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Girl Pawns, Brides & Slaves *Child Trafficking in Southeastern Nigeria, 1920s*¹

Robin P. Chapdelaine

*The commission has undertaken to get the facts about the traffic in women and children as it exists to-day over the world.*²

(William F. Snow, Chief of the Advisory Committee on the Traffic in Women and Children, 1926)

Child trafficking and migration often results from economic and resource insecurity. Sub-Saharan Africa is credited with the largest number of trafficking victims overall, with two-thirds of those trafficked identified as children.³ In particular, the movement of children under various forms of guardianship is on the rise and this phenomenon has become an urgent international concern. Benjamin N. Lawrance and Richard L. Roberts suggest that child trafficking must be considered in relation to how colonization related to the global economy.⁴ It is nearly impossible to address contemporary concerns about the welfare of trafficked children without taking into consideration the historical context in which the transfer of children under

¹ This project was funded by the American Historical Association's Bernadotte E. Schmitt Research Grant, Rutgers University History Department and the Rutgers Center for Historical Analysis. This chapter is part of a larger project on child dealing in Southeastern Nigeria, which I began in 2007. Continuing research that I started in 2007 in British archives, I planned to conduct additional research in Nigeria during the latter part of 2011 and complete oral interviews in the early months of 2012. However, President Goodluck Jonathan decreased fuel subsidies on 1 January 2012 and gasoline prices increased by over 100 per cent. Nigerians, the majority of whom live on less than two dollars a day, became enraged. After the eruption of riots in several major cities and the threat of additional violence, I immediately returned to the United States with less than twenty-four hours to spare before the entire country essentially shut down. It seems a bit ironic that economic insecurity would be the reason that forced my premature departure. Nonetheless, with the help of local assistants who interviewed informants on my behalf, I was able to gather the information I needed for this study on the transfer of Southeastern Nigerian children during the colonial period. See Anene Ejikeme, 'Nigeria Boils Over', *The New York Times* (12 January 2012), available online: www.nytimes.com/2012/01/13/opinion/nigerian-anger-boils-over.html [accessed 1 May 2015].

² William F. Snow, 'The Program of the League of Nations Advisory Committee on the Traffic in Women and the Protection and Welfare of Children and Young People', *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science in the City of New York* 12(1) (1926), 414.

³ *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2014* (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Vienna), 82.

⁴ Benjamin N. Lawrance and Richard L. Roberts, eds., 'Introduction', *Trafficking in Slavery's Wake: Law and the Experience of Women and Children in Africa* (Athens, OH, 2012), p. 3.

various forms of guardianship became normalized. Scholars and policy makers can best understand the contemporary problems of child trafficking in West Africa (and abroad) by tracing its historical development from the transatlantic slave trade to colonial forms of servitude and beyond.

By piecing together colonial reports, oral interviews,⁵ anti-slavery archival materials, League of Nations documents and anthropologist and missionary memoirs, this chapter aims to show that the trafficking of women and children was complex and deeply embedded in Nigerian economic systems. With a specific focus on Igbo, Ibibio, Ijaw (Ijo) and Efik communities during the colonial period, I have encountered rich details about the transfer of children, mainly girls, from one form of guardianship to another. Yet, even with this diverse set of resources, child trafficking cases remain impossible to quantify. Moreover, independent accounts from child brides, pawns and slaves are also missing. These details would have enhanced the understanding of such exchanges. Similar to what Sacha Hepburn argues with regard to girls in post-colonial Zambia and Paola Porcelli's analysis of child fosterage in rural Mali,⁶ Southeastern Nigerian children filled a variety of labour and economic needs by virtue of being transferable.

