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Olaudah Equiano

Facts about his People and Place of Birth

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Abstract: Olaudah Equiano, an African-American born in 1745 in Essaka, a town in modern eastern Nigeria, is reputed as the first African-born former slave to write his autobiography without the help or direction of white writers of his time like his predecessors. His work is recognized “not only as one of the first works written in English by a former slave, but perhaps more important as the paradigm of the slave narrative, a new literary genre” (Olaudah). Equiano’s *Narratives* lately became the focus of some controversies by his critics who question the authenticity of his claims, which they see as fiction rather than facts. The reason for the controversies stems from the fact that his baptismal records of February 9th, 1759, in Westminster, England, lists him as “Gustavus Vassa, a Black born in Carolina, 12 years ago.” Another reason is that his critics think that his account of Ibo life is entirely based on his reading of Ibo life, traditions, and culture rather than from his actual memory of his early childhood in an actual Ibo land. Their argument is that he was too young to be able to remember what his early life in an actual Ibo land was like back then. However, a well-researched study of his narratives by individuals who are conversant with the location, culture, and traditions on the Ibos shows that Olaudah Equiano’s claims were actually from his memory of his early childhood in an actual Ibo land. If according to some Harvard University researchers, children at age 2 have memories strong enough to repeat tasks shown them some months earlier, and 3, 4, and 5 year olds are able to recall or remember things they had seen, heard, or been thought, one wonders why Equiano’s narratives would seem such a big deal.

INTRODUCTION

In every generation, we find people of extraordinary skills, wisdom, vision, dedication, and discipline. Their story often forms a beacon of light or stepping-stone to success for the succeeding generation. This is the case about the story and autobiography of Olaudah Equiano. His story is one

that will certainly inspire every ambitious and enthusiastic youth who hopes to rise to prominence, either in education or in any other life career. His story, I believe, would also inspire those who desire to be pioneers and pacesetters in their area of calling. After reading his autobiography, I feel challenged to pursue my education with fresh vigor and vitality in order to become an in-

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spiration to those who would read my biography in future.

Equiano's narratives have lately become the focus of some controversies by his critics who are neither Igbos nor inhabitants of Essaka. These people question, out of ignorance, the authenticity of Equiano's autobiography including the story about his people and place of birth. In this essay, my aim is to explore Equiano's world, with the intent of unraveling the truth about his claims. To do this, a look at the regions, various cultures and traditions of the Igbo tribe in Nigeria (especially, in the 17th century) would be of immense help. These will help to either establish or discredit his claims and narratives.

WHO IS EQUIANO?

Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa) claims to have been born around 1745 in the village of Essaka (Issaka) in the interior of modern-day eastern Nigeria. He is an African American who claims to be an African slave kidnapped from his village, Essaka (an Igbo land—written 'Eboe' in Equiano's *Narratives*), at the age of eleven. According to his narrative, after being shipped through the "Middle Passage" of the Atlantic Ocean, he was sold to a Virginia planter. A British Naval officer, known as Captain Pascal, later bought Equiano as a present for his cousin in London. Equiano had assisted his slave merchant master and worked as a seaman throughout the North American continent. However, he later bought his freedom after ten years of enslavement. He was kidnapped from his village at a very tender age, so Equiano could only recall his childhood in Essaka, where he was dressed in the traditional attire of his people—the "greatest warriors."

His unique recollection of traditional African life before the advent of the European slave trade is praiseworthy considering the technological and literary level of

his time. Equiano is reputed as the first African-born former slave to write the story of his life himself, without the help or direction of white writers or editors of his time, as his predecessors had. His narrative, which is actually written by himself, is widely viewed as a form of autobiography, which during the nineteenth century gained popularity worldwide because of its compelling firsthand testimony against slavery. According to an online foundation dedicated to Equiano, for "more than two centuries now, this work is recognized not only as one of the first works written in English by a former slave, but perhaps more important as the paradigm of the slave narrative, a new literary genre" (Olaudah).

