Africa's Lost Generations

What kind of a place was West Africa when the slave trade began? Some written records exist in Islamic regions, but for other areas, scholars have little documentary evidence to go on. The slaves themselves were usually illiterate. Yet, beginning in the 18th century, a handful of slaves and ex-slaves, educated for the most part in America and Britain, unlocked their memories and penned their recollections. In many cases, these are the earliest written descriptions of West African societies—religious beliefs, politics, commercial activities, amusements, marriage customs. Nigeria's noted literary scholar, Emmanuel Obiechina, analyzed these memoirs during his stay at the Wilson Center. We present excerpts from his book in progress.

by Emmanuel Obiechina

Between the year 1734, when Ayuba Suleiman, a Maryland slave, published his *Memoirs*,[1] and 1854, when Ali Eisami's *Narrative*[2] appeared, a score of Africa's children, dispersed by the slave trade, many of them laboring in servitude, overcame the cruel constraints of their condition to give the world a retrospective portrait of the West African civilization that slavery had destroyed.

Their accounts, written in simple, almost biblical prose, remain fresh and powerful to this day.

Some of these authors, such as Samuel Crowther, returned to their native lands, but others never saw their homes again. Some of them eventually "won" their freedom, or bought it, like Olaudah Equiano (for £40). Others remained slaves until death. Three were rescued from slave ships by British frigates (the slave trade was abolished in the British Empire in 1807) and resettled in Sierra Leone. A few of the writers were learned Muslims, the intellectual match of any contemporary Oxford don; some were poor farmers, animists, "primitives" from the rain forest further to the south.

They had in common two things only. All of them, though at different ages, had been wrenched violently from their homelands and brought to what Ottobah Cugoano (b. 1757) called "those inhospitable regions of misery."[3] And, in all of them, Africa

Collection, The Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter.

Olaudah Equiano, an Ibo tribesman, was sold into slavery in 1757. He educated himself, bought his freedom, married an Englishwoman, and, in 1789, published his autobiography. By 1827, his book had gone through 17 editions.

remained a vibrant reality, a source of acute sensations in which memory was mixed indistinguishably with regret.

What is extraordinary about these books, which have been little read nor long remembered, is their similarity, although they were written over a period of 120 years by men and women who, in most cases, did not know one another. The authors came from different lands in Africa; they lived in forced exile in different places, from Kent Island, Maryland, to Greenwich, England.

But their shared muse was Africa. They were impelled to write by the remembrance of things past. In so doing, they unintentionally became the most accomplished anthropologists of 18th- and early 19th-century West Africa.

Kidnapped

There are few if any historical parallels to the destruction of West African civilization by the slave trade—abetted by blacks and exploited by Europeans—that began in the mid-15th century. In the course of four centuries, perhaps 15 million black Africans were sold to white masters in Charleston and Rio, Kingston and London, Port-au-Prince and Havana. Not surprisingly, for all of the narrators, sudden capture by fearsome strangers on a day that promised to be ordinary was a traumatic turning point. Olaudah Equiano devoted almost the entire second chapter of his autobiography to his kidnapping by neighboring blacks in 1757.

The attack was unexpected: "One day, when all our people were gone out to their works as usual, and only I and my sister were left to mind the house, two men and a woman got over our walls, and in a moment seized us both, and, without giving us time to cry out, or make resistance, they stopped our mouths and ran with us to the nearest wood."[4]

