

Preserving the Ikot Abasi Slave Trade Arena in Nigeria for Cultural Relations with the African Diaspora and Advancement in Atlantic Historiography

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Abstract

In recent times, knowledge of the Atlantic slave trade has become increasingly prominent in the realms of scholarship, but the documentation of slave relics in the Ikot Abasi area of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, has barely entered the annals of archaeological and historical consciousness. The site named by the researchers as the “Slave Trade Arena”, houses undocumented slave trade relics dating back to the 18th century. The Ikot Abasi slave site is home to an ancient slave storage facility used for the storage of enslaved persons and was a point of embarkation from the Bight of Biafra during the transatlantic slave trade. This site has prospects of significantly burgeoning the frontiers of Atlantic historiography for further research if given adequate attention. Due to neglect, it currently languishes in a state of accrued dilapidation requiring immediate rehabilitation to avoid further loss of material evidence. This novel study posits that the site demands prompt research, documentation, conservation and preservation of these relics for future reference. Interpreting primary and secondary sources, the study emphasizes the significance of the site’s contribution to Atlantic scholarship and the opportunities for cultural relations between the Ibibio of Akwa Ibom State in Nigeria and people of African descent within the diasporic space.

Keywords: Ikot Abasi Slave Trade Arena, African Diaspora, Archaeological Relics, Cultural Relations and Akwa Ibom State.

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Introduction

The relationship between Africa and the African diaspora has been riddled with complexities that have proven to be a conundrum for decades. The rise of Pan-Africanism in the early 1900s had attempted to unite people of African descent but the momentum died out. However, in recent times, the growth of Afrocentrism among people of African extraction in the diaspora and the soul-searching desire to investigate their African origin has inhaled new life with prospects for interactions and collaborations between Africa and the diaspora. The existence of slave trade sites in Africa may be perceived to be legacies of a sinister past but can be turned over as symbols of healing and reconciliation. The slave trade site, also named “Ikot Abasi Slave Trade Arena” by the researchers, is a slave fort in Ikot Abasi, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, where enslaved persons who were captured from the interior around the Cross River Basin were kept. There is also a ‘Bridge of no return’, a passage used by the enslaved persons to reach the waters where they would board the ships en-route to Europe and the Americas.

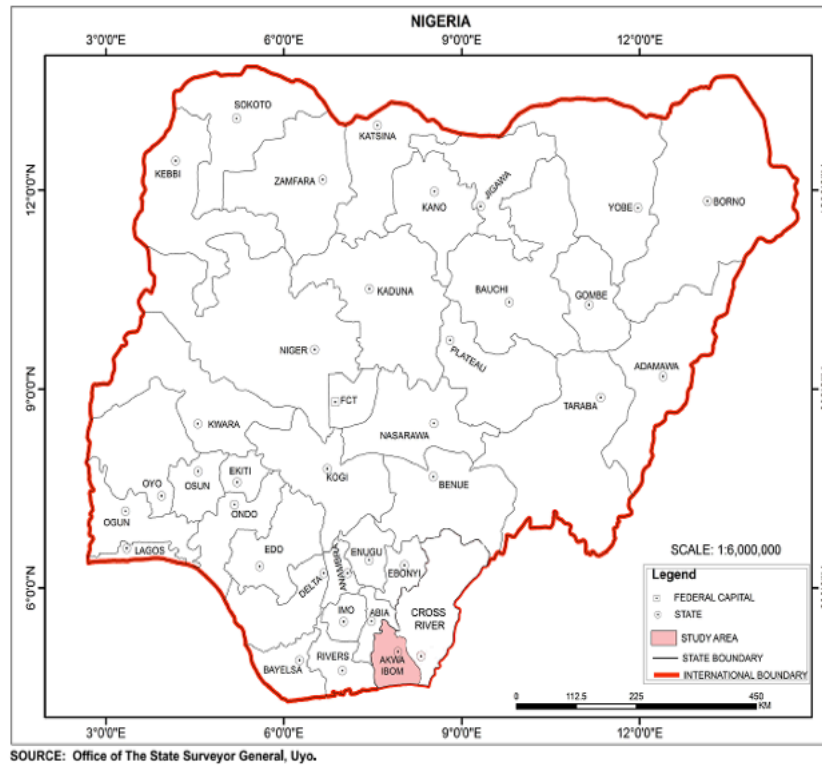
Historically, the Ikot Abasi area is a part of the Bight of Biafra which is currently called the Bight of Bonny, a region where far-reaching slave trading activities had occurred during the epoch of the transatlantic slave trade to the point where the fort and bridge were built in the 1700s. Despite its major contribution to Atlantic scholarship and the population of the African diaspora, the site has sparsely been investigated regardless of the fact that it retains a plethora of knowledge regarding slave trading activities along the Bight of Biafra which could immensely contribute to the academic domain of Atlantic Studies. Scholarly inquiry into the site also stands to enrich the archaeological and historiographical documentation of the entire area particularly as regards the trade in humans that existed for centuries.

This study investigates the relevance of the Ikot Abasi slave trade site to the consciousness of the broader community in the African diaspora. Furthermore, it advocates that urgent archaeological research be undertaken to preserve and address the current state and rapid deterioration of these relics. In addition, the study also explores the following potentials of the area as: a world historical site for Akwa Ibom State and Nigeria, a repository for transatlantic documents and an omphalos for the exchange of African culture within the diasporic milieu. It also examines similar historic slave sites in Ghana and Benin Republic and their relevant positions as linkages between the diasporic community and Africa.

