

## CHAPTER 6

### THE SLAVE TRADE IN NIGER DELTA ORAL TRADITION AND HISTORY

E. J. Alagoa

The scope of this study is limited to the overseas trade in slaves as it has been remembered in the oral traditions of the Niger Delta, and to the effects of that trade on the history of the delta. Information on the slave trade, based mainly on the records of European observers and participants, is to be found in the general works on the history of the Niger Delta by K. O. Dike (1956) and G. I. Jones (1963). Both authors concentrate on the city-states of the eastern delta, namely, Bonny, Kalabari, Okrika and Nembe, and have paid attention to the consequences of the abolition of the trade by Britain in 1807, to the growth of the palm-oil and kernel trade in its place, and to the significance and role of slaves in the internal political, social, and economic history of the delta. Robin Horton (1969) has paid particular attention to the role of persons incorporated into Kalabari society and to the effects of the overseas trade on the development of the institutions of the city-state from those of the village polity.

Similarly, the processes and effects of the overseas slave trade in the western delta feature in the work of A.F.C. Ryder (1959) and P.C. Lloyd (1963). Ryder discusses the trade of the Benin kingdom at its port of Ughoton on the upper Benin River from the first visits of the Portuguese in about 1485 through the period of Dutch activities to British colonial takeover in 1897. Lloyd studies the effects of Itsekiri control of trade in the western delta on the politics and society of the Itsekiri kingdom.

Dike (1956: 1) identifies two periods of European activity in the Niger Delta: first, a period beginning with the advent of the Portuguese in the fifteenth century to the British abolition of the slave trade in 1807, and second, the period 1807-1885. This periodization distinguishes between the slave trade and the trade in palm oil and kernels. Jones (1963: 89-90) notes gradual expansion of the slave trade through the

eighteenth century to "a peak in the Rio Real of about 15,000 to 20,000 annually in the first quarter of the nineteenth century." Jones suggests that the slave trade came to an end as a result of the British naval blockade "after 1839," followed by an increase in palm-oil exports to a peak in 1855. Palm kernels became a commodity in the trade from 1870, while the establishment of a British Protectorate after 1885 coincided with a further increase in the quantity of trade. Dike (1956: 98) also noted that the slave trade did not end in 1807 with the British declaration of abolition. He recorded the account of a British captain who saw between sixteen and twenty slaving ships at Bonny in 1827, but none in 1837. But he also noted that the success of the British naval squadron operating from Fernando Po (Equatorial Guinea) in driving the slave trade from the ports of Bonny and Elem Kalabari actually increased exports from the port of Brass. It was this continuing slave trade that persuaded the British government representatives on the spot to enter into the so-called "slave trade treaties" with the delta states from 1839 to the 1850s.

Elem Kalabari apparently predominated as a center for the slave trade until the end of the seventeenth century. From about 1699 through the nineteenth century, Bonny became the most important center of the overseas trade in slaves and then in palm oil and kernels. Opobo took over this position of leadership in the palm-oil trade from about 1870. The varying importance of the different states in the nineteenth century in terms of the slave trade is shown by the efforts the British made to sign treaties to abolish the trade and to enforce abolition. The first treaty of its type was signed with the kingdom of Bonny on 11 March 1839, a second on 20 August 1841, and a third on 21 November 1848. Compensation for loss of trade to the value of \$2,000-\$10,000 a year were agreed to be paid to the rulers. The treaty with Elem Kalabari was only signed 8 August 1851 and with Nembe (Brass) on 17 November 1856. These treaties were the subject of disputes over payment of compensation by the British and the commitment to compliance by delta rulers. If the British had doubts about the good faith of the local rulers, the rulers were equally skeptical about the British change of attitude about the slave trade. In the 1841 treaty, King Pepple had a clause inserted to protect himself against any subsequent shift of position on the part of the British:

That should Great Britain at any time permit the Slave Trade to be carried on again, the Chiefs of the Bonny shall be at liberty to carry on the Slave Trade also.