Children often occupied one or more types of servile status during the colonial era. They were pawns, slaves, serfs, servants, subjects, clients and child brides.⁷ Pawnship, a form of legal dependency in which a pawn was held as security for a loan, became a widespread labour condition in Southeastern Nigeria in the twentieth century. The pawn's labour paid the interest on debts until the debtor reimbursed the moneylender.⁸ Pawned children expected to be redeemed and returned to their natal village once the loan had been repaid.⁹ Slavery, another dependent category, robbed the slave of any legal rights, making him or her into a commercial property, a 'capital investment'.¹⁰ Paul E. Lovejoy describes 'panyarring' as a form of foreclosure on the loan.¹¹ The system of panyarring was different from slavery and pawning insofar as moneylenders or their debt collectors could 'seize' the debtor or his or her relatives.¹² Clients, serfs and subjects were people who lacked wealth, and who usually offered to work in return for sustenance and

⁵ I owe a great deal of gratitude to our now-departed Dr Austin M. Ahanotu and to Mr Anayo Enechukwu for assistance organizing and conducting oral interviews.

⁶ Sacha Hepburn and Paola Porcelli, this volume, Chapters 3 and 4.

⁷ Robin P. Chapdelaine, 'A History of Child Trafficking in Southeastern Nigeria, 1900–1930s' (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 2014), 2.

⁸ Paul E. Lovejoy and Toyin Falola, 'Pawnship in Historical Perspective', in Paul E. Lovejoy and Toyin Falola, eds, *Pawnship, Slavery, and Colonialism in Africa* (Trenton, NJ, 2003), p. 3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁰ Suzanne Miers, *Britain and the Ending of the Slave Trade* (New York, 1975), pp. 118, 134.

¹¹ Paul E. Lovejoy, 'Pawnship, Debt and "Freedom" in Atlantic Africa during the Era of the Slave Trade: A Re-Assessment', *The Journal of African History* 55(1) (2014), 9.

¹² Lovejoy and Falola, *Pawnship, Slavery, and Colonialism in Africa*, p. 16.

protection.¹³ I refer to child brides as girls under the age of 16 years, who were betrothed or married, but still dependent on her parents or guardians for support. Other forms of adoption or fostering that may not have been part of a payment–child exchange also existed.¹⁴ During the 1920s, social activists became increasingly involved with the League of Nations in its efforts to establish global working conditions of women and children as part of its overall effort to end human trafficking, slavery and other types of forced labour.¹⁵

The League of Nations' Growing Concern about Child Trafficking

The creation of the Advisory Committee on the Traffic in Women and Children resulted from the 1921 League of Nations International Conference on the Treatment of Women and Children in Geneva and the Convention drafted for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children.¹⁶ In January 1922 the Council of the League of Nations' Advisory Committee on the Traffic in Women and Children operated under the League's Social Section, which dealt with international social issues.¹⁷ The Committee was initially concerned with European women and children who had been trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation outside of their home country. Although the Committee lacked executive power, its representatives offered advice to the League about social policy and implementation. Their goals included raising the legal age of marriage in various countries, shutting down prostitution houses, securing homes for homeless children and providing services to disabled children. These goals expressed an evolving ideology that assumed children and women to be a protected class of individuals.

In 1924, the League of Nations voted to accept the 1924 Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child and formed the Child Welfare Committee.¹⁸ An English school teacher, Eglantyne Jebb, social reformer and the founder of the Save the Children organization, drafted the Declaration.¹⁹ The Declaration advised that children should be provided

¹³ Felix K. Ekechi, 'Pawns in Igbo Society', in Falola and Lovejoy, eds, *Pawns, Slavery, and Colonialism in Africa*, p. 175. See also Herbert S. Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: New Approaches to the Americas* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 5.

¹⁴ J. S. Harris, 'Some Aspects of Slavery in Southeastern Nigeria', *The Journal of Negro History* 27(1) (1942), 37–38.

¹⁵ National Industrial Conference Board, *The Work of the International Labor Organization: Studies of International Problems* (New York, 1928), pp. 1–2, available online: <http://dds.crl.edu/CRLdelivery.asp?tid=15989> [Accessed 1 May 2015].

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

¹⁷ Snow, 'The Program of the League of Nations Advisory Committee', 411.

¹⁸ 'Health and Social Questions Section, 1919–1946 (Sub-Fonds)', *United Nations Office at Geneva, Administrative History*, accessed 8 August 2014, <http://biblio-archiv.unog.ch/detail.aspx?ID=405>.