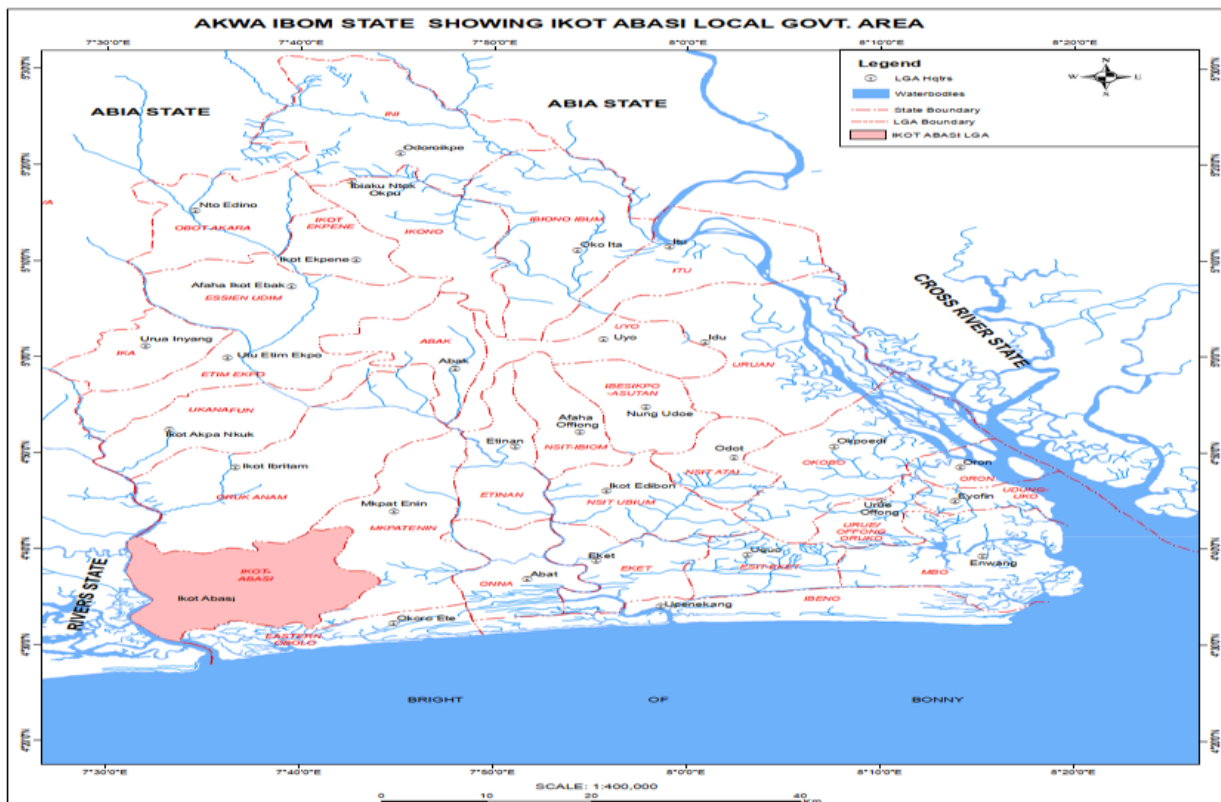
Geographical Background

Ikot Abasi Local Government Area is located in the Southwestern corner of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. It is bounded by Oruk Anam Local Government Area in the North, Mkpai Enin and Eastern Obolo Local Government Areas in the East. The Atlantic Ocean in the South and the Imo River form the natural boundary in the west separating it from River State (Abasiattai et al. 1997: 73) (see map 1). The village where these transatlantic slave trading activities occurred is called Ikot Abasi and is located on latitude 4°34'20" N, and longitude 7°32' 48" E within Ikot Abasi Local Government Area in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria (see map 2). The terrain of Ikot Abasi is flat and low lying with three physiographic units: the alluvial plains (comprising mangrove swamps and freshwater flood plains), the beach ridge sand that extends from the mangrove mudflats towards the shoreline and the rolling sandy plains which are located in the upland area where the topography is undulating in nature (Abasi- attai et al. 1997: 74).

The area is drained by the Imo River and its tributaries, principally the Essene creek and numerous streams and rivulets (Abasiattai et al. 1997: 74). The soil is acidic, well drained and strongly weathered. Although acidic in nature, it can be made fertile and productive if adequate soil management practices are adopted. The climate of the area is that of the humid tropic with a high temperature between 26° C and 28° C. The rainfall is heavy (between 2,000 - 4,000mm) occurring almost throughout the year (April - November). Ikot Abasi Local Government Area falls within the tropical forest zone, with three types namely: mangrove forest along the coast and River estuaries; freshwater swamp forest and rainforest. This vegetation type allows for the existence of different species of trees and fertile soil for cultivation during the farming season.



Map 1: Nigeria showing Akwa Ibom State. Source: Office of the Surveyor General, Uyo.



Map 2: Akwa Ibom State showing Ikot Abasi LGA. Source: Office of the Surveyor General, Uyo.

Origin and Migration of Ikot Abasi People

A consensus based on the Commission of Enquiry into the Chieftaincy disputes in the 1970s from several areas in Ibibio land stipulates that the people belong to the Benue Congo family language group who are Semi-Bantu. They travelled

through Cameroon, Central or South-Western Africa and crossed into the South-Eastern portion of Nigeria, though it is believed that they settled in the stretch of land called Aro-Chukwu. Ekong (2001: 4) asserts that Talbot (1926) estimates that at about 1300-1400 AD, the Igbo group invaded the Aro-Chukwu district and a number of them together with the Ekoi people drove away the original Ibibio inhabitants. He further buttressed that this account matched the history given by the Okoyong people in describing the war between them and Adadia people. He continues to explain that the Ibibio, as a result of this invasion, moved southwards and settled in the location beyond the Cross River where they remain to this day. Noah (1994: 26) also supports this view by stating that the Ibibio had lived in the area prior to 1300 AD. He explains that they are the native source from which other smaller groups in the Qua Iboe and Calabar originated from.