But between the desire for the fees, the activities of the British preventive squadron, and the growing profitability of

the trade in palm oil, the overseas slave trade gradually disappeared in the middle of the nineteenth century.

The slaves sold at the ports of the eastern Niger Delta came predominantly from the Igbo country. Nembe (Brass) also received slaves from beyond the Igbo country down the Niger, from the Igala, and other northern Nigerian peoples. In the western delta, some western Igbo passed through Itsekiri middlemen, as well as Urhobo, Isoko and other groups from the regions under Benin influence. Some riverine Yoruba also came through the lagoon trade into the western delta. Thus Osifekunde, an Ijebu, had been captured by Ijo pirates (Lloyd 1967). Slaves sold at Bonny were acquired mainly through the system of trade and the oracle based at Arochuku (Dike 1956: 40). Since the Obi Nkita quarter dominant at Arochuku had established special relations with the rulers at Bonny, that city-state also became dominant in the slave trade in the delta. The Aro controlled most trade routes to the coast in the Igbo hinterland. In addition to the Aro oracle, the blacksmithing community of Awka also operated the Agbala oracle which enabled them to operate freely over wide areas. The Aro used mercenary allies to raid communities which defied the decisions of their oracle, and so collected slaves in this manner also. Other slaves sold at the delta ports had been disposed of by their parents, uncles or other relations. Others had been kidnapped, taken as war prisoners, or convicted of offences within their communities. The traders of the delta, then, did not themselves raid for the slaves they sold to the ships but procured them from communities adjoining the delta or through the Aro and other trading communities of the hinterland. Some of the slaves came from a long way inland, usually passing through many intermediaries.

The European traders soon came to terms on procedures for the conduct of the trade with the delta communities. The visitors paid dues to the local rulers for permission to commence trade, and slaves were paid for in a copper currency or in copper or brass bars. The ships also received yams, "bananas" and livestock to feed the slaves on the Atlantic crossing. It may be noted that some of these trade practices and procedures were dictated by trade patterns already established in the Niger Delta (Alagoa 1970). It was, of course, not by chance that the Portuguese and Dutch traders called at the ports on the Rio Real. Elem Kalabari and Bonny, and apparently also Nembe (Brass), and Okrika, were already centers of local trade into the hinterland and within the delta, and they were political centers of authority in their respective parts of the Niger Delta. All the early visitors noted the large size of the canoes operated by the delta communities, reported to be the largest on the Guinea coast. The use of copper in exchange, too, was not fortuitous. Pereira (c. 1508) reported that the delta traders paid salt for the produce of

the hinterland, and noted that they wore "copper necklaces," and preferred to receive from the Portuguese copper bars and bracelets or manillas. John Barbot (1732) reported that the people of Elem Kalabari reworked the imported copper "with much art, splitting the bar into three parts, from one end to the other, which they polish as fine as gold, and twist the three pieces together very ingeniously, like cords, to make what sorts of arm-rings they please."

Dike (1956: 23-25) speculated that the delta city-states came into being as a result of the slave trade. According to his reconstruction, the early Ijo settlers in the delta moved in small scale migrations from Benin. They created little fishing villages subsisting on salt-boiling as an additional activity. Once the slave trade across the Atlantic began, the hinterland communities were attracted to the coast, the Igbo, in particular, coming down in voluntary migrations to take up places in the delta suitable as ports for the trade. This immigrant population converted the fishing villages into city-states in the period 1450-1800. Additional increments to the populations of these states were made through the purchases of slaves, especially during the nineteenth century.

Horton (1969) also suggests the overseas slave trade as the major stimulus in the transformation of the fishing villages into city-states. He does not, however, suggest that the slave trade induced voluntary migrants from the hinterland, or that such migrants, voluntary or forced, were the creative agents. Rather, he suggests that the opportunities and challenges created by the overseas trade induced the inhabitants of the delta cities to make structural changes which account for the social, political and economic institutions of the city-states.

