

THE "CANOE  
HOUSE" AND THE  
ORACLE OF  
ARO-CHUKU:  
AN ORGANIZATION  
FOR THE SLAVE  
TRADE IN  
SOUTHERN  
NIGERIA

Enrique SOSA

In previous issues, *Tricontinental* has already published articles that developed the role played by the slave trade in capitalism's original process of accumulation. Now it offers its readers an article by the Cuban professor and researcher Enrique Sosa that shows other aspects of this phenomenon: the use of internal elements in the economic-social structure that existed among the victims of the trade, and their emergence in an organization at the service of the white slave trade.

It is believed that a third of all people of African origin now live far from their ancestral homeland, which during the period of forced emigration could only become venerated, nostalgic land, transmitted through inalienable legends, rites, rhythms, songs and dances: Africa.

But its roots have been tenacious and fertile and in America, the continent that was to receive the highest percentage of this exodus caused by the slave trade from the 16th to the 19th centuries, Africa found one of its most fertile soils in Cuba.

Thus Latin-American Cuba is also a Latin-African country.

And the result has been that rich and complex phenomenon the sage Don Fernando Ortiz called transculturation, so evident in Cuba in its two great founding sources: the Spaniard and the African, flavored with what was left of the Indians and other diverse ancestries of secondary and more subtle importance.

Cuban history has presented the general characteristics of the African slave trade and examined the possible origins of the main black ethnic groups that reached Cuba as slaves, but there is still a great deal to investigate and disseminate, numerous oral and written sources — sometimes obscure or altered — both in Cuba and elsewhere, that must be located and studied in order to better understand the national, ethnic and cultural origins of the Cuban population.

One of these aspects concerns the source of slaves, the organization promoted by the slave trade not only among the white operators — direct traders or colonial receivers in all their degradation — but also among the victims themselves through the tribal and religious chiefs and their adaptation of tribal or family elements in their socio-economic structure in order to more rapidly and fully stock the holds of the slave ships with their miserable human merchandise, also including as “bundles of coal” or “pieces of ebony” inhabitants of the village and relatives of the family and tribal chiefs, even to the point of obtaining the largest numbers in the interior, far from the slave ports and ships, in tribes never before visited by the white man.

The history of the slave trade has revealed that the use of direct, enormous and brutal force was the chief method for acquiring slaves, with the systematic use of pirate incursions, the much-feared raids,<sup>1</sup> with their aftermath of ruin, death and destruction as the fatal consequence.

<sup>1</sup> The Africans called them “wars.”

But it is also known that kidnapping — particularly of children of both sexes — and the abuse of power on the part of many chiefs who used their tribal prestige for personal profit through the purchase and sale of Blacks, were other common forms that furthered acquisition of the slave work force destined for America.

The distance between villages<sup>2</sup> and the organization of armed bands of men who, during the “dry” period or throughout the year, devoted themselves to surprise attacks on villages, plundering and burning them, or who waited in ambush to fall on lonely travelers outside the most secure limits of their homes, were methods that served to guarantee the success of that abduction.

Enslavement for indebtedness and sale of the debtor to the white slave traders in flagrant violation of sacred family practice and customs, was one of the most remunerative ways in which the chiefs abused their power.

Increasing slave trade in Africa not only depopulated an entire continent, but also blocked its economic and cultural evolution and led to isolation, mistrust and individual and social alienation which neither the chiefs nor the whites themselves could escape. Terror reigned over great expanses of land under the horrible slogan of hunt or be hunted.

All this is true, but in considering these forms of slavery in isolation, we can lose sight of the real complexity the slave trade assumed in Africa, the intricate tangle of reciprocal interactions, of mutual conditioning among venerated ancestral institutions whose power and prestige — in violation of their original community nature — would then be channeled toward the acquisition of personal wealth by a few who were considered and accepted as the depositaries and representatives of the “end without beginning,” of the great ancestral owners of the waters and the lands, intermediaries with the gods, promoters of fertility and of life, judges in determining the possibility or impossibility of continuing existence in the world of the dead and of reincarnation in the world of the living.

In short, it meant the accelerated disintegration of the primitive community system and its replacement by a class society based on slavery, in the areas most intensely affected by the consequences of the slave trade but where, nevertheless, because of the socially destructive essence of the slave trade itself, this new means of production could not be established as a higher phase of social development — essential and progressive — with respect to the system of primitive communism.

In southern Nigeria, with the oracle of **Aro-Chuku** as its center, one of these complex organizations for enslavement extended its actions over such an enormous area that it reached the point of including, at least, the current provinces of Ogoja, Onitsha, Owerri, Calabar and parts of Warri, populated by the following tribes:

<sup>2</sup> In this respect, we recommend reading the experiences of two of the victims, the Ibo Olaudah Equiano and the Ijebu Osifedunde, in *Africa Remembered*, narratives by West Africans from the era of the slave trade, edited by Philip D. Curtin, University of Wisconsin Press, 1968.



Ogoja: Ibo, Ekuri-Akunakuna, Iyala, Mbembe, Orri, Ukelle,

Owerri: Yache, Ekoi, Boki.

Calabar: Ibo, Ijaw, Edo, Ibibio.

Warri: Ibibio, Ibo, Ekoi, Ekuri-Akunakuna, Ododop, Uyan-ga.

Onitsha: Ibo, Ijaw, Edo, Yoruba.  
Ibo.<sup>3</sup>

All these names have been passed down through the Cuban *carabali*<sup>4</sup> with its African myths and legends: those of the original tribes except for the Edo and Yoruba who, with other tribal groups, were given the generic name in Cuba of *lucumíes* or *lucumís*.

The Ibo tribe is the largest of all, followed by the Ibibio. An Ibo sub-tribe of uncertain origin, the Aro, located on the Calabar and another Ibibio sub-tribe, the Efik, also established on the Calabar, together with the Ijaw and the Ibo of Abam sub-tribe located in Owerri, are particularly important for purposes of our work.

#### The slave trade as origin of the Carabali

British pressure to abolish the slave trade forced tribal kings and chiefs in southern Nigeria's main slave trade ports to sign agreements committing themselves to ending it in the 1840's, but according to the British Reverend Waddell<sup>5</sup> the trade lasted until 1842 along the Old Calabar, and Talbot states that it was maintained through Bonny until 1841, and through New Calabar until 1851.