The people of Ikot Abasi are segments of the original Ikono group who broke off during the dispersal from their mainland near the Uyo/Abak area. Chief Obio Offiong (Abasiattai et al. 1997: 111) posits that some Assang people of the Nsit group trekked southwards and later settled in Ikot Abasi, where they became known as Nnung Assang (Nnung meaning people). According to Abraham Usen, the Ikot Abasi people migrated from Uruan to Ekom Iman and moved to where they were called Ikpa Nung Assang(Usen 2024).¹ Due to migratory patterns caused by population growth, new settlements were formed. Sir Udo Udoma (Abasiattai et al. 1997: VII) states that the Ikot Abasi people broke out from Nnung Assang, and settled in a place known as Ikot Essien with Obong Ebio. Feeling unsatisfied there, they moved further under the leading of Obio Nkwaha across the Okwoho Oruk stream and settled in Ikot Obio Nkwaha under the leader Abasi Akpan Enin in a place named Ikot Abasi Akpan Enin. The area was shared among the five families of the people, each of them called Owok or Otung. The five families include: Owok Iwuot Ekpo, Owok Ima, Owok Ekpai, Owok Ayanti and Owok Ekere. The Ikot Abasi area is home to five Clans namely: Ikpa Nnung Essang, Ikpa Edem Eya, Ikpa Ibekwe, Ukpum Ete and Ukpum Okon. Ikot Abasi is currently a village in Ikpa Ibekwe Clan. The area is situated on the right side of the Ikot Abasi River and is the village from which the present Local Government Area derives its name (Abasiattai et al. 1997: VII).

The pre-colonial economy of the people of Ikot Abasi depended largely on farming, fishing and hunting. These were occupations that generally revolved around the land and water of the area and ultimately these natural resources

¹ Oral interview with Usen, Abraham, interview by Emem Michael Udo and Otobong Enefiok Akpan in Ikot Abasi, April 24, 2024.

were utilized for the preservation and growth of members of the community. Farming in the area was carried out by both men and women with major food crops being yams, vegetables and cash crops like palm trees. Fishing was important to this coastal community, fish harvested from the rivers include mullet: grandisquamis, tilapia, malatica and chrysichthys waiker. Hunting was popular with animals such as deer, grass cutter, antelope and leopard being hunted and used as sources of food. Other economic activities included crafts/industry and trade. Trade involved the bartering of commodities in periodic markets such as Ukam and Ete while craft or cottage industry included the practice of processing oil from palm fruit and the distillation of alcohol for palm wine (Abasiattai et al 1997: 114).

History of Slave Trade in the Ikot Abasi Area

The discovery of the Americas by Christopher Columbus in 1492 brought new insights to the concepts of land, labour, production and capital as the fiendishness of 16th century capitalism forever changed the trajectory of world history. This economic system was paramount to the establishment and sustenance of the long and gory transaction of humans coming from Africa in what became the transatlantic slave trade, also called the triangular trade. It was a trade that involved the buying and selling of humans particularly Africans from the West and Central part of the continent to the Americas and Europe between the 16th and 19th centuries.

The slave trade arose from the need to acquire free labour from Africa to be used in the plantations of the newly discovered and colonized continent whose proceeds were then exploited for the enrichment of European economies. Eric Williams affirms that according to Adam Smith, the prosperity of a new colony depended largely on one important economic factor, which is plenty of land used for agricultural purposes (Williams 1944: 4). Curtin (1990: 40) elucidates that slavery in the Americas was structured to serve as a unit of labour in form of agricultural work which involved continuous supervision throughout long working hours.

The first Europeans to establish contact with the people of Ikot Abasi were the Portuguese, who had begun to interact with the Andoni people in 1472 (Abasiattai et al 1997: 116f.). By the 16th century, the Portuguese had begun trading humans in Old Calabar. Few years after the arrival of the Portuguese, the Ikot Abasi people got involved in the slave trade through collaboration with the Andoni middlemen (Afigbo 1987: 25). Afigbo (1987: 125) explains that the Andoni traditionally claim to be salt makers and their women traded in salt with

the interior people, which was used in exchange for palm oil and slaves later bought by the Portuguese. The Andoni went as far as Ubium, Ndio in Eket and up to Essene in the Ikot Abasi area to purchase slaves for sale. They were the first middlemen to work as slave traders in the Ikot Abasi area but were later replaced with the Umani (Bonny), Efik, and the Aro.

Though by the 17th century, the trade had gradually entered the hands of the British as the accounts according to Latham explicates that trade had begun in Calabar by 1668 for John Watts, an English sailor. He recalls that “the Peach Tree of London”, a ship, sailed to Old Calabar, in the Bay of Guinea where she entered a river called the Cross River into Parrat island and loaded slaves. Latham (1973: 17) suggests that this was an indication that the trade had existed for a while, but the kidnapping of Watts for several months proved that it was not very regular by this time. However, by 1672, many ships left Old Calabar for Britain with cargo of humans and ivory tusks.

In the hinterland, slave routes were footpaths meandering in a fashion that people took through villages and markets. As the trade grew, more road networks came into existence. Much of the footpath network of trade routes created in the period was incorporated into the early colonial road system. Some of the important river beaches which were used as routes to convey the slaves from the interior to the coastal markets were: the Essene beach in Ikot Abasi; Ikot Obio Nko in Asutan Ekpe; Ndiya in Nsit; Ekpene Ukpa in Iman; and Eyiesana beach in Nsit. Other routes were the Awa River-Ibeno through Effiat, and Ikot Ebong beach. Enslaved persons from Annang land, Enyong, Ibiono Ibom and Ikpa Uruan reached Old Calabar port through Itu. In Ikot Abasi axis, King Jaja known locally as Jojoba, used Opokalama and Iwoma in the Imo River where slaves were shipped to Opobo. Another route passed through Uta Ewa which in 1919 was expanded as a trading post and harbor built to evacuate goods to Europe (Derefaka/ Akpan 2016: 3).

Footpaths were used, such as one that connected the town of Essene to the Jaja Creek, and some of these paths still exist and need to be explored. Lovejoy and Richardson (1997: 5) articulate the significant role the area played in the slave trade by asserting that the Bight of Biafra with concentration on Old Calabar was the third most substantial exporter of enslaved persons after the Gold Coast and Angola. Udo and Usoro (2016: 216) also stated that most enslaved persons were acquired from the Igbo, Annang (an Ibibio subgroup) and Ibibio and sold in slave markets in Calabar and Itu. As the slave trade expanded and persisted in the area, slave markets were established at places such as Essene, Ibekwe, Ukam within the Ikot Abasi area and Uruakwak, Ubium and Ndio in the Ibibio hinter-

land. Enslaved persons purchased from these markets were conveyed and guided along footpaths, creeks and rivers to depots where slaves were kept awaiting the arrival of the Europeans who then purchased them to Europe and the Americas.