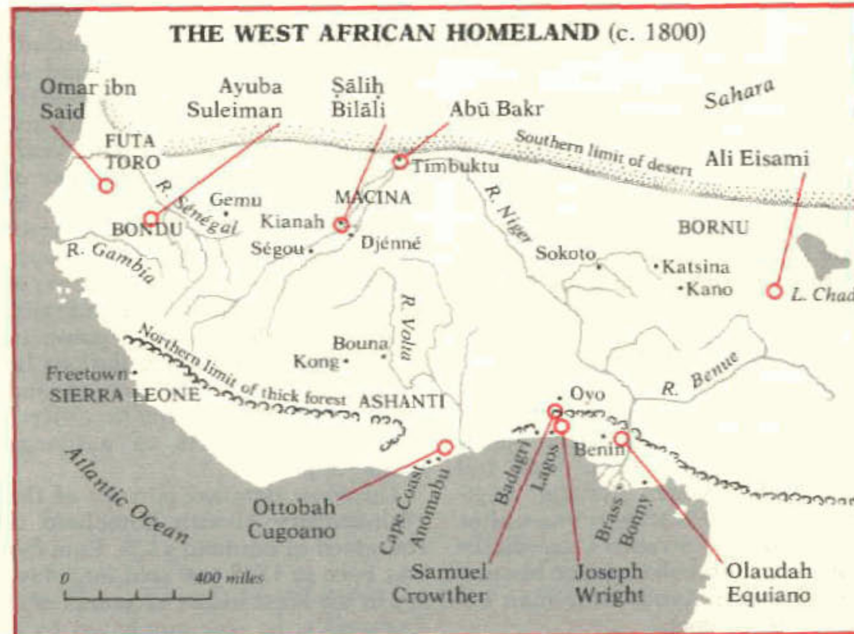
Africa's Dark Age

So began an odyssey that would take Equiano from the dense rain forest of Igboland down to the slave port of Bonny in the Niger delta, to the West Indies and America, then as a freedman to Europe, and, later, even to the Arctic Circle on an unsuccessful British expedition to reach the North Pole.

Ayuba Suleiman, a nobleman of Bondu, in what is now Senegal, was, like some of the others, the victim of an ambush. He was with an attendant on a business trip to the Gambia when he was grabbed in 1830.

He had laid aside his gold-hilted sword, a gold knife, and his elegant quiver and arrows (a gift from King Samba of Futa Toro) and was proceeding to take sustenance with his companion at a wayside inn when "a company of Mandingoes, who live upon plunder, passing by at the time, and observing him unarmed, rushed in, to the number of seven or eight, at a back door, and pinioned Job [Ayuba's slave name], before he could get to his arms, together with his interpreter, who is slave in Maryland still." (Ayuba's narrative was dic-

Emmanuel Obiechina, 47, a former Wilson Center Fellow, is a professor of English at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. He received his B.A. in 1961 from University College, Ibadan, and his Ph.D. in 1966 from Cambridge University. His many books include Culture, Tradition, and Society in the West African Novel *(1975) and* An African Popular Literature: A Study of Onitsha Market Pamphlets *(1973).*



The slave trade fanned the tribal wars and political turmoil that nearly destroyed West African culture between the 16th and 19th centuries. The authors of slavery narratives were born in cities and villages scattered throughout a territory more than twice the size of Alaska. Their homelands are located in what are now the nations of Senegal, Gambia, Mali, Niger, Ghana, and Nigeria.

tated to one Thomas Bluett.)

Ayuba was freed from slavery in 1733, thanks to the efforts of James Oglethorpe, a founder of the Georgia colony, who had been impressed by his erudition. Wined and dined as a great scholar in England (where he wrote out three copies of the Koran in Arabic from memory), he returned home to Bondu in 1734.

The era of the slave trade, which coincided with periodic Muslim *jihads* (holy wars) and political instability throughout West Africa, was the continent's Dark Age. The light of African civilization went out, whole societies were decimated, and the creative impulse in the people wilted away under the recurrent violence of armed roving bands and ambitious adventurers, white and black. The Ijebu tribe that captured and sold Joseph Wright to the Portuguese spent the 1820s tearing down neighboring Egba cities and enslaving the inhabitants.[5]

Some of West Africa's cultural traits survived the Atlantic crossing, notably the art of storytelling. In their homelands, all the writers had sat around the fireside in the villages, listening to raconteurs, balladeers, epic narrators—and committing the tales to memory. The expatriates

reached back to that tradition in their own stories.

In a sense, their first concern as writers was to restore their own personal identities. While the kidnaping itself was terrifying, the most disabling psychological blow fell when the individual was immersed in the wide impersonal world of strangers. There he was anonymous. In despair, many slaves took their own lives.

"I Was Named Olaudah"

Loss of identity began with the loss of one's original name. The African was capriciously tagged with appellations picked up from here and there by his master. Olaudah Equiano was named Gustavus Vassa after the founder of Sweden's hereditary monarchy. Ottobah Cugoano became John Stewart. Ayuba Suleiman became Job Solomon.

As if to reassert their individuality, all of the writers dwelt on their original African names. "I was named Olaudah," Equiano wrote, "which, in our language, signified vicissitude, or fortune also; one favoured, and having a loud voice, and well spoken."

The new slave, of course, did not lose only his freedom and his name. He was also stripped of paternity, fraternity, kinship ties, and the presumption of humanity. Inevitably, the narrators tried to restore these links to the human race.