<sup>3</sup> Data taken from Talbot, P. Amaury, *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria* (Vol. II), Oxford University Press, London, 1926, pp. 8-13.

<sup>4</sup> The term *Carabali* appears to come — by transposing the letters — from *Calabari*, the black precedent of Calabar known in this form, without taking its multiple tribal origin into account. Talbot notes that "the words Calabar or Old Calabar are not applied to the rivers of the Cross up until the 17th century Dutch maps. The town of Calabar was known by the natives as *Efuk* (Efik), and the word Calabar was considered to be of European origin. What may have happened is that the word was taken from the (new) Calabar River, named for the village of the Kalabari who lived there, which appears to have been more important from a commercial point of view than the river of the Cross. The words *Kalbonger*, *Calabaras* or *Calapongas* used by the Europeans as the name for the inhabitants located beyond the river of the King are also possible variants of this. Through some error, this name was applied to the estuary of the Cross River which then became known as the "New Calabar" River. Talbot, P. Amaury, *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria*. (T. I.), *Ibid.*, pp. 183-184.

<sup>5</sup> Rev. Hope Masterton Waddell, *Twenty-nine Years in the West Indies and Central Africa: a Review of Missionary Work and Adventure* (1829-1858), London, T. Nelson and Sons, London, 1890.

Actually, these agreements were ignored whenever it suited those who wanted to violate them and the actual trade went on for some years more. The Ijaw chiefs of Bonny, for example, once they could no longer deceive the British guards and patrols, rerouted their slave groups to a more hidden shipping point, near Brass.

These ports on the Old Calabar (Creek Town and Duke Town to the British or *Ikoritungko* and *Atakpa* to the natives) controlled by the Efik, and those on the New Calabar, Bonny and Brass, controlled by the Ijaw, were the ports from which the *carabali* were shipped, although it is possible that this designation was also applied to some of the Blacks shipped through Warri and even through Lagos, where the great slave majority sent to America were of Yoruba origin.

Through Bonny alone, founded around 1400, almost 20 000 slaves a year were sold to the white traders between 1800 and 1820, of which 16 000 were Ibo.<sup>6</sup>

The British traveler William Baikie, quoted by Fernando Ortiz in his book *Los negros esclavos*, visited Niger in 1855 and two years later, in London, published his *Narrative of an Exploring Voyage up the Rivers Kwora and Binué* in 1854, in which he describes the Efik as an immigrant people established on lands belonging to the Kwa, a sub-tribe possibly of the Ekoi family which the Efik themselves called *Abakpa*.<sup>7</sup>

The Efik chiefs, like the Ijaw, were big slave traders and Ortiz's quote from Baikie relates them directly to the Aro and to Cuba:

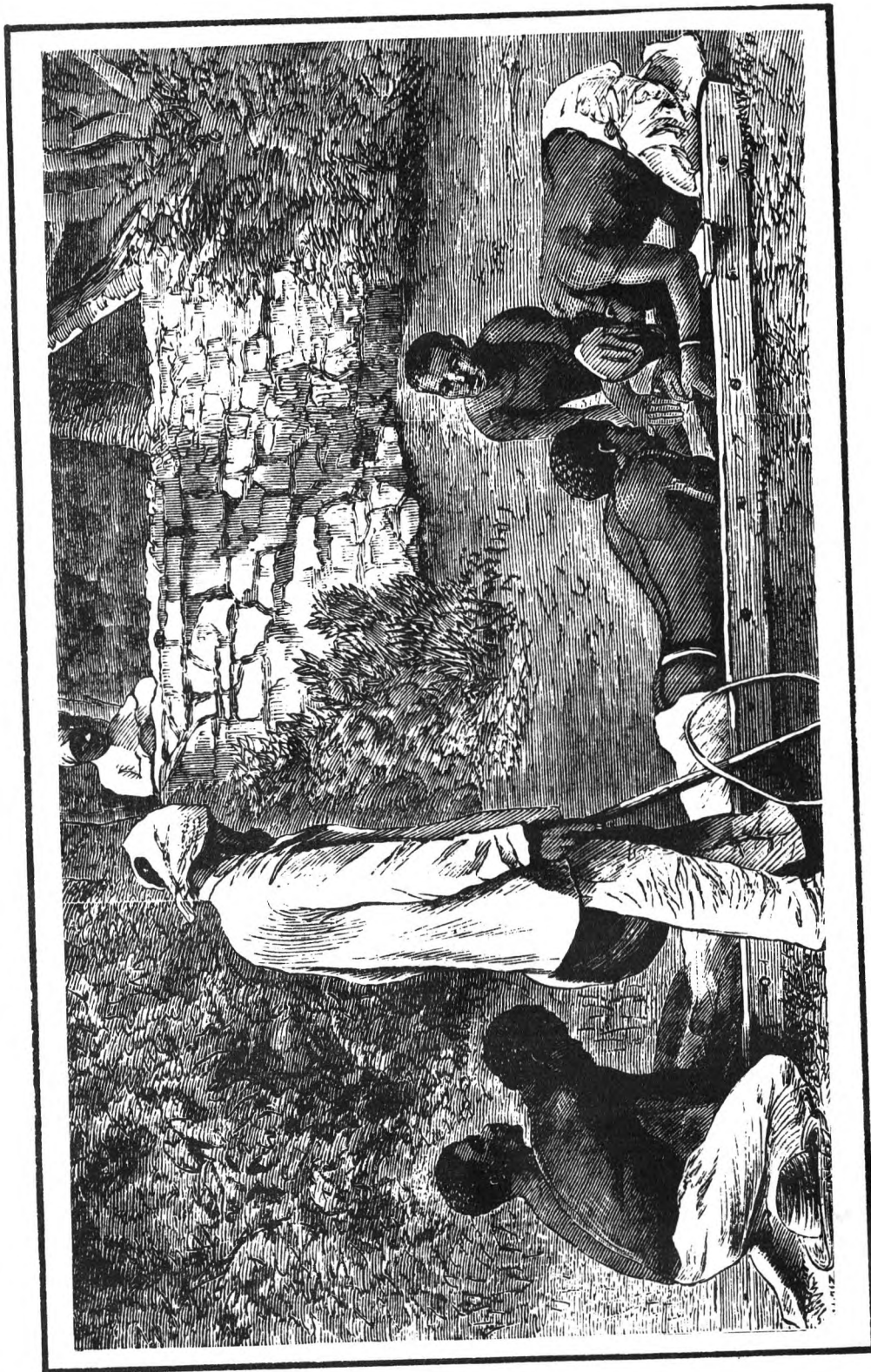
When a man goes to the Aro to consult the god *Tshuku* (sic), he is received by several priests outside the town, along a stream. There he makes some sacrifice and kills a fowl and, if that isn't satisfactory, the priests throw something red into the stream to color the water and tell the people it is the blood of the unfortunate one stricken by *Tshuku*, while the poor Black is captured by the priests. From there he is taken by canoe, along with other victims of *Tshuku*, to Old Calabar and sold there as a slave. One of my informants told me about 20 poor believers in the rite who were taken to Cuba as slaves.<sup>8</sup>