Abassaitai (et al. 1997: 118) while citing Isichei explains that the Black traders of Bonny and Calabar (Efik) used Thursdays or Fridays as their trading day. They arrived every fortnight with 20 or 30 canoes, sometimes more or sometimes less containing 20 or 30 enslaved persons in each canoe. With their arms tied to the back, the “stubborn” and stronger ones were pinned down above the knee for extra security and thrown at the bottom of the canoe where they were often covered with water. On their arrival on the coasts, they were taken to the trader’s houses to be fed, oiled and kept in top shape for the sales at the market. It can be speculated that with the construction of “the Bridge of No Return” and the slave fort in the 18th century, enslaved persons along these areas were instead kept and stored here in the Ikot Abasi Slave Trade fort.

Located by the shores of the Imo river, the fort is home to “the Bridge of No Return” in Ikot Abasi, in modern day Akwa Ibom State. The bridge is popularly named so because every enslaved person who stepped on it never had the opportunity to return home. Attached to the bridge is the bunker where “stubborn” or stronger enslaved persons who were perceived to likely generate problems for the middlemen were kept for days. This was done to break the will of the captured and to serve as deterrent against planned insurrections. The bunker has three underground compartments and was built to hold roughly 30 people at a time but instead was used to hold at least 150 people. The bunker has a very small vent on its top used for ventilation (oral interview: Mrs. Cyrilla Bassey 2024; see figures 4 and 5).

Inside the fort, other relics exist such as the branding rod which was used to inscribe on the enslaved the names of the European merchants who purchased them possibly indicating that mini slave auctions probably took place there. The furnace hole used for heating up the branding rod, the hook (see figure 3) which was accompanied with a scale used in measuring the enslaved persons and also the last of the chains used in holding down the enslaved persons (oral interview: Mrs. Cyrilla Bassey 2024), and a manila² are some of the relics found at the site

² Due to many decades of neglect, the scale which was used to measure the weight of the enslaved persons no longer exists at the site. Also, a manila was discovered at the river bank by the researchers, known to be an ancient form of currency used in exchange for the enslaved persons in this area during the transatlantic slave trade.

(see illustrations for the chains and figures 8 and 9 for inscriptions on the signpost and manila).

According to the signpost by the bridge, this infamous jetty was built in 1795 by Europeans, though the nationality of the builders was not stated. It is not certain if the bridge and the fort were built the same year, but one can speculate that they were possibly built around the same period. In describing the British involvement in the slave trade with Old Calabar, Latham (1973: 17f.) however postulates that London's share of the trade declined because of the South Sea Bubble which left Bristol as the principal English slaving port. He further buttresses that at a time in 1767 there were only English ships in the river, pointing out that four from Bristol, one from London and one from Liverpool often sailed the area. Latham insists that the English dominated the trade in Old Calabar.

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According to Edet Uya (Imbua et al. 2012: 714), although the concept of Old Calabar geographically refers to the earliest Efik city states, such as Creek Town, Old Town, New Town, the last including Archibong Town, Cobham Town, Henshaw Town and Eyamba Town, it was however used by the Europeans in a generic sense to describe the communities where enslaved persons were plundered around the Efik-Ibibio area and to also refer to the Efik middlemen. It is important to note that the Efik, Aro and Andoni middlemen did not actively sell their kin. They mostly captured and sold other neighbouring groups, especially those in the hinterland.

It is pertinent to speculate based on the sources and evidence reported above that the Ikot Abasi slave trade site was possibly built by the British.³ This assertion stems from historical records which document that the English dominated the slave trade in the area in the 18th century until it was abolished in Britain in 1807, although trade in humans after this time remained unabated as it was taken over by the French, Dutch, Spanish and Portuguese. The enslaved persons were often transported to Europe and America through the coastal waters of the Imo River which empties into the Atlantic Ocean. The latter was the waterway that served as a trans-continental passage between Europe, Africa and America during the transatlantic slave trade. Scholars such as Udo and Usoro (2016: 216) citing Latham assert that the cleric Jesuit Alonso de Sandoval expressed that slaves who arrived in the Port at Cartagena in Grenada were mostly identified as Ijo, Igbo and Ibibio. According to them, this was supported two centuries later by another scholar, Oldendorps. The slave trade had far reaching consequences in the Ikot Abasi area as this impressed its population composition and distribution as well the area's economic and political balance of power.

Significance of the Slave Trade Relics in Ikot Abasi

Historical Sites as Symbols of Reconciliation

The realities of the deep seated wounds inflicted by the slave trade on people of African descent globally, particularly the gruesome role the African leaders and its elite played in the sustenance of the trade for centuries, can no longer be ignored. However, it is important to elucidate that whenever a member of a family migrates to another country or continent, blood ties do not automatically dissolve as a result of this movement but rather kinship remains, extending geographically as distance does not sever the blood ties of brotherhood. Howbeit, for a very long time it seems that the African continent has allowed the ties of kinship and the cords of camaraderie to be severed by time and space as the African diaspora remain independent with very negligible attempts made by Africa to build bridges of partnership with its kith across the Atlantic, so much so that very few collaborative efforts exist to buttress this point.

Although the ideologies and objectives of Pan Africanism were originally formed to unify people of African descent in Africa and those in the diaspora, the concept and its cry for freedom and emancipation was however borne out of the diaspora. One of such few collaborations notable of mention was FESTAC 77.

³ Discourse using secondary evidence which propounds the possibility of the forts been constructed by the British, is further examined in the study.

This was the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture which took place in Lagos, Nigeria in 1977, but prior to FESTAC 77, the first Black Festival took place in Dakar, Senegal in 1966. After the success and spectacle of FESTAC, similar platforms of such magnitude have sparsely been initiated by the continent in recent times.

