an important means of wealth creation.

Apart from the initial application of some form of violence in the process of recruitment slaves were loved and cherished. To the lineage slaves contributed to economic viability and to the age grade and community at large they rendered community and military services as occasions demanded. Apart from implicit psychological stigma which in any case was not visible for most slaves, there was hardly a distinction between slaves and free citizens.

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