The "canoe houses," a complex organization with a mercantile basis, were to serve Efik and Ijaw chiefs, behind what was still a patriarchal facade, to take these slaves to the slave ports and sell them to the whites.

<sup>6</sup> Crowder considers their total number between these two dates to have been 372 000. Michael Crowder, *The Story of Nigeria*, Faber and Faber, London, 1966.

<sup>7</sup> It is possible that this name of *Abakpa* is the origin of the word *Abakúa*, the secret society the Efik and Ekoi Nigerians founded in Cuba and which still exists.

<sup>8</sup> Fernando Ortiz, *Los Negros esclavos* (The Black Slaves), *Bimonthly Cuba Magazine*, Havana, 1916, pp. 103-104. It is interesting to point out that, according to this quote from Baikie, slave traffic through Old Calabar was still in progress at the beginning of the 1850's.



### The "canoe house"

In the second half of the 18th century,

Captain John Hall, who made two trips to Africa in a slave ship in 1772 and 1776, says that the arrival of a slave ship at Old Calabar was the signal for the natives to take to the river in their war ships. He had seen a fleet of from three to ten canoes, each with a crew of 40 or 60 oarsmen, carrying between 20 and 30 warriors armed with muskets. Each canoe had a cannon placed in its prow. After a period of between ten days to three weeks, the canoes returned filled with slaves. Falconbridge recalls that he once saw a similar fleet of canoes in Bonny, which had returned from an expedition bringing 1200 slaves.<sup>9</sup>

The trips from Bonny to the Aro territory lasted four or five days and their canoes, similar to those the Efik's used with capacity for up to 120 people in each, could bring back between 1500 and 2000 people on each trip.

The owners of these canoes, along with their oarsmen slaves, warriors, clients and others, made up the "canoe house." One of these chiefs (father) could have 300 or more members under his direction. The famous Eyo I of the Old Calabar reached the position where he had 400 canoes with their oarsmen and warriors, in addition to thousands of slaves on his plantations.

Along the entire Niger Delta and in the slave trading ports of the Bay of Biafra, effective power came to rest on possession of these rapid and long canoes, armed and equipped to obtain and transport slaves. The Ibos, located more toward the interior, dispersed and also turned against each other by the effects of the slave trade and without direct contacts with the Europeans, could not—or did not achieve the proper conditions to—organize "canoe houses," and it was among them that the oracle of Aro-Chuku exercised the weight of his religious-commercial activity, the practice of extra-economic co-action that made the slaves available to the chiefs of the coastal and river port "canoe houses."

Since it was extremely costly to obtain and maintain a "canoe house," the privilege of owning and directing it could only, in principle, fall into the hands of the chiefs of clans and tribes that enjoyed—and benefited from—the respect and obedience of their respective communities and received the mutually beneficial support of the white slave traders, so long as they promptly and efficiently satisfied the latter's insatiable need for human merchandise. Thus it was that one rose from being chief of a family "house" to chief of a "canoe house" and that the nature of the former served the disastrous ends of profit, exploitation and death or enslavement that the latter represented. The "canoe house" was built on the basis of family order and could use all its advantages, but for a new purpose, that of personal enrichment.

In New Calabar, with the sharp growth in the slave trade, even a sufficiently clever and unscrupulous slave could find a "canoe house" if its slave and free members authorized him to do so. In the end, this organization was fostered by its greatest beneficiaries,

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Mannix and M. Cowley, *Historia de la trata de negros (History of the Black Slave Trade)*, Pocketbooks, Alianza editorial, Madrid, 1968, pp. 101-102.





by the whites who made the traffic possible and who didn't care particularly whether or not its leadership was controlled by the family chiefs, but only about increasing their capital profits.

The "canoe houses" concentrated economic and political power in the hands of the most authoritarian and competent tribal chiefs for purposes of enslavement, and the ascent to leadership was frequent cause for bloody struggles that also served to supply slaves, now from within the very family or tribal group.

In places such as Bonny and New Calabar this concentration of power limited the functions of the old institutions such as the People's Assembly and the Council of Ancients and led to the establishment of personal types of sovereignty, although these were still contained within the weakened framework of the primitive community.

In essence, the same thing happened at Old Calabar, but there power was not concentrated in the hands of an incipient monarch but rather in the chiefs who, because of their wealth, won leadership of the secret **Ekpe**<sup>10</sup> — the leopard — society, one of the many societies that proliferated throughout western Africa.

**Ekpe** consisted of a series of ranks, acquired by purchasing them, that provided material benefits, social status, and personal gain. Only the richest men could acquire the highest levels and the more they purchased, the more powerful they became. The nominal chief of the big tribal family **Eyo I** of Creek Town belonged to was his older brother, but the actual chief, because he had the "canoe house" on which everyone's prosperity depended, because of his wealth, his relations with the slave trading British and/or traders and the ranks he had purchased in **Ekpe**, was **Eyo I**. During the same period — first half of the 19th century — there was great rivalry in Duke Town between the most powerful chief of the town, through his control of **Ekpe**, **Iyamba V**, and the lofty **Effium** family. **Iyamba** was considered a usurper, but the British and **Ekpe** supported **Iyamba**.

The canoes that came from this part of Nigeria, from the Old Calabar, were therefore war canoes of **Ekpe**, belonging to one or another of the "canoe houses" based there, which, like those the **Ijaw** used, carried some 30 men rowing and, standing in the center, the warriors armed with muskets.