Equiano's life on the high seas is noteworthy too. He not only traveled throughout the Americas, Turkey and the Mediterranean, but also participated in petitioned the Queen of England in 1788 who later appointed him to the expedition to settle Blacks from London in Sierra Leone, a British colony on the west coast of Africa. Although his dream was to become a Christian missionary to Africa, and to return to his beloved native country, Equiano did not achieve these goals.

OLAUDAH EQUIANO'S SLAVERY

The Portuguese explorers were the first Europeans to reach Benin, an empire with its headquarters in Nigeria. A strong bilateral trade developed between them with the Portuguese trading European goods and guns for tropical products and slaves from Benin. Also, in 1553, the first English expedition to Benin led to a significant trade between England and Benin based on the export of ivory, palmoil, and pepper. Visitors in the 16th and 17th centuries brought back to Europe tales of "the Great Benin," a fabulous city of noble buildings, ruled over by a powerful king" (Wikipedia). The Benin Empire extended from On-

itsha, an Igbo land in the east, through the forested southwestern region of Nigeria and into the present-day nation of Benin Republic. Benin (in Nigeria) became increasingly rich and powerful during the 16th and 17th centuries. Slaves from enemy states and interior villages were sold, and carried to the Americas. The Obas (Chiefs) of Benin Kingdom also established a royal monopoly over trade in pepper and ivory with Europeans. Benin later became an important exporter of cloth (Wikipedia).

During the 16th and 17th centuries, Benin prevented the depletion of its own population by prohibiting the export of male slaves. Rather, Benin did import and also export slaves (both male and female) either purchased by Europeans elsewhere in West Africa or kidnapped from other neighboring villages, and resold some of them to the region which is now Ghana (Giblin). It was perhaps at this time that Olaudah was kidnapped, at the age of eleven and sold into one of the African countries, where he was then resold to a British Naval officer, Captain Pascal, who took him to London. According to his narrative, he became a personal servant to a lieutenant in the English navy who, during the time of his conversion to Christianity and consequent baptism, renamed him Gustav Vassa (after a sixteenth century Swedish king). He later became a ship's steward during the campaigns in the Mediterranean and off the coast of France.

Equiano was expecting to be freed from slavery after six years of service to his master (as the two of them had agreed), but was instead sold to a West Indian trader who soon sold him to a Philadelphia Quaker and trader, Robert King (Gates Jr. and Nellie, 188).

HIS WORKS

According to a website dedicated to his story, Olaudah Equiano, "at the age of

forty-four, wrote and published his autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, The African Written by Himself*, which he registered at Stationer's Hall, London, in 1789."

Despite all his attractive accomplishments, however, Equiano's most important work is his autobiography, which became a best seller. He published nine different editions before his death in 1797, including an American edition (1791), and German and Dutch editions, 1790 and 1791 respectively. By 1837, nine more editions had been published. Three editions were bound together with the poems of another former slave child Phyllis Wheatly, whose *Poems on Various Subjects* (1773) was the first collection of poems published by an African American. Together, their works form the genesis of a Black written literary tradition (Olaudah).

The Interesting Narratives of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself (1789), was written at the request of his many friends. Olaudah believes that it was Providence that brought him to the Americas so that he could speak for the Blacks who are maltreated under slavery. In his work, he gives a compelling testimony against slavery and its atrocities. His work also contains the story of his seagoing, spiritual enlightenment, and economic success in England and the Americas. It was rated the most influential work of English prose by an African American, and also proved that Blacks could adequately represent and express themselves through writing.

In his narratives, Equiano tells of the simplicity of his people's manners, the justice of their moral values, and the harmony of their society. To Equiano, "Africa... is neither benighted nor socially backward; in his portrayal, the African world exists as a moral judgment against the 'polished and haughty European' whose callousness and ethnocentrism" he challenged (Gates and Nellie 188). It should be noted here that

Equiano's conversion to Christianity did not change his views about slavery. His belief was that Christianity and abolitionism, which are the pursuit of individual and social perfection, go hand in hand. Therefore, through his writings, he made clear his dedication to social change by voicing his moral outrage against slavery.

