

PERSONAL HISTORY

MY GREAT-GRANDFATHER, THE NIGERIAN SLAVE-TRADER

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Illustration by Angelica Alzona

My parents' home, in Umujieze, Nigeria, stands on a hilly plot that has been in our family for more than a hundred years. Traditionally, the Igbo people bury their dead among the living, and the ideal resting place for a man and his wives is on the premises of their home. My grandfather Erasmus, the first black manager of a Bata shoe factory in Aba, is buried under what is now the visitors' living room. My grandmother Helen, who helped establish a local church, is buried near the study. My umbilical cord is buried on the grounds, as are those of my four siblings. My eldest brother, Nnamdi, was born while my parents were studying in England, in the early nineteen-seventies; my father, Chukwuma, preserved the dried umbilical cord and, eighteen months later, brought it home to bury it by the front gate. Down the hill, near the river, in an area now overrun by bush, is the grave of my most celebrated ancestor: my great-grandfather

Nwaubani Ogogo Oriaku. Nwaubani Ogogo was a slave trader who gained power and wealth by selling other Africans across the Atlantic. “He was a renowned trader,” my father told me proudly. “He dealt in palm produce and human beings.”

Long before Europeans arrived, Igbos enslaved other Igbos as punishment for crimes, for the payment of debts, and as prisoners of war. The practice differed from slavery in the Americas: slaves were permitted to move freely in their communities and to own property, but they were also sometimes sacrificed in religious ceremonies or buried alive with their masters to serve them in the next life. When the transatlantic trade began, in the fifteenth century, the demand for slaves spiked. Igbo traders began kidnapping people from distant villages. Sometimes a family would sell off a disgraced relative, a practice that Ijoma Okoro, a professor of Igbo history at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, likens to the shipping of British convicts to the penal colonies in Australia: “People would say, ‘Let them go. I don’t want to see them again.’ ” Between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, nearly one and a half million Igbo slaves were sent across the Middle Passage.

My great-grandfather was given the nickname Nwaubani, which means “from the Bonny port region,” because he had the bright skin and healthy appearance associated at the time with people who lived near the coast and had access to rich foreign foods. (This became our family name.) In the late nineteenth century, he carried a slave-trading license from the Royal Niger Company, an English corporation that ruled southern Nigeria. His agents captured slaves across the region and passed them to middlemen, who brought them to the ports of Bonny and Calabar and sold them to white merchants. Slavery had already been abolished in the United States and the United Kingdom, but his slaves were legally shipped to Cuba and Brazil. To win his favor, local leaders gave him their daughters in marriage. (By his death, he had dozens of wives.) His influence drew the attention of colonial officials, who appointed him chief of Umujieze and several other towns. He presided over court cases and set up churches and schools. He built a guesthouse on the land where my parents’ home now stands, and hosted British dignitaries. To inform him of their impending arrival and verify their identities, guests sent him envelopes containing locks of their Caucasian hair.

Funeral rites for a distinguished Igbo man traditionally include the slaying of livestock—usually as many cows as his family can afford. Nwaubani Ogogo was so esteemed that, when he died, a leopard was killed, and six slaves were buried alive with him. My family inherited his canvas

shoes, which he wore at a time when few Nigerians owned footwear, and the chains of his slaves, which were so heavy that, as a child, my father could hardly lift them. Throughout my upbringing, my relatives gleefully recounted Nwaubani Ogogo's exploits. When I was about eight, my father took me to see the row of *ugba* trees where Nwaubani Ogogo kept his slaves chained up. In the nineteen-sixties, a family friend who taught history at a university in the U.K. saw Nwaubani Ogogo's name mentioned in a textbook about the slave trade. Even my cousins who lived abroad learned that we had made it into the history books.

Last year, I travelled from Abuja, where I live, to Umujieze for my parents' forty-sixth wedding anniversary. My father is the oldest man in his generation and the head of our extended family. One morning, a man arrived at our gate from a distant Anglican church that was celebrating its centenary. Its records showed that Nwaubani Ogogo had given an armed escort to the first missionaries in the region—a trio known as the Cookey brothers—to insure their safety. The man invited my father to receive an award for Nwaubani Ogogo's work spreading the gospel. After the man left, my father sat in his favorite armchair, among a group of his grandchildren, and told stories about Nwaubani Ogogo.

"Are you not ashamed of what he did?" I asked.

"I can never be ashamed of him," he said, irritated. "Why should I be? His business was legitimate at the time. He was respected by everyone around." My father is a lawyer and a human-rights activist who has spent much of his life challenging government abuses in southeast Nigeria. He sometimes had to flee our home to avoid being arrested. But his pride in his family was unwavering. "Not everyone could summon the courage to be a slave trader," he said. "You had to have some boldness in you."