¹⁹ Paul G. Lauren, *The Evolution of International Human Rights* (Philadelphia, 2011), 110.

with an environment in which they could live happy, prosperous lives; that they should be cared for in times of need; that they should receive relief services when needed; that they should be trained to work, but sheltered from exploitation; and taught to be compassionate towards others.²⁰ The Declaration initially targeted European countries. However, it was Jebb's desire that the protection of children's welfare would extend to Africa and Asia as well.²¹ The League supported the mission and strongly urged governments to secure these inalienable rights for all children.²²

In addition to the League's work that focused specifically on women and children, various forms of slavery continued to be a main concern. In 1925 the League appointed the Temporary Slavery Commission for the purpose of putting an end to the traffic in African slaves, which included a focus on children, child marriage and pawning. Upon receipt of the Commission's report, the Slavery Convention of 1926 mandated that all members work to end all forms of slavery, defined as 'the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised'.²³ In 1926, Eleanor Rathbone, feminist social reformer, an independent member of the British Parliament and an active member of women's international organizations,²⁴ served as an advisor to the Child Welfare Committee.²⁵ Through much insistence by Rathbone and others like her, the League turned its attention to the welfare of children in Europe's colonies.²⁶

Prompted by the League's increased concern about slavery and pawnship,²⁷ Colonial authorities began to examine and critique ways in which Igbo, Efik and Ibibio-speaking people in Southeastern Nigeria set up systems to transfer children. Governor General Hugh Clifford ordered all district officers to respond to questionnaires detailing indigenous laws and customs, including pawning practices, throughout

²⁰ 'Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child' (League of Nations, 26 September 1924), available online: www.un-documents.net/gdrc1924.htm [accessed 1 May 2015].

²¹ Evelyn Sharp, *The African Child: An Account of the International Conference on African Children*, Geneva (Negro Universities Press, 1970), p. 4.

²² Lauren, *The Evolution of International Human Rights*, p. 120.

²³ Suzanne Miers, 'Contemporary Forms of Slavery', *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 34(3) (2000), 716.

²⁴ Organizations included the International Council of Women and the International Women's Suffrage Alliance.

²⁵ Paul Weindling, ed., *International Health Organisations and Movements, 1918–1939* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 163; See also Susan Pedersen, 'Metaphors of the Schoolroom: Women Working the Mandates System of the League of Nations', *History Workshop Journal* 66(1) (2008), 190; Miers, 'Contemporary Forms', 716. By 1929, Rathbone, Duchess Katharine Marjory Stewart-Murray, a British noble woman who served as the Scottish Unionist Party member of Parliament, and humanitarian Josiah Wedgwood formed the Committee for the Protection of Coloured Women in the Crown Colonies. With eight additional members, this Committee focused on clitoridectomy and brideprice practices throughout the colonies. These individuals, and many others like them, persuaded the League members to take a more activist position in improving the livelihoods of women and children throughout the world.

²⁶ 'The Covenant of the League of Nations', *The American Journal of International Law* 15(1) (1921), 12.

²⁷ Kevin Shillington, *Encyclopedia of African History* (New York, 2013), p. 785.

the Southeast.²⁸ The Government sought information on the institution of pawnship with specific interest in the pawns' gender, the age, the nature of the agreements, how young brides fit into the realm of debt bondage and how and if pawns gave consent. In addition, officials wanted to know what link pawning continued to have with slavery.²⁹ The responses to the questionnaires on 'Tribal Customs and Superstitions of the Southern Province of Nigeria: Practice of Pawning Children as Security for Debts'³⁰ listed marriage customs, pawning, child stealing, prostitution and various forms of slavery as ways that Nigerians mobilized juvenile labour.³¹ Even though the responses resulted in contradictory assessments about the nature and conditions of child pawning, the reports did detail the ways in which girls moved under one form of guardianship to another.