It has already been shown elsewhere (Alagoa 1966-1967) that there are no traditions for massive migrations into the Niger Delta from the hinterland in the period 1450-1800. The oral traditions concerning the period of the slave trade suggest that it was the old established communities which received the visitors and made accommodations in their activities and systems to take advantage of the new opportunities. Increments to the population during the period resulted from slaves that were retained in the community. Accordingly, the Horton thesis is more relevant to the situation with the proviso that many of the institutional changes induced by the overseas trade had already begun as a result of the internal long distance trade into the hinterland and within the Niger Delta (Alagoa 1971a). What the slave trade appears to have done was to accelerate processes already in operation.

Dike (1956: 153-165) suggests a second consequence of the slave trade. According to this hypothesis, between 1850-1875 the slaves in each of the delta states and in Calabar revolted. Revolts are stated to have occurred twice in Bonny in 1855 and

in 1869. It has again been shown that the problems that arose in the delta states in the nineteenth century were not slave revolts but rather struggles for political power among the ruling elites (Alagoa 1971b). The process for the acculturation of slaves into the delta communities was such that no revolt of slaves was theoretically possible. They were ritually incorporated as children of their masters' wives and became full members of the lineages or "war-canoe houses" (wari) of their masters. They were also able to achieve political authority and become heads of these "houses." The political struggles to which Dike refers all related to struggles for power between groups of "houses" within the various states for control of kingship (amanyanabo). Each group contained within it house heads who were of slave origin. The most celebrated case was that of 1869 in Bonny in which Jaja took away his own faction to found the new state of Opobo at the estuary of the Imo River. In this case Jaja as a former slave was head of a royal house, but in other cases in Nembe, Okrika, and Elem Kalabari, factions were led by non-slave leaders.

It was only in the Efik state of Calabar that what appeared to be a genuine slave movement occurred in the middle of the nineteenth century. Here, slaves were segregated physically and placed in slave plantations. Only the few slaves serving in the city in the households of the leaders had a chance to become integrated, and then only to a limited extent. To keep the slaves and the poor in their place, membership in the Ekpe secret society, which was the major executive authority in Calabar, was closed to these classes. Finally, slaves served as victims in funeral sacrifices and suffered other disabilities. In these circumstances, the slaves in the plantations rose against the ruling classes in the city to force them to improve the social and economic condition of the slaves.

It may be noted that there were other consequences of the slave trade in the internal history of the Niger Delta city-states. Some of these consequences resulted from the problems of absorbing new members of the community through the slave trade, while others were the result of new wealth and new power bases created by the slave trade.

### The Slave Trade in Niger Delta Oral Tradition

No attempt has yet been made to collect oral traditions in any part of the Niger Delta specifically on the subject of the overseas slave trade. The following brief discussion relates to statements concerning the slave trade that have been recorded in the course of collecting historical traditions. These traditions provide relatively little information on the trade, which may reflect the role assigned to the slave trade in the

historical consciousness of the people, or it may merely represent the neglect of the slave trade theme in research.

Bonny traditions concerning the beginning of the slave trade show that the siting of the city was not related to the trade and in fact that the town preceded the onset of the trade (Alagoa and Fombo 1972: 3ff). The founders migrated from the central delta eastward, but through the hinterland, re-entering the delta by way of the Imo River valley. The attraction of the Bonny area was the abundance of game and birds (okolo, curlews). The hunter who led the migrants took them first to a site out of reach of the Bonny River estuary at Orupiri. After a generation a move was made to a site within reach of the estuary, but still along a side creek of the Bonny River. According to the traditions, even this move occurred prior to the arrival of the Portuguese on the Rio Real. The Portuguese visitors did call on Asimini, the ruling king, but found it more convenient to do business at the neighboring city-state of Elem Kalabari because the Bonny River was then narrow and shallow. To ensure regular visits by the foreign ships, Asimini sacrificed "his daughter Ogbolo to the sea gods in order to deepen the estuary. . . . After the sacrifice, the river gradually widened, and ships began to visit Bonny regularly for trade" (Alagoa and Fombo 1972: 7). An annual sacrifice to the gods of the sea became customary.