CONTROVERSIES ABOUT EQUIANO'S NARRATIVES

Until now, there is no scholarly consensus as to the authenticity of Olaudah's claims about his birth in Nigeria, West Africa, and his account of Igbo life. One of the reasons for this is because of the information contained in his baptismal certificate. The church's record of his baptism on February 9th, 1759 in Westminster, England, lists him as "Gustavus Vassa a Black born in Carolina 12 years ago." Another reason is that his critics think that the account of his Igbo life is entirely based on his reading about Igbo life, tradition, and culture rather than on his memory of his early boyhood in Igbo land. But, a well-researched study of his narratives by individuals who are conversant with the location, culture, and traditions of Essaka (his native land), will help to authenticate his claims.

In his narratives, Equiano said that his native land of Essaka is a considerable distance from the capital of the Benin Kingdom (in Benin Republic), which is part of an African region known as Guinea. But the Benin Empire, whose power extended into the Benin Kingdom, ruled over Essaka. According to Equiano, Guinea is located south of the equator, and comprises many kingdoms and empires. The name Guinea (originating from Berber) roughly translated into 'land of the blacks,' is geographically assigned to most of Africa's west coast, south of the Sahara desert and north of the Gulf of Guinea. Guinea is a traditional name for the region of Africa that lies along

the Gulf of Guinea. It stretches north through the forested, tropical regions and ends at the Sahel. Countries that made up Guinea in the 17th century include Benin Republic, Côte d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Togo, Southern Nigeria, and Western Cameroon. The Igbo, formerly referred to as the Ibo (but written as 'Eboe' in Equiano's narratives), are one of the largest single ethnicities in Africa. Most of the Igbo speakers are based in central southern Nigeria (part of Guinea Region in the 17th century), where they constitute about 17% of the population; they can also be found in significant numbers in Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea. Their language is also called Igbo. So, from the foregoing, it will be deduced that, during the 17th century, the village of Issaka (Equiano's native land) was a part of the powerful Benin Empire in Nigeria, which extended into the Benin Kingdom.

Nigeria, a West African country, was inhabited as far back as 40,000 years ago. According to archaeologists, the oldest human skeleton that was found in present day Nigeria dates back to 9,000 B.C. However, historians generally believe that the earliest organized societies in Nigeria were those of the Nok civilization, which flourished between 500 B.C. and A.D. 200. By as far back as the 15th century, much of what is now modern Nigeria was divided into "states" identified by different ethnic groups as they are today. These early states included the Yoruba kingdoms, the Igbo kingdom of Nri, the Edo kingdom of Benin, the Hausa cities, and Nupe. Additionally, numerous small states to the west and south of Lake Chad were absorbed or displaced in the course of the expansion of Kanem, which was centered to the northeast of Lake Chad. Other states probably existed but the absence of archaeological data does not permit accurate dating. In the southeast, the earliest Igbo state was Nri which emerged in 900 AD. Despite its relatively small size

geographically, it is considered the cradle of Igbo culture (Ismail).

During the 15th century under Oba Ewuare (Ewuare the Great), the Benin Kingdom was a strong military fortress. It surpassed most of the other kingdoms in military and economic power. Benin City was protected by moats and walls. These extraordinarily complex walls were about thirty feet high in some places and stretched perhaps about 10,000 miles in length. In addition, Ewuare vastly increased the territory under the control of Benin. He and his son, Ozolua, extended his reign over Benin from the Niger River in the east, which belonged to the Igbos, to the eastern portions of Yoruba states in the west. It was from here that he launched his military campaigns and began the expansion of the kingdom from the Edo-speaking heartlands (Prof. Giblin).

Perhaps because of the military and economic power of the Benin empire, the Onitsha Kingdom that was originally inhabited only by Igbos was occupied in the 16th century by migrants from Benin. Some of these migrants also settled in other Igbo lands which were between Onitsha and Benin City. For this reason, the Old Kingdom of Benin consisted of both the Edo and non-Edo speaking groups, which are not linguistically or genetically related to each other. Some of the non-Edo speaking groups include the Ika, Aniocha and the Ukwuani speakers that inhabited Essaka—one of those lands located between Onitsha town and Benin City. These language groups have some form of Igbo language embedded in their vernacular. One could say that the Ika, Aniocha and Ukwuani vernacular are some forms of “mixed” Igbo language.