Equiano wrote in endearing detail about his family: his six brothers and sisters; his closeness to his mother; his father's high status in the community. "My father was one of those elders or chiefs I have spoken of, and was styled Embrenche," he wrote proudly, "a term, as I remember, importing the highest distinction, and signifying in our language a mark of grandeur."

Ayuba Suleiman's "blue-blooded" family and social background in Bondu were given an impressive build-up in the account he dictated to Thomas Bluett: "About fifty years ago Hibrahim, the grandfather of Job, founded the town of Boonda, in the reign of Bubaker, the King of Futa, and was, by his permission, sole Lord Proprietor and Governor of it, and at the same time High Priest, or Alpha; so that he had a power to make what laws and regulations he thought proper for the increase and good government of his new city." Ayuba was himself an assistant imam, or priest.

The most detailed portrait of the 18th-century African homeland is contained in Equiano's *Life*. Equiano was born in 1745 and sold into slavery in the West Indies 12 years later. Eventually, he was purchased by a Virginia trader. He became a skilled seaman and made enough money from private trading ventures to purchase his freedom, whereupon he settled in England and became, with Cugoano, a leader of the large black community in London.

A Nation of Dancers

In his autobiography, published in London in 1789, he began by describing his tiny village of Essaka, which he then carefully located inside the Benin empire (in present-day Nigeria), which in turn he set within the whole African continent.

He described the culture with enthusiasm and pride, and always with honesty. On the significance of music and dance among his people, he wrote: "We are almost a nation of dancers, musicians and poets. Thus every event, such as a triumphant return from battle, or other cause of public rejoicing, is celebrated in public dances, which are accompa-

nied with songs and music suited to the occasion." Among the musical instruments Equiano remembered were drums, guitars, and "another much like a stickado," a kind of xylophone reserved for the use of betrothed virgins.

Clean Cookery

The dress of both sexes was nearly the same, he said, and it "generally consists of a long piece of calico, or muslin, wrapped loosely round the body, somewhat the form of a highland plaid. This is usually dyed blue, which is our favourite colour."

Equiano's picture is comprehensive, taking in the marketplace, agriculture, the making of cloth, and jewelry. "As we live in a country where nature is prodigal of her favours," he wrote, "our wants are few and easily supplied. . . . In such a state, money is of little use. . . . Agriculture is our chief employment; and everyone, even the children and women, are engaged in it. . . . Everyone contributes something to the common stock; and, so we are unacquainted with idleness, we have no beggars."

The diet of his people, he said, consisted largely of yams and goats, plantains and poultry, all washed down with palm wine. "As yet," Equiano wrote, "the natives are unacquainted with those refinements in cookery which debauch the taste." It was a polygamous society, and Equiano conceded that the menfolk "do not preserve the same constancy to their wives, which they expect from them."

Equiano plainly loved his homeland, but he portrayed its darker side faithfully. He acknowledged that his people were warlike and that even the women were adept with the javelin and bow. Fallen enemies were dismembered for trophies—an arm or leg, say—to be hung in the marketplace. The chief spoils of war were slaves, for personal use or for sale to the white men on the coast.

Ayuba Suleiman of Bondu.
The book on his breast is the Koran.

As for religion, Equiano said, "the natives believe that there is one Creator of all things and that he lives in the sun. . . . As for the doctrine of eternity, I do not remember to have ever heard of it."

One of the most memorable passages in Equiano's book describes a visit he made with his mother to his grandmother's grave, "which was a kind of small solitary thatched house. . . . There she made her libations, and spent most of the night in cries and lamentations. . . . The loneliness of the place, the darkness of the night, and the ceremony of libation, naturally awful and gloomy, were heightened by my mother's lamentations; and these concurring

with the doleful cries of birds, by which these places were frequented, gave an inexpressible terror to the scene."

Tying the Knot

I have quoted Equiano at length with good reason: His book provides the most comprehensive view known to scholars of a West African society in the 18th century. But every one of the other writers included something of his African heritage. In their portraits, tinged with nostalgia, Africa became a human habitation, not the dense, dark jungle of the European imagination.