Marriage practices, in particular, had been a concern of colonial administrators. In particular, British officials initially set the age of consent at 12 years of age, and a girl of that age would be required to give her written consent to marry her future husband by signing a Certificate of Betrothal and then a Certificate of Marriage. Colonial authorities wanted the wife, husband and both sets of parents to sign the Certificate of Marriage to ensure that the marriage was legitimate.³² The entire scheme would become unenforceable. Many parents, brides and grooms were illiterate making it impossible to prove that any of the participants knew what they were signing. Even if the parents truly did understand what they signed, a mere signature did not prevent parents and other guardians from selling a girl outright. By 1927, the colonial administration defined any persons under the age of 16 years as a child.³³ Because a child could be betrothed by her parents in infancy, and taken in lieu of repayment on a debt while still a young child, it is immediately apparent that colonial perceptions of acceptable marriage practices differed from local practices. Consequently, the specific focus on child marriages moved to that of child pawns and slaves, which in turn highlighted the porosity between various servile statuses.

²⁸ Dimitri van den Bersselaar, *In Search of Igbo Identity: Language, Culture and Politics in Nigeria, 1900–1966* (Leiden, 1998), p. 178. District Officer of Owerri Reginald Hargrove compiled and edited the responses.

²⁹ 'Files of the Egba Judicial Council, Tribal Customs and Superstitions of Southern Nigeria (Pawning)', 1920s, CSO 26/1 #06827, 'Pawning of Children', Nigeria National Archive Ibadan.

³⁰ *I. Tribal Customs and Superstitions of the Southern Province II. Practice of Pawning Children as Security for Debts of Parents*, CSO 26/1/074 Vol. I, Nigeria National Archive Ibadan.

³¹ For a full discussion of the term 'mobilizing juvenile labour' see Marie Rodet, "'Under the Guise of Guardianship and Marriage': Mobilizing Juvenile and Female Labor in the Aftermath of Slavery in Kayes, French Soudan, 1900–1939', in Benjamin N. Lawrance and Richard L. Roberts, eds, *Trafficking in Slavery's Wake: Law and the Experience of Women and Children in Africa* (Athens, OH, 2012), pp. 86–100.

³² *I. Tribal Customs and Superstitions of the Southern Province II.*

³³ Judith Byfield, 'Pawns and Politics: The Pawnship Debate in Western Nigeria', in Toyin Falola and Paul E. Lovejoy, eds, *Pawnship in Africa: Debt Bondage in Historical Perspective* (Boulder, CO, 1994), p. 199. By defining the legal age of consent of a pawn at the age of sixteen, the colonial government had codified the legal age of consent as it related to marriage.

Four main patterns existed by which girls moved from one form of dependency to another, including marriage, pawning, sale and seizure. Marriage was perhaps the most complicated manner in which females left their natal homes. Marriage did not exist as an institution solely between a man and a woman, but developed as an arrangement between two households comprised of senior and junior men and women. The stories from Aba, Owerri, Onitsha and Calabar illustrate the prolonged and complex courtship and betrothal processes for most Southeast residents. Missionary George Basden described that a young man in Onitsha usually had his father serve as an intermediary, who approached the woman's family. The intermediary presented palm wine or gin and kola nuts as initial gifts, but never discussed the potential marriage during the first few meetings. The intermediary continued to bring gifts to the future bride's home and, after some time, the groom's intentions were made public.³⁴ After some negotiation, the future husband's family offered a brideprice, in some form of wealth, to the bride-to-be's family. This exchange represented a formal contract.³⁵

In Owerri, an informant explains that during the 1920s, '[i]n most cases, the bride must consent to marry the groom before the bride's family accepts the brideprice.'³⁶ Even if a groom acquired a wife through pawning, an elder in Owerri remarked: 'It is a belief that brides are never for sale. The payments attached to the bride are just to fulfil certain traditional obligations as no amount could buy a child.'³⁷ Even when a girl child was pawned, when she was old enough she could marry the man of her choosing provided the debt was repaid before the marriage.³⁸

Most societies in Southeastern Nigeria practiced exogamy and parents planned for their daughter's departure even when she was quite young. As such, girls often served her family's economic needs, as pawns, when her family experienced economic stress. In Enugu, one elder explains:

The belief of our people is that a girl belongs to somewhere else, that is to say, she will be married outside of the place, [the] compound, [where] she is born. But for boys, people want somebody who will take over for them, when they die and who will remain in the compound.³⁹

³⁴ G. T. Basden, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria* (Dublin, 2006), pp. 70–1.