These warriors could make land raids, assaulting villages and capturing or killing their inhabitants, or else they simply protected the human merchandise acquired by the captains of each canoe in local markets where slaves already captured by other enslaving assailants in lands located still further inland were offered in small lots. At other times, anchored at specific points in the rivers, they waited for big slave traders to bring them their desired human cargo.

These local markets and these big traders could, in turn, belong to the great **Aro** organization that flourished in the huge **Ibo** country.

<sup>10</sup> **Ekpe-Egbo**, for the British, was the **Efik** secret society already mentioned, which is known in Cuba as **Abakúa**. Among the **Eko**, where it seems to have originated, the word **Ngbe**, equivalent to **Efik Ekpe**, means leopard.



### The Aro and their oracle

Between 1300 and 1400, the **Ibo**, advancing toward the south, invaded the **Aro-Chuku** district, expelling the **Ibibio** who lived there, and controlled the hollow and cave where the famous oracle was ensconced.

The **Ibo** mixed with some of the **Ekoi** and divided the territory into 14 sections, six of which were **Ekoi**. These were the ones that supplied the **Efik** with slaves from the north and northeast territories.

Another version, perhaps related to the former, has it that the **Aro** were descendants of slaves acquired by the **Ibibio** to the west in the direction of Bonny who rebelled against them with the aid of the **Ekoi**, and that **Aro** is the name of the founding ancestor of **Obi-Nkita** (dog's heart) before being expelled by the **Ibibio**<sup>11</sup>

These two versions coincide in agreeing that there was a struggle against the **Ibibio** until, finally, they were expelled and that this was achieved through the alliance of the **Aro** and the **Ekoi** who divided the conquered country. It is not clear whether or not the **Aro** were, from the very beginning, of **Ibo** origin.

At the beginning of the 17th century, when the slave trade in this part of Nigeria increased and its control passed from the hands of Portugal —pioneers in establishing the slave agency— to the Dutch and, later, to the British, the oracle of **Aro-Chuku** was establishing its own religious-mercantile branches, throughout the whole immense territory included between the Cross and Niger rivers: its theocracy came to dominate the center and east of the **Ibo** country and spread southwest to the **Ijaw**, south to the sea, north to Nigeria's northern borders, and east to include some of the **Ekoi**. A major portion of its borders were adjacent to or penetrated the country of the **Ibibio**, including the **Efik**.

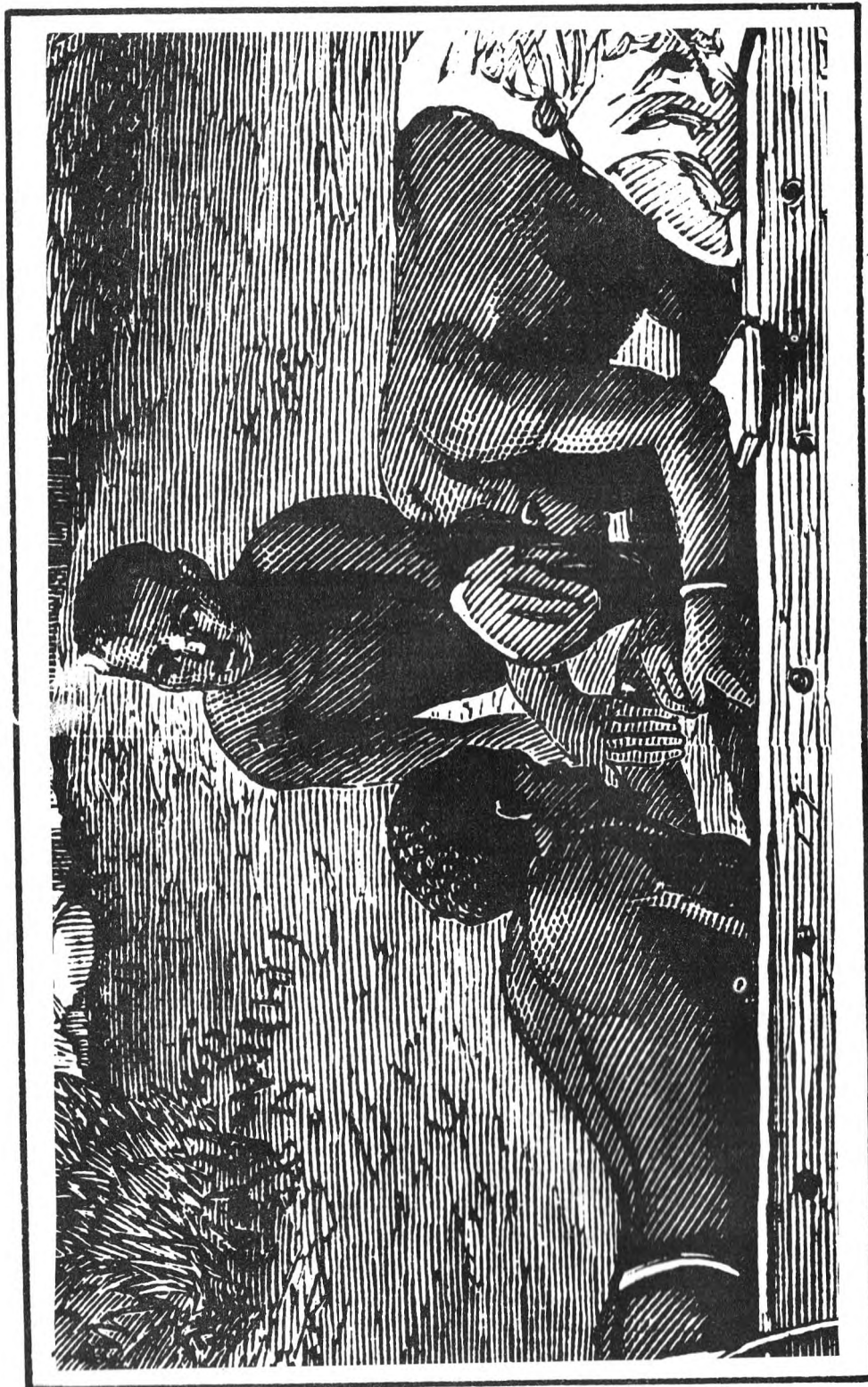
The enterprise promoted by the **Aro**, allies of the **Ekoi**, brought them optimum results. The entire territory mentioned was divided into sections and priests who were followers of the oracle were established in each one to act as their commercial promoters and informers.