My father succeeded in transmitting to me not just Nwaubani Ogogo's stories but also pride in his life. During my school days, if a friend asked the meaning of my surname, I gave her a narrative instead of a translation. But, in the past decade, I've felt a growing sense of unease. African intellectuals tend to blame the West for the slave trade, but I knew that white traders couldn't have loaded their ships without help from Africans like my great-grandfather. I read arguments for paying reparations to the descendants of American slaves and wondered whether someone might soon expect my family to contribute. Other members of my generation felt similarly unsettled. My cousin Chidi, who grew up in England, was twelve years old when he visited Nigeria and asked our uncle the meaning of our surname. He was shocked to learn our

family's history, and has been reluctant to share it with his British friends. My cousin Chioma, a doctor in Lagos, told me that she feels anguished when she watches movies about slavery. "I cry and cry and ask God to forgive our ancestors," she said.

The British tried to end slavery among the Igbo in the early nineteen-hundreds, though the practice persisted into the nineteen-forties. In the early years of abolition, by British recommendation, masters adopted their freed slaves into their extended families. One of the slaves who joined my family was Nwaokonkwo, a convicted murderer from another village who chose slavery as an alternative to capital punishment and eventually became Nwaubani Ogogo's most trusted manservant. In the nineteen-forties, after my great-grandfather was long dead, Nwaokonkwo was accused of attempting to poison his heir, Igbokwe, in order to steal a plot of land. My family sentenced him to banishment from the village. When he heard the verdict, he ran down the hill, flung himself on Nwaubani Ogogo's grave, and wept, saying that my family had once given him refuge and was now casting him out. Eventually, my ancestors allowed him to remain, but instructed all their freed slaves to drop our surname and choose new names. "If they had been behaving better, they would have been accepted," my father said.

The descendants of freed slaves in southern Nigeria, called *obu*, still face significant stigma. Igbo culture forbids them from marrying freeborn people, and denies them traditional leadership titles such as *Eze* and *Ozo*. (The *osu*, an untouchable caste descended from slaves who served at shrines, face even more severe persecution.) My father considers the *obu* in our family a thorn in our side, constantly in opposition to our decisions. In the nineteen-eighties, during a land dispute with another family, two *obu* families testified against us in court. "They hate us," my father said. "No matter how much money they have, they still have a slave mentality." My friend Ugo, whose family had a similar disagreement with its *obu* members, told me, "The dissension is coming from all these people with borrowed blood."

I first became aware of the *obu* when I attended boarding school in Owerri. I was interested to discover that another new student's family came from Umujieze, though she told me that they hardly ever visited home. It seemed, from our conversations, that we might be related—not an unusual discovery in a large family, but exciting nonetheless. When my parents came to visit, I told them about the girl. My father quietly informed me that we were not blood relatives. She was *obu*, the granddaughter of Nwaokonkwo.

I'm not sure if this revelation meant much to me at the time. The girl and I remained friendly,

though we rarely spoke again about our family. But, in 2000, another friend, named Ugonna, was forbidden from marrying a man she had dated for years because her family found out that he was *osu*. Afterward, an *osu* friend named Nonye told me that growing up knowing that her ancestors were slaves was “sort of like having the bogeyman around.” Recently, I spoke to Nwannennaya, a thirty-nine-year-old *obu* member of my family. “The way you people behave is as if we are inferior,” she said. Her parents kept their *obu* ancestry secret from her until she was seventeen. Although our families were neighbors, she and I rarely interacted. “There was a day you saw me and asked me why I was bleaching my skin,” she said. “I was very happy because you spoke to me. I went to my mother and told her. You and I are sisters. That is how sisters are supposed to behave.”

Modernization is emboldening *obu* and freeborn to intermarry, despite the threat of ostracization. “I know communities where people of slave descent have become affluent and have started demanding the right to hold positions,” Professor Okoro told me. “It is creating conflict in many communities.” Last year, in a town in Enugu State, an *obu* man was appointed to a traditional leadership position, sparking mass protests. In a nearby village, an *obu* man became the top police officer, giving the local *obu* enough influence to push for reform. Eventually, they were apportioned a separate section of the community, where they can live according to whatever laws they please, away from the freeborn. “It will probably be a long time before all traces of slavery disappear from the minds of the people,” G. T. Basden, a British missionary, wrote of the Igbo in 1921. “Until the conscience of the people functions, the distinctions between slave and free-born will be maintained.”

Nwaubani Ogogo was believed to have acquired spiritual powers from the shrine of a deity named Njoku, which allowed him to wield influence over white colonists. Among his possessions, which are passed down to the head of the family, was the symbol of his alliance with Njoku: a pot containing a human head. “You had to cut the head straight into the pot while the person was still alive, without it touching the floor,” my father said. “It couldn’t just be anybody’s head. It had to be someone you knew.” In Nwaubani Ogogo’s case, this someone was most likely a slave. When Gilbert, my great-uncle and a previous head of our family, died in 1989, his second wife, Nnenna, a devout Christian, destroyed the pot. Shortly afterward, her children began to die mysterious deaths, one after another. Nnenna contracted a strange ailment and died in 2009. Some relatives began to fear that dark forces had been unleashed.