The Kalabari have a different tradition to explain the advantage that Bonny gained as the port nearer to the estuary in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Alagoa 1972: 141). According to this tradition, after Oruyingi, Mother of the gods, had given birth to all the gods, she asked them what they desired for the peoples over whose destiny they would preside. Owoamekaso, goddess of the Kalabari, asked for a book that would attract the European ships to Elem Kalabari. After they left the presence of Oruyingi Ikuba, god of the Bonny people, became jealous and tried to seize the book and take it away from Owoamekaso. Ikuba went away with a larger fragment of the book, and so attracted the larger ships to Bonny, only the smaller ships passing through to Elem Kalabari.

The siting of settlements provides some evidence of the manner in which slaves were obtained within the delta. Although the delta city-states did not, as a rule, raid for slaves in the hinterland, but obtained the bulk of the slaves for export through purchase, there is evidence of some raiding within the delta itself on weaker communities. This is revealed in the traditions of these small communities and reflected in the siting of their settlements, away from the major river-courses. This situation is most clearly evident in the siting of the villages on the beach island between the Brass and Nun Rivers. The towns of Egwema and Beletiemna now stand on the main river connecting the Brass and Nun. But these sites were only very recently occupied. Their inhabitants still keep

shrines on their original settlements that are sited in the center of the island between the Atlantic and the Akassa Creek. The original settlements are named ama-ogbo, central town or town center. The reason for locating the towns away from the river was clearly to escape the attention of pirates and slave raiders.

The village of Elem Bakana in the Kalabari area is still located in its old site away from the river. When I visited the village in 1964, the men sang songs in which they suggested that it was necessary to ensure that even the smoke from their fires could not be seen by canoes passing on the river (Alagoa 1972: 140). Elem Bakana, as well as the neighboring villages of Bukuma, Obonoma, and Udekama, may have been raided by Kalabari slave dealers. These communities were of a different culture and spoke a language different from the Kalabari. But it would appear that raiding took place even among Kalabari-speaking communities. Thus, the traditions concerning Agbaniye Ejike, King of Bile, who ruled in the eighteenth century, state that he raided and sacked all the neighboring Kalabari communities. In a praise song to King Amakiri of Elem Kalabari, the savagery of Agbaniye Ejike is contrasted with the constructive leadership of Amakiri, who extended his authority by serving as protector of the threatened communities (Alagoa 1972: 139).

In the western delta, the Ijo communities were placed in a peripheral position in relation to Itsekiri and Benin. In response they preyed on the trade of these two kingdoms, sometimes supplying slaves to Itsekiri. Ijo piracy is reported in most of the accounts of European visitors to the western delta, and Ijo traditions confirm these piratical activities as well as the supremacy of Itsekiri in the overseas trade (Alagoa 1972: 25-83). The Kabo, for example, were notorious for their piracy on the Forcados River. The Erohwa, an Isoko group, were driven inland from their old site on the Forcados close to the site of Patani, one of the best known raiding communities (Hubbard 1948: 96-97).

There are few, if any, published accounts of European raids for slaves in the Niger Delta, or indeed, on most of the Nigerian coast. The Portuguese were more directly concerned with the business of collecting slaves in the Congo, Angola, and the Senegambia. A tradition among the Kabo suggests that the idea of European raids for slaves was not a far-fetched one, however. The Kabo account of how they lost control of the slave trade on the Forcados River to the Mein group relates to fear of European raids. During a period of low water, a rumor spread that the Europeans would come up the river in the following flood season and capture any persons they saw (Hubbard 1948: 186; Alagoa 1972: 74-75). The Kabo proceeded to dam the river and to divert it from their settlements. By the following flood season, the river had been effectively rechanneled through the territory of the neighboring Mein. The

expected raids did not come, and the Kabo became dissatisfied with their new location in what had become the Kabo Creek, and began a series of new settlements on the new Forcados channel in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Despite the record of violence in the Niger Delta, the more centralized and powerful states and rulers tended to work for good order, but to their own advantage. The states tried to keep the level of slave raids to a minimum. Many accounts of wars undertaken by the states relate to punishments against unruly communities along the trade routes. This violence along the trade routes and the competition between the various states and within states between lineages (wari, houses) became one reason for retaining more and more of slaves to increase the force of war-canoes.