Ayuba Suleiman's Bondu lay on the banks of the River Sénégal. Suleiman stressed its Islamic foundations (Islam first swept below the Sahara during the 11th century) and approvingly cited the ordinance that "no person who flies thither for protection shall be made a slave." Unhappily, this provision was extended only "to all in general, that can read and know God," in other words, to orthodox Muslims. Suleiman was actually on his way "to sell two Negroes" to the British for purchase of paper and other necessaries when he himself became a captive.*

Through the pen of Thomas Bluett, Ayuba described the harvesting of peanuts, the hunting of lions, and the ivory trade. There was a brief discourse on a potent poison made from cassava, an aside on the perils of idolatry, and a long description of marriage customs:

"When a man has a mind to marry off his son and has found a suitable match for him, he goes to the girl's father, proposes the matter to him and agrees for the price he is to pay for her. . . . All things concluded on, the two fathers and the young man go to the priest, and declare their agreement. . . .

"But now comes the great difficulty, viz., how the young man shall get his wife home; for the women, cousins, and relations, take on mightily, and guard the door of the house to prevent her being carried away; but at last the young man's presents and generosity to them, makes them abate their grief.

"He then provides a friend, well mounted, to carry her off; but as soon as [she] is up on horseback, the women renew their lamentations,

Courtesy of the University of Wisconsin Press.

Samuel Crowther, first African-born bishop of the Church of England.

*By all accounts, including those of historians and those of our narrators, the enslavement of Africans by Africans was considerably more humane than was slavery in the New World. "So far as I can remember," wrote Cugoano, "some of the Africans in my country keep slaves, which they take in war, or for debt, but those which they keep are well-fed and good care taken of them and treated well."

and rush in to dismount her. However, the man is generally successful, and rides off with his prize." Ayuba had gone through this ritual twice.

Ṣāliḥ Bilāli's Kiannah was a little town on the Niger River. The Niger, with its tributaries, served as the artery of commerce linking populous cities such as Djénné, Ségou, and Timbuktu with one another—and with the faraway Arab traders, who descended in "large boats covered with awnings" and laden with salt, blankets, pistols, beads, and cowries. There was a division of labor: "The men work in the fields, fish, herd cattle and weave," Ṣāliḥ Bilāli wrote. "The women spin, and attend to household duties, but never work in the field."[6]

The Gold Mines

Abū Bakr al-Siddiq, born in Timbuktu around 1790, was educated in Djénné and Bouna, cities then esteemed as centers of Islamic learning and commerce. Abū Bakr's father was, intermittently, a gold miner in the rich fields around Bouna.

"They have to break the stones," Abū Bakr explained, "and grind them, and reduce them to dust. This is then put into vessels and washed with water till the gold is all collected under the water in the vessels and the dust lies above it. They then pour out this mud on the ground, and the gold remains in the vessels."[7] The French and the British established outposts on the Sénégal and Gambia rivers to exploit the gold traffic in the interior.

There was a strong religious emphasis in Abū Bakr's account. "The faith of our families is the faith of Islam," he wrote. "They circumcise the foreskin, say the five prayers; fast every year in the month of Ramadan; give alms as ordained in the law; marry four women. . . . They fight for the faith of God; perform the pilgrimage to Mecca."

We do not know if Abū Bakr himself ever made it to Mecca. After working in the West Indies as a stonemason and clerk (he kept his accounts in Arabic), he was set free by his master, published two autobiographical fragments, and then returned to Timbuktu in 1836, never to be heard from again.

Enlightened Whites

The writers among Africa's lost children were remarkable people. They had to be. The leap from slavery (and the mentality imposed by that condition) to the liberating act of creating literature was a long and difficult one that only very few could make. Even those few could not have attempted, much less achieved, that feat without an education.

All of the writers had received some kind of schooling before they left Africa, be it of a "traditional" tribal sort—learning the customs and stories and rituals of the community—or of a Koranic variety, peculiar to the Islamic societies in West Africa. Scholars in the academies at Timbuktu, Djénné, and Katsina were known throughout the Muslim world.

For a slave, formal Western education was more difficult to acquire. In America, many states had laws forbidding Africans to learn to read. Overt sanctions were virtually absent in England, but racial prejudice was not. On both sides of the Atlantic, Africans depended for their educations on the efforts of enlightened whites. Most prominent among these were England's indefatigable Duke of Montague and his benevolent wife, who helped Ayuba Suleiman and several other slaves

and freedmen.

Every writer talked about his education. Equiano first described his early training in Igboland prior to his journey into slavery.

"The manners and customs of my country," he wrote, "had been implanted in me with great care, and made an impression on my mind, which time could not erase, and which all the adversity and variety of fortune I have since experienced, served only to rivet and record."