³⁵ *Annual Reports of Bende Division, South Eastern Nigeria, 1905–1912: With a Commentary by G. I. Jones* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 91.

³⁶ Anthony Nwadinke, interview by Ezeji Grace on behalf of Robin P. Chapdelaine, 21 August 2012.

³⁷ Nelson Anyanele Ezeji, interview by Ezeji Grace on behalf of Robin P. Chapdelaine, 21 August 2012.

³⁸ *I. Tribal Customs and Superstitions of the Southern Province II*, pp. 92–3.

³⁹ Chief Daniel E. N. Agbo, J.P., interview by Anayo Enechukwu on behalf of Robin P. Chapdelaine, 8 August 2012.

In a culture that positioned women as family members who left the natal village, it was expected that families planned their future access to earnings based on having a daughter.

Customarily, a groom in Owerri would begin the courtship process by bringing palm wine to the future bride's home. One woman describes the process:

When a man finds a girl he likes and proposes to her, and the girl agrees, he proceeds to the parents. The man goes for the first visit with a keg of palm wine tagged *mmanya ajuju* (meaning inquiry drink) where he makes his intentions known to the parents. On saying the purpose for the visit, the girl child would be called upon and asked if she knew the man. If she says yes, she will be told what the man's mission were [was]. She is then asked if they should drink palm wine, and if she says yes, it translates that she has consented to the proposal.⁴⁰

She goes on to describe the next stage of the proposal explaining:

The man will be asked again to come on a market day... with another keg of palm wine titled, *mmanya ezi-uka* [meaning reality drink]. It is in this state that the groom will now be given the list of traditional items required for the marriage. And once these items [brideprice inclusive] are provided, he is said to have completed the marriage rites. They would be blessed by both families and asked to live peacefully amidst singing and dancing by family and friends.⁴¹

The process included extended negotiations that included senior members of the girl's family. Most importantly, it required the future bride's consent.

The payment of a brideprice held varying significance dependent on location. In Aba, one senior woman recalls that as the father of the bride continued negotiations, over time the groom would present, 'items like a keg of palm-wine, snuff, tubers of yam, hens and cocks', and noted that by the 1920s and 1930s men also paid a sum of around £20.⁴² Another informant from Calabar claims that men often worked for the girl's parents for an agreed term before they would let him marry their daughter, in addition to a payment of money and goods.⁴³ Paying a brideprice was mandatory in almost every region in the Southeast.⁴⁴ However, another informant claimed that among the Ibibio in Calabar, 'people attach little to [the] brideprice. Once they find themselves in love, they get married with or without cause to tradition. They may have up to four children before thinking of going for traditional rights.' However, if an

⁴⁰ Mrs Anthonia Nkechinyere Ibeawuchi, interview by Augustine Onyemauchekwu on behalf of Robin P. Chapdelaine, 25 August 2012.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Callista Okemmadu Ibocheonwu, interview by Cynthia E. Uche on behalf of Robin P. Chapdelaine, 22 August 2012.

⁴³ Kinsley Agu, interview by Ifeoma Obijiaku on behalf of Robin P. Chapdelaine, 21 August 2012.

⁴⁴ Chief Daniel E.N. Agbo, J.P interview.

Ibibio parent needed a loan they would pawn a girl child with the understanding that the girl would be taken as a bride if they failed to repay the debt.⁴⁵ Oral testimonies provide intriguing details, which highlight similarities and differences among marriage norms during the 1920s in the Southeast. The payment of a brideprice signified the symbolic and real value of the woman offered in marriage and the utility of linking moneylending agreements with the exchange of a female pawn.

The second way girls departed from their homes was when a father, uncle or older brother needed a loan and made the decision to pawn a child. The uses for a pawned child depended on his or her gender.⁴⁶ Often pawned boys assisted with farm work, worked as apprentices or assisted with trade activities. Girl pawns also worked on farms, as domestic labourers, caretakers of young children and often ended up as the moneylenders' wives. Upon maturation, pawned women contributed to the family economy through reproduction, adding to their master's wealth, in addition to the domestic and agricultural work.