These priests, called **Aro-Akpa** or **Ekpe**, were given a term of seven years at this job. When that time was up, they were replaced by their oldest sons or, if they had no children, by a brother. They received many presents and payment for many rights but they were considered poor because their personal businesses failed and their animals and slaves died. Undoubtedly this public view of priesthood suited the theocracy of **Aro-Chuku**; its apparent poverty, austerity and short priesthood life must have been factors that strengthened believers' confidence in the oracle.

In practice, the oracle's judgments did not always favor those with right on their side. The venality and corruption of its priesthood inclined justice toward preferential treatment of the powerful chiefs and/or the wealthy, although it is evident that it succeeded in establishing a system that facilitated much accurate information with which to surprise those who appealed to it and

<sup>11</sup> P. Amaury, Talbot, *The People of Southern Nigeria* (Vol. I) *Ibid.*, p. 182. These **Ibibio** may have been members of the **Efik** sub-tribe which, descending along the Cross River, would have settled on the lands of the **Kwa** — related to the **Ekoi** — in order to develop their great slave trade with white buyers there.





force the terrified confession of anyone guilty. The priests who appeared before the oracle with the appellants they lived with, must have been of inestimable importance in this sense.

As Baikie describes it, the oracle passed sentence from a cave located near a stream. Any complaint or serious matter that could not be solved within the affected community was submitted to it: an epidemic, feminine infertility, one or another cases of alleged witchcraft or the vengeance of a rebuffed *yuyú*,<sup>12</sup> victory in war or success in business. It was considered particularly qualified to discover the feared witches, enchanters and poisoners that served the powerful forces of evil, which *Aro-Chuku*'s forces for good had to overcome. It could predict the future.

For centuries, a sort of supreme court of justice for millions of members of the great *Ibo* tribe and other minor tribes acted under *Aro* control. But what most concerns us now was its additional control over the main commercial routes, along which the merchandise that came from Europe and the coast was brought in: gunpowder, guns, salt... and internal trade was channeled under its control: fowl, cloth, palm fibers and cotton, iron utensils and, above all, slaves who, once under the power of the oracle, were quickly transported to ports of embarkation by simulating their death before the sacred cave.

To do this they had depots, market places and, as we have seen, agents invested with indisputable and sacred authority.

Like *Aro-Chuku*, but on a smaller scale, famous oracles also existed in *Umunoka* and in *Awka*, the former ruled by the deity *Igwelle Ale* and the latter by *Agbara* or *Agwara* whom some considered to be the daughter of the great goddess of the *Aro-Chuku* oracle, of *Ibinokpabi*, which leads one to assume that she was of *Aro* origin.

#### Gods of *Aro-Chuku*

In discussing the ethnic origin of the people of southern Nigeria, Talbot divides them into three main groups: Sudanese, semi-Bantu and Bantu, noting that he used the first name for lack of a better one to distinguish it from the other two. Of the tribes that interest us, he classifies as Sudanese the *Ijaw* of the Niger Delta and the *Ibo* located between the Niger and the Cross River.

He limits the Bantus to the extreme southeast of Nigeria and defines the *Ibibio* and the *Ekoi* as semi-Bantu, along with the *Ekuri-Akunakuna*, *Ododop*, *Uyanga* and others.

The *Aro*, whose origins we have mentioned, classified as an *Ibo* sub-tribe, are thus found between the *Ibo* themselves and the *Ekoi* and *Ibibio*.

This relationship, which conditioned their very origin, is necessarily reflected in the religious superstructure of the oracle and the gods of *Aro-Chuku* which included *Ibo* and *Ekoi* deities (in

<sup>12</sup> According to Waddell the word *yuyú* was brought from some other part of the coast (meaning Old Calabar) and adopted by the natives as well as the whites to designate venerated objects; but in reality, the term also included everything unknown and magic: the winds, the earth, the waters and objects of all kinds, from a banana or tree branches at the crossing of roads, to a human skull. The method of influencing — controlling — these forces through secrets held by those initiated into its cult was also known as *yuyú*.



turn related to the **Efik-Ibibio**). **Ibinokpabi**, the speaking goddess, would have as ancestors **Ale**, the great (**Ibo**) earth goddess, of which she would be a constituent part, and **Obassi**, the heavenly **Ekoi** god.

This convenient ancestry of **Ibinokpabi** serves to explain her power — law — among so many dissimilar tribes and sub-tribes, themselves torn by conflicts of multiple origin, the source of her material power in her spiritual power.

But above all was **Chuku**.

**Chi, Chuku (Chi-uku) or Chineke**, was for the **Ibo** the creator, the first generating source of mankind and of all things, to whom life and death answered.

He lived in the sky from which he sent the rain that controlled the fertility of the soil, the fertility of **Ale**. All other gods were subordinated to him and he was the source of **chi**, the spiritual principle that defined man, conditioning his good or bad luck: personal **chi** — things also had it — was an emanation from **Chi** which also included groups of people, sometimes as a family or tribal characteristic: everything started from him, everything returned to him, everything was impregnated by him.

But **Chi**, like other main deities of the rich Nigerian pantheon, was a distant, vague and indifferent figure, who did not receive offerings directly but to whom those destined for all the other gods went in the end.

His variants were **Chuku** or **Chi-uku** (the great **Chi**), **Chineke** (the creator), **Chi di n'elu** (**Chi** in the sky), **Chi n'uno** (**Chi** universal) and **Chuku Oke Abiama** (the universal maker).

The imponderable and distant **Chi** — also close and decisive in the personal or tribal **chi** — expressed his decisions, his will, through the voice of the oracle, **Ibinokpabi**; the **Oru** (**Brass-Ijaw**) were accustomed to making sacrifices to **Chuku Oke Abiama** after having consulted the oracle **Aro** who determined the nature of the sacrifice: a man, a goat or a cow. If by chance it was a man, a slave was selected and handed over to the **Aro** in return for the promise to take him to **Aro-Chuku** and sacrifice him there: we now know his true destiny.

The **Aro** were also called **Umu Chuku** (sons of **Chuku**).