Last July, my father's cousin Sunny, a professor of engineering, visited my parents to discuss another concern: a growing enmity in our family. Minor arguments had led relatives to stop speaking to one another. Several had become estranged from the family. "We always have one major disagreement or division or the other," my father's cousin Samuel told me. My cousin Ezeugo was not surprised by the worrying trend. "Across Igbo land, wherever there was slave trade with the white people, things never go well," he said. "They always have problems there. Everybody has noticed it." My relatives thought that our family's history was coming back to haunt us.

Prior to colonization, the Igbo believed that spiritual forces controlled events. If enough misfortune piled up, a family might come to believe that it was the victim of an intergenerational curse resulting from the actions of an ancestor. Family members would seek out a juju priest, who would consult a deity, diagnose the root of the curse, and then expel it through a religious ritual. When foreign missionaries arrived, they persuaded the Igbos to embrace Christianity—openly, at least. But belief in ancestral curses has remained, cloaked in Bible passages that refer to God "visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation." Many churches now offer services similar to the old rituals, in which a pastor replaces the juju priest and Jesus replaces the pagan god. This way, evil forces can be exposed without Christians engaging in idolatry. Deliverance usually requires a family to pray, fast, and renounce atrocities.

In 2009, the late priest Stephen Njoku wrote a book called "Challenge and Deal with Your Evil Foundations," in which he argued that some people should change their names to rid themselves of curses. "It's like building a house," he told me. "If you don't get the foundations right, if you used substandard materials or if the stones were not laid properly, the building will inevitably develop cracks and collapse." A number of Igbo communities with names that extol gory histories have taken new ones. In 1992, people in my home town became concerned about several unexplained deaths of young people. After a period of communal prayer, people gathered in the village hall and voted to discard the community's historic name, Umuojameze, which means "children of Ojam, the king." Ojam was a deity whom the townspeople had worshipped before Christianization, and to whom they had made regular human sacrifices. They chose the new name, Umujieze, which means "children who hold the kingship," to reflect our severance from the atrocities of the past.

My relatives disagreed about the cause of our family's curse. Most believed that it was because of Nwaubani Ogogo's slave trading. Some suspected that it was his broken alliance with Njoku. My father thought that it might have resulted from his human sacrifices. Sunny was not sure the family was cursed at all. "If our problems are because of the sins of our fathers, why are the white people making progress despite the sins of their fathers?" he said. Nevertheless, they agreed to hold a deliverance ceremony, and settled on a plan. On three days near the end of January, from 6 A.M. until noon, family members around the world would fast and pray. My father sent out a text message in preparation that included passages from the Bible. He has never been overtly religious, and it amused me to watch him organize a global prayer session. I teased him about the fact that he would have to skip breakfast, which was usually waiting for him at the same time each morning. "I'm a saint," he declared.

On the first day of the fast, members of my family met in small groups in London, Atlanta, and Johannesburg. Some talked on the phone, and others chatted on social media. Thirty members gathered under a canopy in my parents' yard. With tears in his eyes, my father explained that, in Nwaubani Ogogo's day, selling and sacrificing human beings was common practice, but that now we know it to be deeply offensive to God. He thanked God for the honor and prestige bestowed on our family through my great-grandfather, and asked God's forgiveness for the atrocities he committed. We prayed over a passage that my father texted us from the Book of Psalms:

Who can understand his errors?
Cleanse me from secret faults.
Keep back Your servant also from presumptuous sins;
Let them not have dominion over me.
Then I shall be blameless,
And I shall be innocent of great transgression.

During the ceremony, I was overwhelmed with relief. My family was finally taking a step beyond whispering and worrying. Of course, nothing can undo the harm that Nwaubani Ogogo caused. And the *ohu*, who are not his direct descendants, were not invited to the ceremony; their mistreatment in the region continues. Still, it felt important for my family to publicly denounce its role in the slave trade. "Our family is taking responsibility," my cousin Chidi, who joined from London, told me. Chioma, who took part in Atlanta, said, "We were trying to make peace and atone for what our ancestors did."

On the final day, my relatives strolled along a recently tarred stretch of road to our local Anglican

church. The church was established in 1904, on land that Nwaubani Ogogo donated. Inside, a priest presided over a two-hour prayer session. At the end, he pronounced blessings on us, and proclaimed a new beginning for the Nwaubani family. After the ceremony, my family members discussed making it a yearly ritual. “This sort of thing opens up the mercy of God,” my mother, Patricia, said. “People did all these evil things but they don’t talk about it. The more people confess and renounce their evil past, the more cleansing will come to the land.”

Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani’s second novel, “[Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree](#),” was published this year.

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