As the world has moved on, what is perceived as abandonment and rejection of the continent has created resentment and cynicism, leading to a degree of mental and emotional disconnection in the minds of people of African descent towards the continent, its culture and its people. The realization that the African middlemen played active roles in the capture and selling of their kinsmen is heart wrenching to conceive and it remains the elephant in the room that is sparsely addressed in Pan-African spaces, but this dialogue is very fundamental in order for reconciliation and healing to take place through the frameworks of historical sites and thought provoking discussions.

The African middlemen were influential in the success of this transaction in human beings especially through the partnership between powerful European merchants and prominent families in Old Calabar such as the Robin Johns, Eyambas, Dukes, Henshaws, Honestys, Ebros, Ephraims, Ecricks, Tom Egbos, Ambos and the Cobhams (Behrendt et al 2010: 20). Their involvement actively assisted in establishing an intricate syndicate of African slave traders whose influence stretched from the shores of the Bight of Biafra across the Atlantic to Britannic waters aboard British ships, while concurrently enriching themselves from the wealth generated from this blood sucking enterprise. Based on this harsh reality, the responsibility of building bridges of reconciliation driven by blood ties should largely be facilitated by the continent as this would assist tremendously in reducing the layers of acrimony formed by centuries of neglect that the diaspora might have consciously or unconsciously accrued regarding Africa and her people.

Slave trade records for the Bight of Biafra

The Bight of Biafra is a region described to be along the Western part of Africa between the Niger river and Cape Lopez, covering modern African States such as the Eastern part of Nigeria, the North of Gabon, Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea.⁴ As part of the Bight of Biafra, the historic importance of the Ikot Abasi

⁴ The Bight of Biafra had major trading cities such as Bonny and Old Calabar which were inhabited by the Umani and Efik respectively. The latter and former were prominent middlemen who traded in slaves with the Ikot Abasi people and other hinterland groups. See the online article on "Slavery and Remembrance: A Guide to Sites, Museums and Memory. Bight of Biafra".

area to the transatlantic slave trade and the African diaspora in general has been somewhat glanced over for decades in the academic fields of Atlantic scholarship. The annals of Atlantic Historiography situate Akwa Ibom as part of the area scorched by the inhabitants of “Old Calabar” and it is located in the Bight of Biafra with records of extensive slave trading activities in the latter being very visibly documented. Lovejoy and Richardson (1997: 5) state that this area was the third supplier of enslaved persons with about 1.67 million ships supplied from the Bight of Biafra from 1662-1867 with the peak period occurring in the late 18th century accumulating about 15,000-20,000 enslaved persons of whom embarked for the Americas. Similarly, Philip Curtin (1969: 157) postulates that from 1690-1807 about 776,400 slave ships departed the Bight of Biafra to England while tables 1, 2 and 3, below state the figures for other locations as postulated by Curtin.⁵

S / No .	Origin of Slaves	Speculative Percentage	Country of Export	Location	Year	Percentage
1.	Bight of Biafra	23.3%	N o r t h America Mainland	Virginia	1710-1769	37.7%
				S o u t h Carolina	1733-1807	2.1%
			G r e a t Britain	G r e a t Britain	1690-1807	30.1%

Table 1: Documented Records of the Extensive Slave Trade within the Bight of Biafra Source: Curtin 1969: 157.

S/No.	Country	Year	Total of Slaves
1	Jamaica	1655- 1701	24,300
		1702- 1725	19,500
		1726- 1750	16,900
		1751-1775	23,800
		1776-1791	18,300
		1792- 1807	Nil
Total			102,800

Table 2: Enslaved Persons into Jamaica from Bight of Biafra Source: Curtin 1969: 160.

⁵ For further readings, see similar works on the slave trade for example by Dike (1956).

Region of Origin	Slaves imported (%)	British imports from Africa 1801-1807 (%)
Bight of Biafra	8.6	41.5

Table 3: Enslaved persons imported into British Guiana, 1803-7 by origin Source: Curtin 1969: 155

In addition, Latham (2010: 17f.) explains that John Elliot's ship called 'Welcome' arrived at Barbados with 210 enslaved persons from Old Calabar in February of 1679. In January of 1680, another English ship arrived with 278 enslaved persons from Old Calabar at Jamaica. The trade in Old Calabar progressed so rapidly that it was said by the English merchants that 'there is so many ships gone to Old Calabar that you can have no trade there'. This was because other Europeans traded there occasionally like the Dutch and Portuguese.

The exact number of ships that departed from the Ikot Abasi "Bridge of No Return" or those prior to its construction is largely unknown as that possibility has been lost to time. However, one can only speculate that quite a reasonable number must have taken off from this point because relics of such immensity found in "the Ikot Abasi Slave Trade Arena" are physical evidence that testify to the large amount of slave trading activities that did occur in the area. As earlier explained, the fort and the bridge were likely built by the British as the tables above indicate an estimated amount of ships and extensive trade that took place for more than two centuries between the English and the people of Old Calabar and other groups within the Bight of Biafra. To further buttress this argument, it is important to point out that the materials for the construction of these relics were possibly imported and the cost of construction was most likely carried out solely by the British. The English merchants were known to be frugal businessmen, bourgeois who would only invest in business ventures that were largely economically profitable to them.

The mercantile system under the tutelage of capitalism operated a form of laissez-faire that allowed business men to operate in the slave trade system with transactions being invariably remunerated into the English economy. So it is accurate to assert that for the British to expend resources of such magnitude for the building of these relics, probably quite a number of ships departed from Ikot Abasi to England and its English colonies in the Americas. Thus, the site must have been a point of embarkation for many ships, thus translating into large profits for the English merchants and Imperial Britain as a whole.

Lovejoy and Richardson (1997: 6f.) buttressed that approximately a greater amount of the evidence on credit arrangements in the slave trade of Old Calabar came from British sources and all pointing to the period from 1760 to 1807 when shipments at the ports reached its peak with inter trade relations between the British and the Africans becoming more sophisticated during the 18th century. Furthermore, Morgan (2016: 3) states that Britain dominated the trade from the Bight of Biafra and it was the most important region in West Africa for British slave merchants, as their imperium in that region was unmatched elsewhere in Atlantic Africa. They accounted for more than two thirds of the slave trade from the region between 1525 and 1859. The above documentation, linking the British trade with the Bight of Biafra and Old Calabar in particular, infers that possibly these reasons necessitated the building of the slave site and that most likely it was constructed by the British.