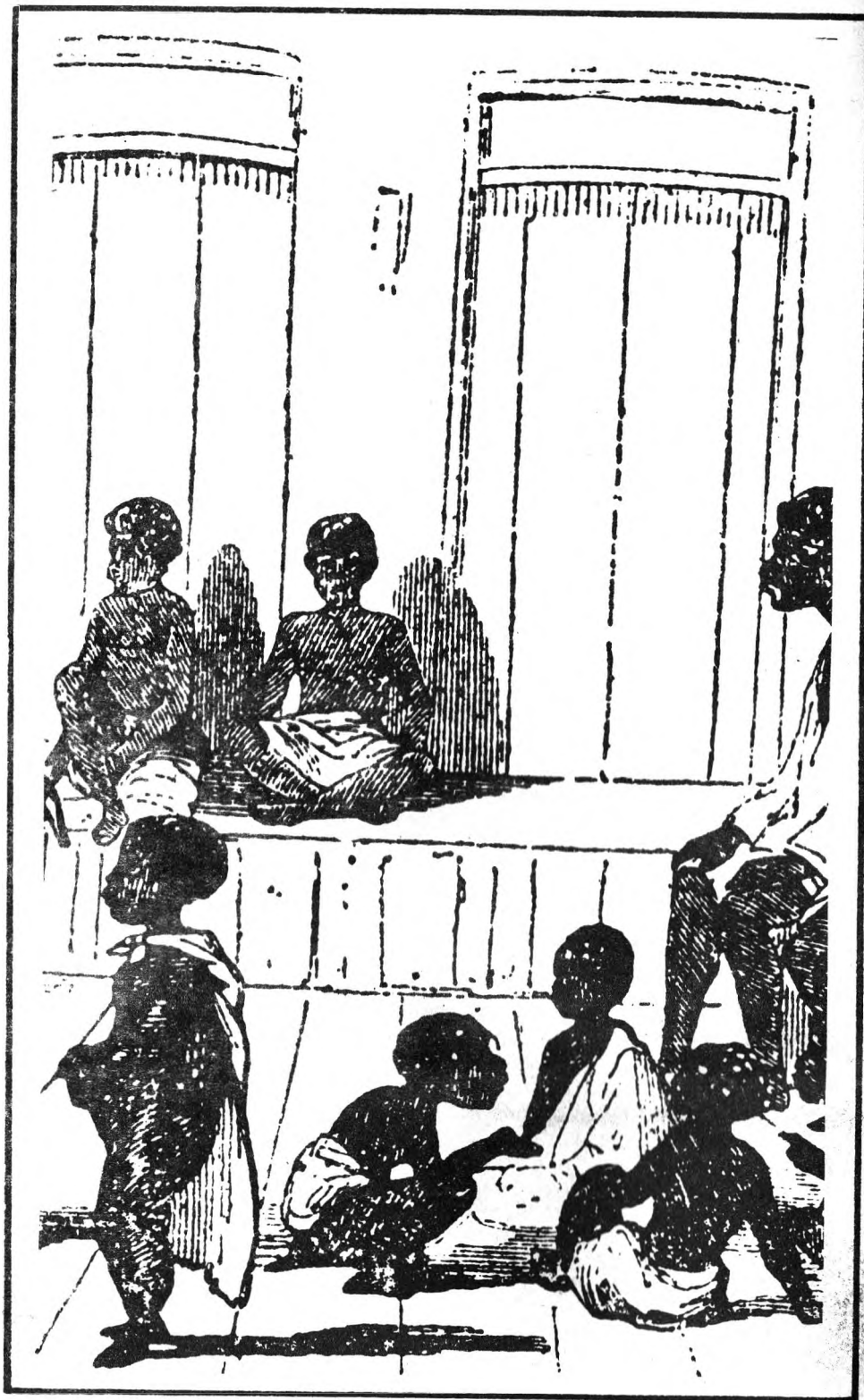
**Ale, Ala** or **Ani** was concerned with the earth and thus looked after the fortune of the harvests and the world of the dead. She was the guardian of obeying the laws for which she herself meted out punishment and the executions were done in her name: the great integrating **Ibo** force with very frequent and varied rites.

In contrast to **Chi**, **Ale** maintained direct, intimate and permanent contact with men during planting and harvest, in war or in peace, and carried them in her fertile womb at the hour of death, and departure for the world of the dead to await reincarnation. In some places she even replaced **Chi** as human creator, although the **chi** — the real being — was always reserved for him.

In maintaining that **Ibinokpabi** was a constituent part of **Ale**, it became implicit that the goddess of the oracle punished all those who violated customs blessed by just and impartial decisions.

The counterpart of **Ale**, **Amade Onha, Kamalo** or **Agbara**, the god revered in the oracle of **Awka**, was a celestial deity, lord of lightning, of rain, of fire and wind. Considered by many **Ibo** as the husband of **Ale**, he followed her in hierarchy among the great gods.





**Amade Onha** lived in the sun, his voice was heard in thunder and he appeared in the lightning that set afire the cursed witches associated with the forces of evil, transgressors of the customs imposed by **Ale**.

**Igwe**, the bright sky, was the brother of **Kamalo**, less worshipped than the former since he didn't guarantee rain like the stormy master of lightning or thunder.

For the **Ekoi** the supreme god was **Obassi**, divided between **Obassi Osaw** as universal creator, who lived in the sky, and **Obassi Nsi**, as the great guardian of mankind in his terrestrial home, during life and death.

The celestial **Osaw** seems to have been the **Obassi** related to **Aro-Chuku**, even to the name by which he was known among some members of the **Ekoi** tribe, **Ibutukpabi** (high deity), from which the name of the goddess of the oracle, **Ibinokpabi**, could have come.

Among the **Ekoi**, **Osaw**, like **Chi** among the **Ibo**, was a powerful god but far-off and indifferent to the problems of mankind which, he nevertheless could punish by thunder, lightning or drought by not providing the rain and the beneficial winds that belonged to him.

**Ibinokpabi**, his daughter along with **Ale**, was to benefit from the prestigious power of the maximum gods of southern Nigeria, **Obassi**, **Ekoi**, and **Ale**, **Ibo**. For some she was also wife, for others sister and for still others, mother of **Kamalo**, in the latter case with **Obassi** himself as father. She made her prophecies in a masculine voice, from a cave located some seven feet above the current of a stream that ran through the **Aro** villages.

The supplicants who visited the oracle stopped in the middle of the stream of water while the priest who accompanied them went up to or near the cave, before which it was believed some of the **Aro** chiefs were seated.

The priest explained aloud the reason they had come to **Aro-Chuku**, and immediately or on another designated day, the oracle issued its irrevocable judgment.