Nze Azubuike Azuka from Calabar explains that when his maternal grandparents, who lived in current-day Anambra State, had pawned his mother, they sent her to a moneylender in Calabar. Having nine other children to provide for and his mother being the most beautiful girl, his grandparents pawned her knowing that she would attract the largest loan. Nze asserts that no parent ever wanted to pawn out a child.⁴⁷ As such, pawning a child was generally a temporary contract, but the arrangement could last for years. In Amorji-Nike, Enugu, men pawned their daughters to rich men and repaid the loan when the girl decided to marry.⁴⁸ The female pawn's future groom paid the brideprice to the moneylender, not the father. However, Chief Anthony Chibueze Agubaram of Calabar claims that sometimes a child would be sold into slavery if not redeemed at the time specified by the original agreement during the 1920s. People of Calabar who suffered the loss of a child labelled the moneylenders 'devil merchants'.⁴⁹ Presumably due to the unpredictable and precarious nature of child pawning, Anthony Nwadinko, an elder born in Owerri in 1914, recalls that child pawning remained a private family affair.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, in some cases families expected to redeem the girl before she married.

A chief who lived in Awo Mbieri, Owerri, acquired one of his seven wives by accepting a female pawn. The chief's son, Ahanotu Marcelenus recalls that the father of the woman (not his own mother), 'owed my father [a debt] and subsequently decided to give out their daughter's

⁴⁵ Nze Azubuike Azuka, interview by Ifeoma Obijiaku on behalf of Robin P. Chapdelaine.

⁴⁶ Lovejoy and Falola, *Pawnship, Slavery, and Colonialism in Africa*, p. 6.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Elder Abraham Oloko, interview by Anayo Enechukwu on behalf of Robin P. Chapdelaine, 2 August 2012.

⁴⁹ Chief Anthony Chibueze Agubaram, interview by Ifeoma Obijiaku on behalf of Robin P. Chapdelaine, 22 August 2012.

⁵⁰ Anthony Nwadinko interview.

hand in marriage to my father to offset the debt. And the debt served as the dowry, which in a normal circumstance, my father was supposed to pay them.⁵¹ Marcellenus' personal account represents one of the many ways that wealthy men acquired girl pawns as wives.

The Senior Resident of Onitsha reported that the practice of pawning female children was universal among some Onitsha villagers during the early 1920s. One Resident offered his observation:

Among a very primitive people like these, among whom females are largely regarded as of such monetary value, where wives are merely bought and sold, where sexual intercourse both among the married and unmarried is to a large extent promiscuous from an early age, where ethical standards in the family affairs of family life do not exist, it can hardly be a matter of surprise that the practice of pawning still remains. They would have no special customs about pawning – the pawn being merely regarded as a chattel of varying value.⁵²

It was difficult for colonial representatives to imagine a community where females existed as both an economic assets and valued family members. As Anglican missionary George T. Basden realized, Igbo parents expressed a 'deep fondness' for their children. Parents wanted as many children as they could have and considered them 'priceless possessions'. Just as I have found in the oral interviews commissioned for this project, the parents' – especially the mother's – expression of love for a child seemed to always be apparent.⁵³

It is also untrue that there were no special customs assigned to pawning in the Southeastern Provinces. As Nigeria's economy became more embedded into the global economy, and local norms came under colonial scrutiny, it is clear pawning practices changed as the transatlantic slave trade died down and domestic slavery increased. Similar to the historical trajectory Lacy S. Farrell maps out in her treatment of child migration in colonial Ghana,⁵⁴ Southeastern Nigeria's long history of normalizing the movement of children, whether it be through pawnship or slavery, served an economic purpose. One Enugu resident claims that people practiced pawning in secret and that it 'is a business system. You don't advertise everything.'⁵⁵ For example, it was normal for a father to pretend he was going to the market or to visit a friend. He would take the child for several days in a row to see the moneylender and then one day return without her. Upon his return, he told his family that the child chose to remain with his friend, but he would not reveal the location of the child.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Ahanotu Marcellenus, interview by Augustine Onyemauchekwku on behalf of Robin P. Chapdelaine, 23 August 2012. Marcellenus was born in Awo Mbieri, Owerri in 1935.