The statistics put forward by Curtin (1969, 1990) and the discourse above speaks volumes that this area was perhaps a hotspot for slave trading activities during the transatlantic slave trade. The historic records and the presence of the slave relics thus expounds the role the region played in the slave trade and therefore expands the slave trade site in Ikot Abasi at a pivotal space in Atlantic History up until the 19th Century when the trade gradually came to a screeching end.

Extensive archaeological research on the lands and waters in and around “the Ikot Abasi Slave Trade Arena” would further provide more encyclopaedic information relating to slave trading activities especially those that occurred within the Akwa Ibom area. It is important to point out that relics such as the slave fort found in Ikot Abasi are rarely found anywhere along the coast of the old South-Eastern Region of Nigeria except for a similar one in Badagry, Lagos State, which is geographically situated in the Bight of Benin in Western Nigeria. Although former slave depots existed along the Bonny, Calabar and Opobo coastal communities, “the Ikot Abasi Slave Trade Arena”, however stands as the only slave fort of its kind along the coasts of the Lower Cross River area.

This therefore strengthens the argument that per chance some of the ships that departed from the Bight of Biafra could have possibly passed through the Ikot Abasi slave forts using “the Bridge of No Return”. Also, the presence of Ibibio cultural hybridization in Cuba in the form of the Abakua, a patronymic secret society of Efik-Ibibio origin, has contributed to the visibility of the Ibibio more in the cultural kaleidoscope of the African diasporic expanse. This transatlantic ethnological cross over has further elaborated the extent of the permeation of the Ibibio and other sub-cultures, all across the Latin American hemisphere, which

attests to the impact of the slave trade in the diffusion of variant knowledge systems in the Americas over the centuries.

The Ikot Abasi Slave Trade Site as a Nexus for Cultural Exchanges between Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria and the African Diaspora

The existence of the slave trade allows the State to explore the opportunities that cultural contact proffers through rehabilitation, preservation and rebranding of the site. The benefits derived from this could be used as a unifying factor in closing relational gaps between Nigeria and the population of the African diaspora. These areas can be transformed into pilgrim destinations for Africans in the diaspora who intend to visit their ancestral home on the continent. The Ikot Abasi slave trade site could also serve as a foyer for the exchange of cultures of a pedagogical nature, ideas and dialogues within the Pan-African domain. Additionally, this site can be explored as a fortress of reconciliation and pillar for forgiveness which could bring together Africans on the continent with those in the diaspora.

It is important to stress that as an instinct for survival, many Africans in the diaspora have preserved hybridized forms of their ancestral values. These can be confirmed through the preservation and transfer of cultures manifested through ideologies, literary works, visual arts, music, dance forms, folklore, cuisine, religion and even colloquial expressions of certain lingo verbalizations, visible all over the Americas and Europe where people of African extraction have been found. These African influenced cultural forms were not only preserved by sheer perseverance and resistance from colonial domination and enslavement but also by the earnest desire to sustain traits from their progenitor which could neither be diminished by the status of their forced migration nor the agents of assimilation.

Besides sustaining fragments of their African heritage, recently some Africans in the diaspora have been seeking to trace their lineages in Africa by exploring modern advancements in technology using innovative breakthroughs in genealogical science. This new technology has revolutionized the way we view DNA testing and offers Afro-Americans the opportunity to trace their African lineage through this medium. The availability of various DNA testing services not only holds the key that connects the past with the present but also deciphers mysteries surrounding cultural or ethnic identities of many in the African diaspora. In addition, it also bridges the gap between Africa and the diaspora. By examining the genetic makeup of the client, one particular testing service compares the matrilineal DNA with the extensive database of indigenous

African samples, thereby giving precise results narrowing down the identities of the specific ethnic group or groups of the individual in Africa which then cultivates opportunities for cultural interactions, human development and ideological exchanges with people of African descent globally (Beard 2024).⁶ With this new development, it is important for Africa to fasten the bonds of brotherhood with her kith scattered in the four corners of the world in areas such as North America, Latin America, the Caribbean and Europe. The world is now at Africa's feet and the possibilities for partnership are endless.

One African American who traced his roots to a specific ethnic group is Samuel L Jackson the famous Hollywood actor (Davies 2020).⁷ It is hoped that with this new scientific breakthrough many with linkages to the Ibibio culture in the diaspora who seem somewhat unknown can have a sense of belonging by aligning themselves with the Ibibio population in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, as the Ikot Abasi slave trade relics are profound evidences that subsist to attest their existence.

In recent times, one of the most far-reaching collaborative efforts carried out by any African country in an attempt to link with the population of the African diaspora was the "Year of Return". In 2019, many took the salubrious trip to Ghana, a year Ghana declared as the "Year of Return" to commensurate the year the first African enslaved persons (20 men, women and children) landed on the shores of Jamestown, Virginia, USA, from West Africa or Angola in Central Africa, aboard a Dutch ship on August 20th, 1619 (Hughes et al 1983: 10).

After four hundred years, this Ghanaian initiative was put together to invite all peoples of African extraction from the Caribbean, Latin America, North America and Europe to Ghana to celebrate their ancestry and reflect on the resilience of the ancestors whose grace and strength kept them all alive for a crucial time in history such as this. It was a landmark journey and a home coming for all that desired to make the trip as they were also offered the opportunity of Ghanaian citizenship as part of incentives for making the peregrination (Chapman 2024).⁸

⁶ One of such DNA service provider is the African Ancestral DNA testing service. It is a pioneering service which combines cutting edge technology with precision that links testing results of the client to a specific ethnicity on the continent.

⁷ A good example of an African American who connected to his ethnicity in Africa is Samuel L. Jackson. He is a well-known African American Hollywood actor who made a trip to Gabon after tracing his ethnic ancestry to the Benga group in Gabon through 'Finding Your Roots', an American docu-series which uses traditional genealogical research and genetics to discover the history of the families of celebrities.