Finally, there are a few instances of traditional evidence concerning particular aspects of the slave trade within the communities. The names of two important "houses" among the Kalabari are considered to be related to the practice of building slave stores or barracoons (barrikos) in a section of the delta ports for the security of slaves. The lineages of Biriomoni (Omoni), meaning, literally, slave quarter, and Barboy, apparently derived from barracoon boy, demonstrate the connection between the trade and these "houses" (Jones 1963: 137-8). These groups were probably created in the eighteenth century at a time when Elem Kalabari was already crowded and the founder of the Omoni house could find no room for expansion, except into the area of the slave barracoons. The Barboy leader, Odum, on the other hand, had been assigned duties among the barracoons in his youth.

In Nembe, two cases of conflict between the metropolis and the community of Okpoama in the nineteenth century resulted from circumstances created by the slave trade (Alagoa and Williamson 1983: 71-79). Isele, regent of Okpoama, raided the Ogbia village of Okpokiri because he had been harrassed by some villagers on his return from the Aboh market in 1870. The raid got him into trouble with the rulers of Nembe because Okpokiri had placed itself under the protection of Bokolo, priest of the national god. Okpoama had to make reparations to Nembe. In the second case, it was members of the Igbeta house of Nembe living in Okpoama who were the occasion for a disagreement. The Igbeta house charged that a number of persons had fled to Okpoama in order to escape the opprobrium of their slave origin and the obligations of their status. They came by night to capture their members but were themselves seized and beaten up by the people of Okpoama. The matter had to be settled after the intervention of the amanyanabo of Nembe.

The Okpokiri incident is similar to the case of the Kalabari communities which sought the protection of King Amakiri in order to escape the predations of Agbaniye Ejike of Bile. The conditions created by the slave trade in the Niger



Delta apparently obliged smaller communities to seek the protection of the more powerful ones. The Okpoama attack on Okpokiri and the action taken by Nembe show the seriousness with which such covenants of submission and protection were taken. The Okpoama case suggests that the incorporation of slaves into houses was a continuous problem. Treatment of individual slaves and former slaves varied, often with the type of leadership. Individuals could change allegiance by escaping to other communities. Sometimes the original purchase price could be demanded as compensation for such losses.

The drum praise title, kule, of Mingi, the early eighteenth century amanyanabo of Nembe, suggests that some of the leaders showed no mercy to slaves caught in an escape attempt. Mingi took the title, Omoni mangiya/pele. "When a slave runs, he is executed." It is clear that slaves could not win the full confidence of their host communities until they showed themselves integrated and reconciled to their new homes. At the same time, the host communities were reminded that the mere action of purchase did not mean that the slave-owner automatically became the master of the slave's mind and body. In the words of a Nembe proverb: Omoni febo/bio fegha: "He who buys a slave does not buy his mind." The business of gaining the loyalty of a slave required subtler means beyond the purchase price of the body.

### Niger Delta Slaves in the New World

The Niger Delta traditions of internal conflicts and local raids suggest that small numbers of people from the Niger Delta were sold across the Atlantic along with slaves from the hinterland. This conclusion is confirmed by evidence of peoples of Niger Delta origin in the New World.