When the guilty one was given a death sentence, all his companions were ordered to leave and shortly thereafter, without anyone knowing how, when or who had immolated him, his head appeared on a rock near the cave.

Another version, which agrees with the one **Ortiz** gives, states that when the sentence of condemnation was pronounced, the waters of the stream rose — a dam caused this phenomenon of great dramatic intensity — and the victim was carried away by them while his companions, terrified by the surprising deep reddish color, fled convinced they had seen a miracle and that justice had been meted out against a criminal whose blood had stained the waters, another **Aro** artifice achieved by mixing the redwood of **Angola** (**Cam-Wood**) with the waters in the dam.

The visitors returned to their villages convinced of the omnipotency and justice of the oracle but, actually, the unfortunate accused had been taken away before their own eyes for very different purposes than those proclaimed by the oracle, for purposes of enslavement.

In other cases the decision of **Ibinokpabi** was different — her priesthood was bribable or really did justice — and the hostage was sent back to his village with the order that he must die, that he must give one of his sons or daughters to the offended family or, in their place, several slaves.



Before leaving for their homes, all those who approached the oracle received an **Offó**.

The **Offó** was a branch, or several branches forming a sheaf, from the tree of the same name. It had widely recognized virtues since it was a beneficial force that served as an intermediary between men, the ancestors and **Ale**: it was the first tree created by **Ale** or, for some, her own son.

The command staff of the **Ibo** chiefs, transmitted from father to son for generations and impregnated with the dignity and power of its successive owners, was also named **Offó**. It was the recipient of a special cult, generally masculine and always related to the ancestors and **Ale**, abundance, successes and the fertility of the earth.

Because they were in charge of the symbols of the ancestors, these chiefs were greeted as **Mazi** or **Uku Offó** and held the title **Eze** (possessor of the earth) or of **Onye nw'Ale**, again associating the sacred names of **Ale** and the ancestors who first used the earth and the waters with their first symbolic representations in natural objects or forces: the religious concepts that made up the primitive societies reflecting their economic and social relations.

The oracle of **Aro-Chuku**, through its clever theocratic ability, knew how to exploit for its own benefit this complex system of beliefs by organizing on its base, as we have seen. But thus formulated, its multiple structure is still not complete; **Aro-Chuku** also had armed forces that directly or indirectly served its ends. We also find their origins in the institutions that arose naturally from the development of the primitive community but as in all other cases, their end was channeled according to **Aro** conveniences and their integrating action was transformed under their control into a force of destruction, depopulation and terror, into a tool for the foreign slave trade.

These forces were organized as fighting clans.

#### The fighting clans: Abam and Edda

In discussing the secret society **Ekpe**, located in **Efik** territory, we are referring to an **Ibibio** association that had commercial relations with the **Aro**.

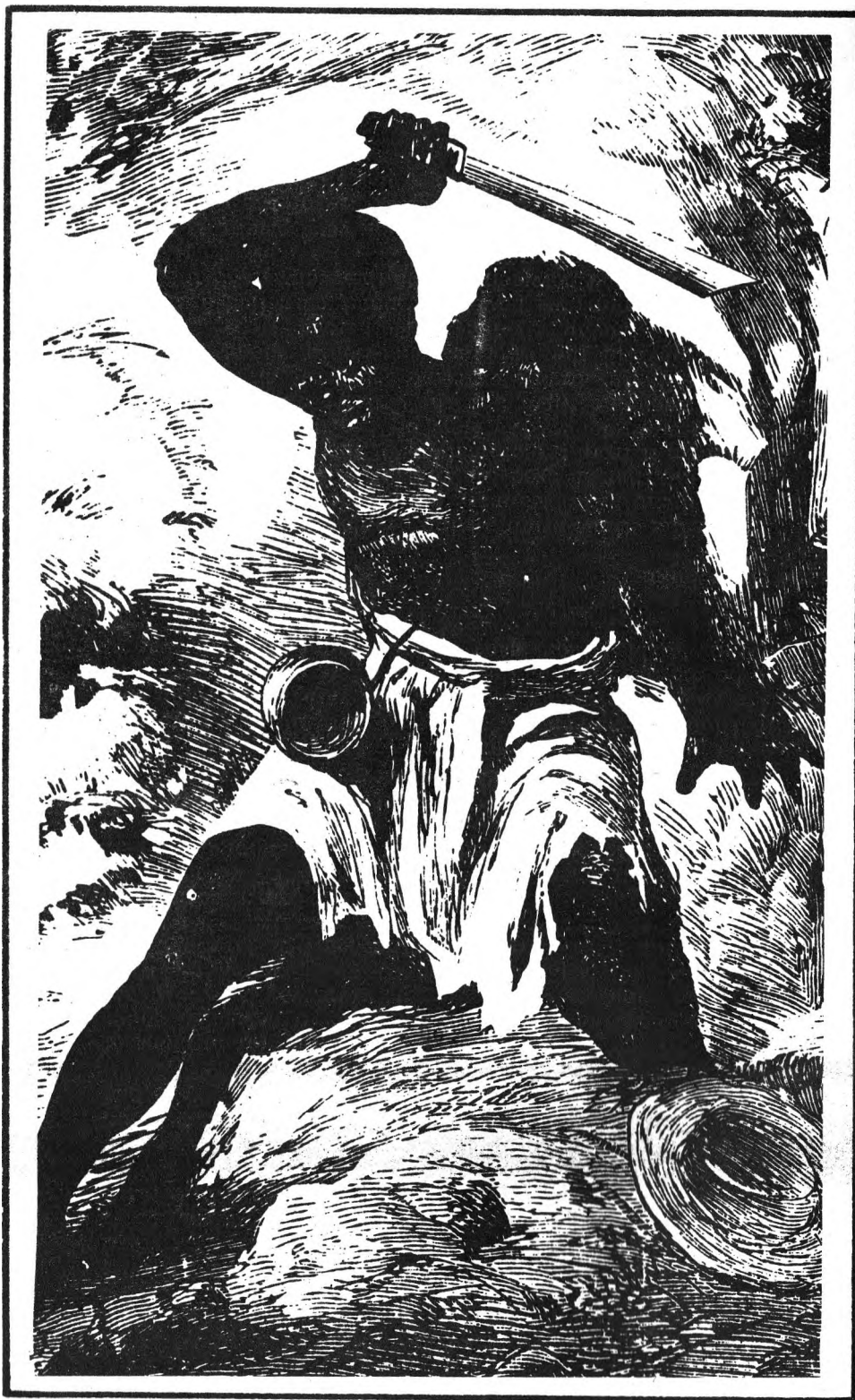
The existence of societies, secret or not, was one of the essential characteristics of social organization among most West African peoples. They might be masculine or feminine, with the latter decreasing in social importance to the extent that the primary matriarchal relations had been weakened in favor of the patriarchy; among the **Ekoi**, for example, women's societies were still very strong and much feared in the 19th century, while among the **Ibo**, if any still remained, their social weight was practically nil, and the same was true among the **Ibibio**.