⁸ According to Chapman (2024), many of these travelers to Africa in 2019 were African Americans from the State of Minnesota in the United States of America.

Global Recognition

In the annals of Atlantic historiography, quite a number of slave trade relics in West Africa have attained notability such as the “Door of No Return” in Ouidah, Benin Republic, a monument built to commemorate millions of enslaved that were taken from that area (Brown 2018). With the assistance of the Beninese government and UNESCO, the monument was constructed in 1995 to honour the millions of enslaved Africans (Dunnell 2019), while Falola and Childs (2004: 23)⁹ assert the importance of Ouidah in the first quarter of the 18th century.

Other slave trade sites such as the Elmina Castle in Ghana and the slave fort in Badagry, Lagos, Nigeria, have received some measure of international recognition while the Ikot Abasi slave site is barely remembered, documented, researched or investigated in the consciousness of Atlantic history.

The plethora of records shown above by Curtin (1969, 1990), though slightly captured in this study has furnished historians with a little more than a glimpse of historiographical catalogues which documents the area’s (Bight of Biafra) extensive involvement in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. In addition, the presence of material relics further adds validity to Curtin’s discourse on the region. It is necessary to also buttress that the current state of deterioration of these relics (see figures 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9) requires immediate attention and swift action precipitating the renovation and rebranding of the slave trade site for the global advertence it deserves while taking into cognizance the shared impact this could have in the lives of not only the people of Ikot Abasi, but also Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, and the African diaspora at large.

⁹ Falola and Childs in their work highlighted the significance of the coasts of Ouidah as a prominent port of embarkation within the Bight of Benin in the 18th century. Further studies indicate that the area was added to the UNESCO World Heritage tentative list in 1996.

Preserving the Ikot Abasi Slave Trade Arena



Figure 1: Front view of the slave fort.



Figure 2: Back view of the slave fort.



Figure 3: The hook within the slave fort.



Figure 4: The bunker connected to the bridge.



Figure 5: Deterioration within the bunker.



Figure 6: The front view of the bridge.



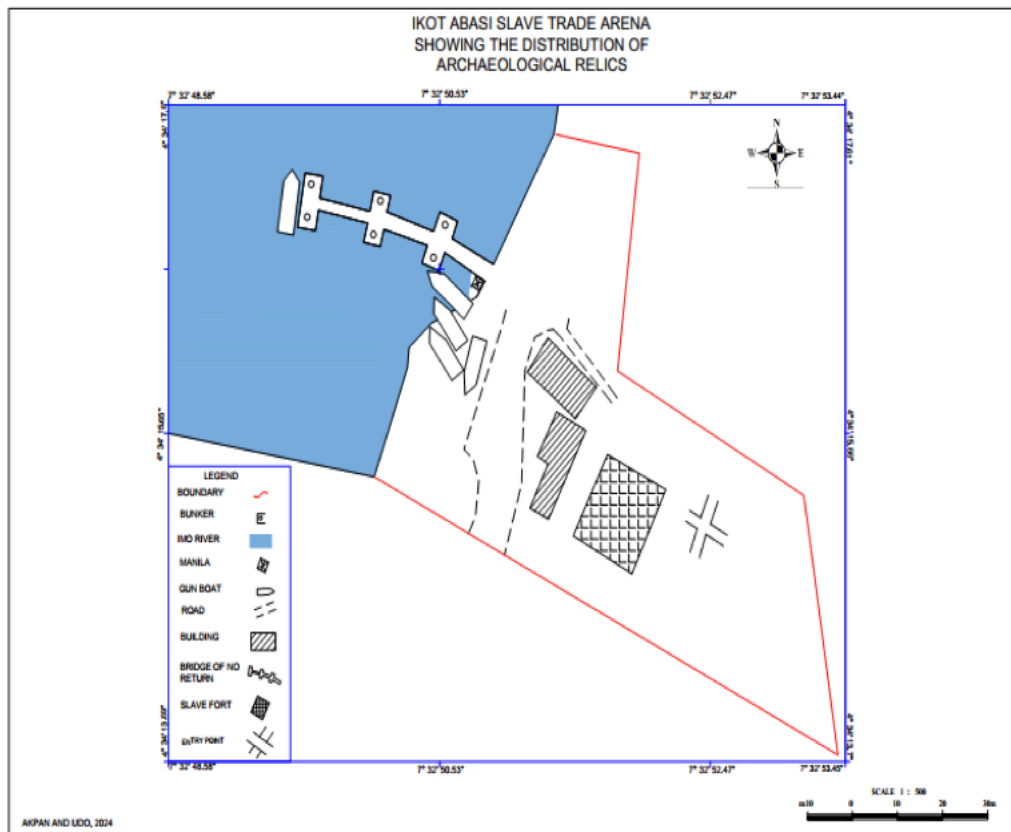
Figure 7: The side view of the "Bridge of No Return"



Figure 8: The signpost on the "Bridge of No Return"



Figure 9: Manila found at the site by researchers.



Map 4: Map of the Ikot Abasi Slave Trade Arena. Source: Akpan and Udo 2024.

Infrastructural Development

However, for the area to be at par or gain similar notability as other slave trade sites mentioned earlier, many steps are required by the government of Akwa Ibom State. One of which is to staidly invest in renovating the site with the purpose of elevating it as a centre of interest in Atlantic scholarship, framed for cultural exchanges, linking the past with the present, while coalescing Africans in Africa and those in the diaspora.

This requires intensive capital and massive investments which can be majorly generated through government funding or the latter's partnership with major corporations and multinationals within the private sector. The parameters of such demands include infrastructural overlaps such as stable power supply, good and accessible road networks, functional transport systems, genteel hotels, efficient telecom and information technology services and, most importantly, peace and security.

Custodian of Slave Trade Heritage

History continues to beckon on the door of the government of Akwa Ibom State for the preservation of the slave trade sites which could collectively be called “the Ikot Abasi Slave Trade Arena”. The latter requires massive renovation and rebranding to make the area marketable to the world. It is however important that the architectural design of the fort and the bridge are not altered in the process of renovation, but rather the original form strictly maintained and adhered to. With the efficacious rehabilitation of the site and the resuscitation of historical and archaeological research in the area, the Ikot Abasi slave trade site would be able to take its long drawn position amongst the great sites in Afro-Atlantic history and finally be considered as a valid archaeological site, fit for expansive research in slave studies.