A recent study of Berbice Dutch, the creole pidgin spoken along the tributaries of the Berbice river in Guiana, shows an unusually large vocabulary derived from the eastern Ijo dialects of Kalabari, Okrika, Ibani, and Nembe (Smith, Robertson and Williamson, forthcoming). Berbice Dutch was shown to be composed of 60.7-66.5 percent Dutch, 22.5-25 percent Ijo, and smaller contributions from English, Amerindian, Portuguese, and other languages, in spite of the fact that the majority of the present speakers of Berbice Dutch are of Amerindian (Arawak) origin or of mixed race. The explanation would seem to be that the pidgin came into being at a time when a slave population of predominantly eastern Niger Delta origin interacted with Dutch slave owners and plantation supervisors.

Other New World references to "Calaba" and "Calabaris" in Suriname (Price 1976: 15) cannot be exclusively related to Ijo peoples of the Niger Delta. They could also refer to Igbo and

other slaves shipped from the port of Elem Kalabari. Thus the Awka maroon or bush negro community of Suriname probably took its name from the Igbo community of the same name. Similar conjectures may be made concerning the connection between the Aluku or Boni community of maroons in Guiana (from Tata Boni, the leader) because of the similarity of the name to Bonny, or concerning the relationship of Brosi of Suriname to Brass or Nembe in the Niger Delta (Herskovits and Herskovits 1969: 88). Such correlations must remain conjectures, especially since the number of Ijo slaves exported from the Niger Delta ports must have been a very small proportion of the total number of slaves exported. Nonetheless, Norval Smith notes in a personal communication that "there appears to be at least one or two Eastern Ijo lexical items in Sranan, the main creole language of Surinam. The most striking of these which is shared in fact by all the Surinam creole languages is/fufuru/'thief'."

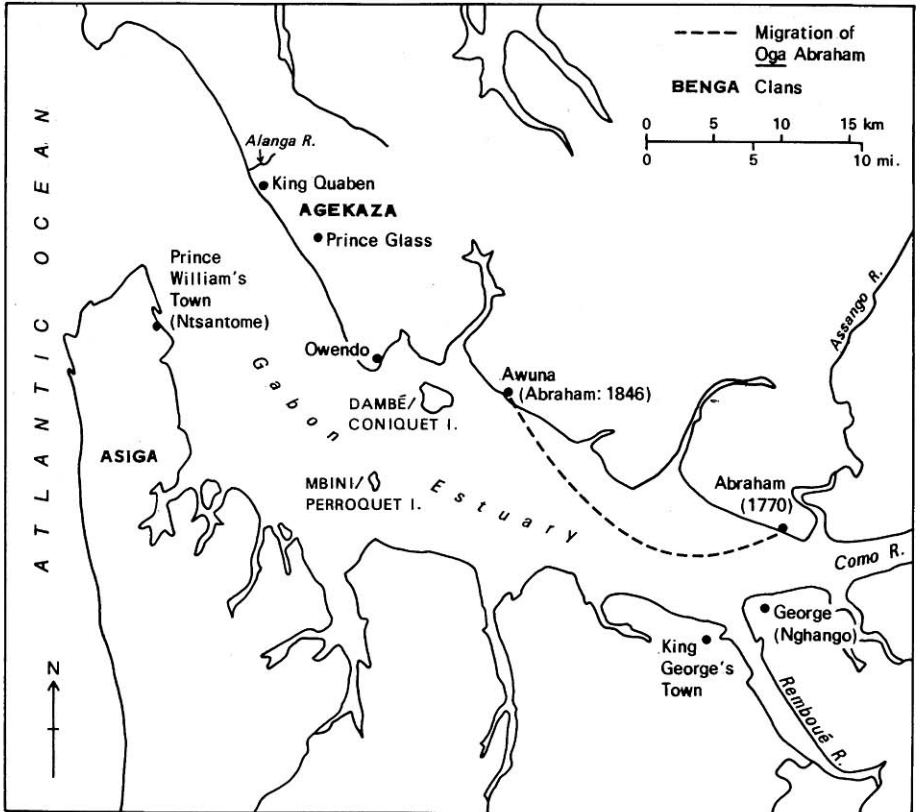
According to a Nembe proverb, when fish is unfairly shared, the man who eats the bones does not forget the experience, although the man who eats the flesh does. The victim remembers, the victor forgets. In the case of the slave trade, the circumstances in the Niger Delta are such that forgetting has been predominant. In the first place, most of the victims were shipped across the Atlantic. In the second, those left in the Delta were incorporated into the communities under circumstances that did not encourage remembrance of a slave past or identity. Among communities that suffered slave raids, also, there has been no eagerness to remember. In the Niger Delta, the slave trade has not featured as a large element of its oral tradition, although, as this chapter has demonstrated, there are some interesting morcels.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alagoa, E. J. 1964. The Small Brave City-State: A History of Nembe-Brass in the Niger Delta. Madison and Ibadan.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1966-67. "Ijo origins and migrations," Nigeria Magazine, 91: 278-88; 92: 47-55.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1970. "Long Distance Trade and States in the Niger Delta," Journal of African History, 11, 3: 319-329.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1971a. "The Development of Institutions in the States of the Eastern Niger Delta," Journal of African History, 12, 2: 269-278.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1971b. "Nineteenth Century Revolutions in the Eastern Delta States and Calabar," Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria, 5, 4: 565-573.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1972. A History of the Niger Delta: An Historical Interpretation of Ijo Oral Tradition. Ibadan.
- Alagoa, E. J. and Fombo, A. 1972. A Chronicle of Grand Bonny. Ibadan.