The **Abam** and the **Ndi Ekumeku** (the silent ones), this latter secret in the style of Old Calabar and the Yoruba, were very famous **Ibo** societies with a large membership.

The **Abam** operated in the Nigerian area that interests us, the eastern part, while the **Ekumeku** operated in the western part near the Niger between Asaba and Benin.

Both the **Abam** and the **Edda**, also organized in armed bands, were **Ibo** sub-tribes with the **Abam** subdivided into the **Abariba**, **Ojafia** and **Abam** clans and the **Edda** into the **Ake-Eze**, **Afikpo**, **Amasiri**, **Unwana**, **Elei**, **Isu-Kweautaw** and **Edda** clans. Ogoja and





Owerri were two provinces particularly affected by their depredations, by the **Edda** in the southern part and the **Abam** in the northern part with the latter, therefore, having more direct contact with the **Aro** than the **Edda**.

The origin of these associations may possibly have been related to that of similar ones by sex and age usually established for youth in all these tribes as an effective device for teaching them the customs, work and social position they would have within the community context until they reached adulthood when, through initiation rites, they were considered ready for marriage and membership in other associations, now composed of men and women with full rights and duties sanctioned by the collective.

Since male work permitted long periods of inactivity in the **Ibo** villages, the adult men used such periods to practice games and the young men used them for sports, including as such the assassination or kidnapping of travelers, reputedly foreigners, whom they took by surprise.

These actions increased the social prestige of the perpetrators as an expression of personal bravery, combativity, war-like masculinity that gave the person the title of **odu-mar** (man killer). Thus, endemic grudges between clans and villages multiplied and lasted at least until rains came and forced the contenders to integrate themselves into the activities of the new agricultural year.

Under these circumstances, the enormous **Ibo** country lived in terror. The youth, united and in ambushes, committed themselves to traveling from one village to another in armed groups of vigilantes. Those captured were assassinated and eaten — many of these tribes were cannibalistic — sold as slaves or liberated after payment of a ransom when it was the case of a rich man.

Mutual jealousy, insecurity and fear were serious obstacles to stabilizing and increasing economic and social relations between regions and villages and in unifying the **Ibo**, the most important factor facilitating their massive enslavement and shipment to America. All might suffer this same sorrowful fate, those who captured and sold today might be captured and sold the following day.

But these were not the only consequences. Since this predatory action came to be a source enrichment, it became professional under the aegis of the slave trade and, again, the priesthood of the oracle of **Aro-Chuku** knew how to use it.

Throughout the entire territory where the word of **Ibinokpabi** was law, groups of armed men became professionals in sacking, robbing, kidnapping and crime under the oracle's protection and in its service. They became mercenaries whose force was all the more effective and active, the closer they were to the **Aro** center of authority where their human booty was negotiated.

The **Abam** became famous in this respect.

With the help of the guns brought in by the whites<sup>13</sup> the **Abam** conquered whoever opposed them or killed their agents. Any village that had a dispute with another could call on the **Abam**

<sup>13</sup> Certain sources note that the **Abam** limited themselves to the use of machetes.

through the **Aro** agents. First a sum of money was sent to them and when the bargain was fulfilled, the captured lands became their property, which is how they seized huge land areas and acquired considerable wealth through the slave traffic.

When they were not hired out, the **Abam**, who lived in a permanent state of war, acted on their own account, but the final destiny of those captured continued to be **Aro-Chuku** and, from there, Bonny or the Old Calabar.

### The end of Aro-Chuku

The arrival in Old Calabar of the British missionary Mr. Waddell, at the beginning of the 1840's, indicated the imminence of a radical change in the life of the people under discussion. The old system of the slave agencies with the slave ships and their Dantesque Atlantic crossings, of local control of primitive native economies by the Blacks themselves and on manhunt destined for far-off markets, across the seas, was reaching its end. Through the missionaries — their so-called benefactory action — new traders would come and with them British consuls and British troops.

Palm oil would replace human merchandise; direct exploitation of the **Ibibio**, the **Ibo** and others would replace the criminal trade; control by the white racists of Blacks discriminated against and dispossessed from their lands, their destiny and their gods, would replace control by the chiefs, representatives of the founding fathers with their "end without beginning". The process of dividing the world's territory among a few imperialist powers<sup>14</sup> was culminating in Africa; imperialism's unrestrained capitalism needed unrestrained extension of the exploitation of most of the world's inhabitants and the Nigerians were compelled by violence to incorporate themselves into this process.

**Aro-Chuku**, with its gods and its vast plundering organization, was condemned to death. The primitive tribal polytheism had to give way to the monotheism of the Christian god. Once more the influx of great social transformations fought to replace one form of religion with another that answered to the needs of a new period.

At the end of the century, British armed forces pushed to reach **Aro**, occupying huge land areas where the oracle had been worshipped and obeyed for centuries. In 1901 **Aro-Chuku** was seized and its "great **yuyú**" destroyed.

But religion is the most conservative ideological force, based on tradition, on conservatism, and offers stubborn, sometimes surreptitious resistance, to all kinds of innovations and changes.

By 1907 the oracle's influence was thought to have disappeared completely, but at a much later date, in 1921, Talbert still mentions a case judged by the tenacious **Ibinokpabi**, the stubborn goddess deposed from her sacred retreat...

<sup>14</sup> Lenin points out that, in 1860, England owned 2 500 000 square miles with a population of 145 000 000, and that in 1899 it owned 9 300 000 square miles with a population of 309 000 000. V. I. Lenin, *Imperialism, Highest Stage of Capitalism. Selected Works (II)*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1961, p. 755.