From Slave to Priest

Later, Equiano learned to read through the kindnesses of many people: David, his young American companion on several sea voyages; the wife of a shipmate on Guernsey; the Captain's clerk aboard the *Etna*; and a Daniel Queen, "about forty years of age, a man very well educated."

Ottobah Cugoano managed to obtain a few years of formal schooling. "After coming to England," he wrote, "and seeing others write and read, I had a strong desire, and getting what assistance I could, I applied myself to learn reading and writing, which soon became my recreation, pleasure and delight; and when my master perceived that I could write some, he sent me to a proper school for that purpose to learn."

The "master" was Richard Cosway, official portrait painter to the Prince of Wales, whom Cugoano served from the time he was brought to England, at the age of 12, to sometime during the 1780s when he secured his freedom and went off to write and work among the London poor.

Two of the repatriates, Samuel Crowther and Joseph Wright, gained the most formal type of education. British Royal Navy antislavery squadrons had intercepted Portuguese slavers carrying Crowther and Wright to Brazil, and each was put ashore at the British colony of Sierra Leone—Crowther in 1822, Wright in 1827. As wards of Christian missionaries there, they received primary and secondary instruction in mission schools and then went to Britain to study theology. Both men were ordained (Wright was a Methodist, Crowther an Anglican) and returned as missionaries to West Africa. Crowther eventually became the first African bishop of the Church Missionary Society's Diocese on the Niger and died, something of a celebrity, at the age of 85. He is regarded as one of the fathers of modern Nigeria.

Finding a Voice

By contrast, the Muslim narrators—born in what is now Senegal, Mali, Niger, and northern Nigeria—described the rigorous Islamic training they received at home.

The Islamic system was laborious, often requiring decades, and encompassing, in its higher reaches, the study of logic, mathematics, rhetoric, and Koranic exegesis.

"I sought knowledge," Omar ibn Said recalled, "under the instruction of a Sheikh called Mohammed Said, my own brother, and Sheikh Soleiman Kembeh, and Sheikh Gabriel Abdal. I continued my studies twenty-five years, and then returned to my home where I remained six years."[8] As a slave in North Carolina, Omar treasured a copy of the Koran in English that a friend of his master presented to him.

Education enabled all of the writers to recover lost confidence and emerge from ignoble silence. With the shock of captivity and expatriation, the heart of the enslaved African was numbed with grief and his

soul was filled with despondency. The human voice froze within him, unable to speak to a world suddenly turned malevolent.

Gradually, the effects of the shock began to settle and clarity to appear. The submerged resources of the African's mind surged forward into his active consciousness. His spirit, at least, was free.

The spirit of freedom that survived in the African, precarious as it may have been, was built upon the memory of the past. The urge to re-enact that past—to narrate it, to share it, or, in defiance, to shout it to the uncaring world—became irrepressible. Like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, a few dispersed children of Africa poured their tales into the ears of their audiences and eased the pressure upon their own hearts.

NOTES

1. Thomas Bluett and Ayuba Suleiman, *Some Memoirs of the Life of Job, the Son of Solomon the High Priest of Boonda in Africa, etc.*, London, 1734.
2. "The Narrative of Ali Eisami," dictated to S. W. Koelle, in *African Native Literature*, London, 1854.
3. Ottobah Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, London, 1787.
4. Olaudah Equiano, *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*, London, 1789.
5. Joseph Wright, "The Life of Joseph Wright, A Native of Ackoo," in John Beecham, *Ashantee and the Gold Coast*, London, 1841.
6. Reported in a letter of James Hamilton Couper of Georgia, published in William Brow Hodgson, *Notes on Northern Africa, the Sahara, and the Sudan*, New York, 1844.
7. "This Is an Account of the Beginning of My Life," in G. C. Renouard, "Routes in North Africa, by Abu Becr as Siddik," *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*, 1836; "The History of Abou Becr Sadiki, known in Jamaica by the name of Edward Donlan," R. R. Madden, *Twelve Months Residence in the West Indies*, London, 1837.
8. Omar ibn Said, "The Autobiography of Omar ibn Said, Slave in North Carolina," *American Historical Review*, 1925.

Some of the works mentioned in this essay are excerpted in Philip D. Curtin, ed., *Africa Remembered: Narratives by West Africans from the Era of the Slave Trade* (Univ. of Wis., 1967).