- Alagoa, E. J. and Williamson, Kay 1983. Ancestral Voices: Oral Historical Texts from Nembe, Niger Delta. Vol. 4, Jos History and Literature Texts Series, Department of History, University of Jos, Jos.
- Barbot, John 1732. A Description of North and South Guinea. Paris.
- Curtin, Philip D., ed. 1967. Africa Remembered: Narratives by West Africans from the Era of the Slave Trade. Madison and Ibadan.
- Dike, K. O. 1956. Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta 1830-1885: An Introduction to the Economic and Political History of Nigeria. Oxford.
- Herskovits, M. J. and F. S. 1969 [1933]. Suriname Folklore. New York.
- Herskovits, M. J. and Herskovits, F. S. 1934. Rebel Destiny: Among the Bush Negroes of Dutch Guiana. New York and London.
- Horton, Robin 1969. "From Fishing Village to City-state: A Social History of New Calabar," in M. Douglas and P. M. Kaberry, eds., Man in Africa, 37-58. London.
- Hubbard, J. W. 1948. The Sobo of the Niger Delta. Zaria.
- Jones, G. I. 1963. The Trading States of the Oil Rivers: A Study of Political Development in Eastern Nigeria. London.
- Lloyd, P. C. 1963. "The Itsekiri in the 19th Century: An Outline Social History," Journal of African History 4, 2: 207-231.
- Lloyd, P. C. 1967. "Osifekunde of Ijebu," in Philip D. Curtin, ed., Africa Remembered: Narratives by West Africans in the Era of the Slave Trade, 217-288. Madison.
- Pereira, Duarte Pachecho 1937 [c. 1508]. Esmeraldo de situ orbis. tr. G.H.T. Kimble, London.
- Price, R. 1976. The Guiana Maroons: A Historical and Bibliographical Introduction. Baltimore and London.
- Ryder, A.F.C. 1959. "An Early Portuguese Trading Voyage to the Forcados River," Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria, 1, 4: 294-321.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1965. "Dutch Trade on the Nigerian Coast during the 17th Century," Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria, 3, 2: 195-210.
- Smith, Norval, S. H., Robertson, Ian E. and Williamson, Kay forthcoming. "The Ijo Element in Berbice Dutch," Language and Society.
- Williamson, Kay 1966. "Ijo Dialects in the Polyglotta Africana," Sierra Leone Language Review, 5: 122-133.

Map 7.1 THE GABON ESTUARY, c. 1830



Cartographic Office, York University