FACTS ABOUT IGBO CUSTOMS AND MANNERS

According to an article written by Mar-

sha Walton and posted at CNN.com/Science & Space, a study by Harvard researchers showed that children at age 2, have memories strong enough to repeat tasks shown to them months earlier. The study, published in the British journal *Nature*, “gets closer to unraveling how memory develops by establishing that 2-year-olds have recall, something that their 1-year-old counterparts do not. But it doesn't explain why most adults can remember only as far back as age 3, 4 or 5” (Walton). According to Walton, scientists believe that factors that aid the development of long-term memory go beyond the physical structures of brain development. Some of these factors include language skills, socialization, environment and self-awareness (Walton). Also, after examining 778 people, ranging in age from six to 76, psychologist H. Lee Swanson of University of California, Riverside, found that working memory got better as children got older, reaching peak level at age 45, then steadily declining (Holladay).

If 3, 4, and 5 year olds are able to recall things that they had seen, heard or been thought earlier, I wonder why Equiano's critics doubt his memory of his boyhood and his native land at eleven years of age? Before the 1900s, even until now, children in very remote villages in Nigeria and in most countries of the world, are able to cook, farm, hunt, and run some difficult errands at a very tender age without supervision. They also participate in dances, masquerading, and other village rituals. Therefore, there should not be any doubt that Equiano could remember most of the culture, customs and tradition of his people at age 44, the time in which he supposedly wrote his *Narratives* (when his memory was at its peak).

According to Equiano, the customs and manners of his people are akin to those of the Jews. An article in Wikipedia, an online encyclopedia, supports this assertion. The encyclopedia has it that, “The Igbo (Ibo)

ethnic group are said to be descended from North African or Egyptian Hebraic and later Israelite migrations into West Africa. Oral legends amongst the Igbo state that this migration started around 1,500 years ago" (Wikipedia). Therefore, many of the practices by the Igbo show striking similarities with Jewish customs mentioned in the Pentateuch. Such customs include: circumcision on the 8th day after the birth of a male child, stern punishment for infidelity of wives, marriage of more than one wife, leadership by elders (Chiefs), simplicity in dressing, to mention just this few. Again, Equiano's list of their simple manner of life, and the kinds of food, beverage (like Palmwine) and meat consumed by his people, are all consistent with that of the Igbos.

Indeed, the Igbo manner of life is a very simple one and contains few luxuries. Like the Jews, Igbos believe in communal help, especially when setting up houses and during farming. And, up until recently, agriculture has been the main occupation of almost every Igbo, including women and children. The Igbo do not use any form of animal in farming. Instead, human strength and farming implements like hoes, cutlasses, etc., are used. The ability to cultivate a reasonable portion of farm land was a major factor in determining adulthood and an individual's importance in the family or community. So, a woman that could cultivate a large portion of land will be expected to marry sooner than one that could cultivate a smaller portion. Also, the mud (red earth) which was used by people of Equiano's time to construct buildings is still being used today in very remote Igbo villages. Lastly, as an Igbo, I am a witness to the occasional visit by locusts on Igbo farms. These usually cause a lot of economic and financial disaster any time they visit.

Finally, although some portions of Equiano's autobiography might have been based on his readings about the Igbo tribe, most part of his narratives are very consis-

tent with the customs, religion and tradition of Igbo people in the 17th century. The time in which Equiano lived could be called "an age of innocence." At that time, people lived with the fear of the law of retribution from the gods. They believed that one could be killed instantly if he lies. Also, as a good and faithful Christian convert, Equiano knew that speaking the truth is one of the hallmarks of the Christian faith. He knew he had nothing to gain by claiming to be an African at a time when Africans were seen as "good-for-nothing slaves" and were treated with levity. It was not in his best interest to speak out authoritatively of his African descent and heritage.

Therefore, I strongly believe that Equiano was born in Africa, and that most parts of his narratives were from his memory of his boyhood in an actual Igbo land.

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