Establishment of An On-site Museum

Due to the existing relics and the far reaching proposed archaeological investigation which would likely produce more artifacts related with the slave trade activities, the establishment of an on-site museum becomes imperative. These collections in turn will serve as memory banks for the purpose of exhibition, education, conservation, preservation, academic research, posterity, and tourism. This would increase the community value, impact the academic community and by implication serve the broader general public.

Stakeholders Involvement

It is exigent that Akwa Ibom state and other stakeholders such as National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM), cultural agencies (like UNESCO) under the auspices of the State Ministry of Culture and Tourism, relevant tertiary institutions, historians, archaeologist, anthropologist, Sociologists, community leaders, Local Government Councils and others both from the public and private sector saddled with the responsibility of developing the historical and cultural heritage of the State to collectively collaborate using various effective methods.

One of such measures could be a collaboration and partnership between the Akwa Ibom State Government and Black institutions across the length and breadth of the diaspora, such as high schools, HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) and other Black based organizations like the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), the African American Historical Foundation, National Urban League, VidaAfroLatina, Afro-

Latin American Research Institute and other similar organizational collaborations of its kind to undertake exchange programs where Black groups could be funded using resources co-sponsored by the State Government with the assistance from the private sector, through financial institutions and also philanthropists from Africa and the diaspora. These programs would promote “the Ikot Abasi Slave Trade Arena”, its histories and general culture of the Akwa Ibom people with its benefits possibly having opportunities which may extend beyond the confinement of scholarship and social interactions to include other economic sectors such as infrastructural and human capacity development.

In addition, an African Diaspora department could be set up in the Akwa Ibom State Ministry of Culture and Tourism, which would be saddled with the mandate to promote the significance of the slave site. Furthermore, to keep the department constantly functioning, a podcast could be created which would effectively utilize the vastness of the social media, thereby using it as a tool in reaching millions of the population in the African diaspora. This podcast could most likely be anchored by curators, historians, archaeologists and experts from other similar disciplines. Programs could be transmitted in English, Spanish, Portuguese and Ibibio with the purpose of reaching diverse people across the diaspora where a range of thought-provoking topics affecting people of African descent are discussed. These and other similar approaches would aid to promote and preserve the cultural heritage prevalent within the Ikot Abasi community for posterity.

Public awareness

In line with the above, these stake holders in turn are to create awareness that would educate the general public here in Akwa Ibom State on the value of the relics as regards preserving the cultural heritage of the area. All these can be accomplished using various mediums such as community campaign and awareness programs using social media platforms, billboards, banners, flyers, pamphlets and other forms of publicity promotion strategies.

Conclusion

This study has discussed extensively the significance of “the Ikot Abasi Slave Trade Arena” and its contribution to Afro-Atlantic scholarship. These relics are a direct connection between the presence and the distant past which requires research and investigation for the furtherance of knowledge and the exchange of ideas within the latitudes of Pan-African scholarship. The preservation, rebranding and rehabilitation of these hallmarks of historical representation,

holds the capacity to link the Ikot Abasi area, Akwa Ibom State and Nigeria as a whole with the global network of the African diaspora. These linkages will further aid mutual cooperation, social integration as well as cross-cultural exchanges between Akwa Ibom State and the diaspora. Multilateral relations will also strengthen ties of brotherhood forged by a partnership that would be beneficial to Africa and the African diaspora. It is important to plant seeds of reconciliation and progress for the growth of Africans in Africa with the kindred in the diaspora while this is still possible. Though those that plant these seeds may not be alive to see them grow into bountiful fruits, however, a generation will emerge reaping these fruits while referencing the good deeds of their ancestors, who didn't just pave the way but rather built bridges where the Ibibio and other people of African descent could walk upon to meet each other halfway. A bridge that supports collaboration, cooperation and camaraderie forged with an iron clad alliance between all people of African extraction should not just be a concept but rather made into a reality.

It is important to note that the history of the transatlantic slave trade is dark and difficult to comprehend or give admittance to. However, the relics in "the Ikot Abasi Slave Trade Arena" though borne out of an augean or somewhat shameful past, can in contemporary times serve as totems for reconciliation and mutual connection between people who albeit separated by the dimensions of time, space and distance, still strongly share experience, a common lineage and ancestry that remains unbreakable, and as a result should be preserved for the ages. In addition, the resolve to maintain history and retain its records begs the need for Akwa Ibom State to urgently rehabilitate these historic slave trade sites as it is assumed that history forgotten is history erased. These sites stand as a memorabilia revealing the tragic fate of many of Africa's children who lost their lives while marching through the footpaths of the hinterland to the forts or depots, and the unyielding ones who were thrown into the bunkers for their attempt at emancipation until the European ships arrived. Though some survived this ordeal, many more died in the forests while their remains lined the grounds of the hinterland. Some died in the slave forts from physical and mental torture or exhaustion while others have their corpus littered in the Oceans floor, covering the coastal routes of the Imo river through the continental waterways of the Atlantic.

The deaths, tears, blood, sorrow, decapitation and resilience of these ancestors are encapsulated in captivating stories revealed through the walls, grounds and waters of these historic landscapes as it longs to speak. Failure to listen and amplify these voices through research and documentation, is tantamount to reducing the experiences and resilience of these ancestors to nothing but

whispers with echoes residing only on the surface of the ground and silent whimpers in the waters of the Atlantic.

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Oral Interviews

- Mrs. Cyrilla Bassey, interview by Emem Michael Udo and Otobong Enefiok Akpan, Ikot Abasi, April 24, 2024.
- Mr. Abraham Usen, interview by Emem Michael Udo and Otobong Enefiok Akpan, Ikot Abasi, April 24, 2024.

Illustrations



Researchers at the bunker



Mrs. Cyrilla Bassey (tour guide) narrating the history of the bunker