⁵² Letter from Sgd. H.T.B. Dew, District Officer, Enugu Province, National Archives, Onitsha, CSO 26/106827, (12 February 1923), 37–9.

⁵³ Basden, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*, p. 64.

⁵⁴ Ferrell, this volume, Chapter 7.

⁵⁵ Elder Abraham Oloko interview.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

Another Enugu elder from Nike explained that when a pawning exchange took place outside where both men wore no shoes and that, 'no man will change what he said. He is afraid of the land. If you agree upon something and you disobey it, the land will kill you.'⁵⁷ It seems that most Enugu parents did not marry off or pawn their children without thoughtful consideration of customary processes. However, there were instances when a family member, not the child's parent, sold the child without her parents' consent.

The third manner in which female children left their home is when a father, older brother or uncle sold them, sometimes under the guise of receiving a brideprice payment.⁵⁸ Mrs Anthonia Nkechinyere Ibeawuchi of Ikeduru, Owerri tells the story of one of her friends who married the son of a moneylender. She explains that even though the practice of giving a girl as a bride in return for a payment from creditor was frowned upon, 'parents had no choice to engage in it since their deteriorated economic situation could not let them solve their [own financial] problem.'⁵⁹ One informant from Amorji, Enugu explains that when a parent offered a female child in return for payment, they would say, 'You have helped me, use this female child. Marry her for the good job you've done for us.'⁶⁰ While pawning was an accepted practice, selling a child into a marriage was not.

In patrilineal societies, fathers often sold their children in secrecy owing to the fact that if the mother's people (father, uncle or brother) found out, they would 'go to the man and make him produce the child or the man would be banished. Some people have been forced to go and retrieve the child because of [familial] pressure.'⁶¹ Another elder from Amorji-Nike, Enugu, Abraham Oloko, stressed that the people of Nike never sold their own children into slavery. He claims that, 'Selling is an abomination', but pawning was acceptable.⁶² However, the elder admitted that people bought children from outside of Nike. He explained that child dealers would kidnap children from other towns and sell them to the rich men. However, a Nike man would never ask whether or not a child had been stolen, but would accept the child when the child dealer claimed that he was offering his 'own' child. The children were most likely used for agricultural labour.

Outright seizure is yet another way traffickers removed children from their homes. Chief Ugwuofi Reuben from Enugu attributes the child stealing that occurred during the 1920s and 1930s to the

⁵⁷ Elder Abraham Oloko interview.

⁵⁸ *Annual Report of Owerri 1921*, 42, CSO 26 No. 03928. Nigeria National Archive Ibadan.

⁵⁹ Mrs Anthonia Nkechinyere Ibeawuchi interview.

⁶⁰ HRH Igwe Dr Titus Okolo, interview by Anayo Enechukwu on behalf of Robin P. Chapdelaine, 2 August 2012.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Elder Oloko, interview by Anayo Enechukwu on behalf of Robin P. Chapdelaine. It is important to note that while many societies in Southeastern Nigerian pawned both sons and daughters, Abraham of Nike claims that the Nike people never pawned boys.

colonial economy.⁶³ The Owerri Province suffered from the steep drop in palm export prices during the Depression years.⁶⁴ Kidnappers recouped costs by employing child labour on farms, in petty trade, domestic services or prostitution. They also stole girls in order to collect the brideprice upon marriage. Some dealers also acted as middlemen and eventually passed the child along to a willing buyer in a different region within or outside of Igboland.

In 1920, a woman from Bende complained that her child had been stolen from her some years past. She had recently found the child in Aba, a major market centre, and the child testified that a family member took her and gave her to Abraham Hart, a trader at Bonny. Upon questioning, Hart produced a signed marriage certificate. The District Office of Aba believed this was either a case of child selling or pawning. In any case, the transaction was completed without the mother's consent. Even so, Hart could not be easily prosecuted because one of the girl's family members agreed to the marriage transaction.⁶⁵ The District Officer of Owerri claimed that, 'relatives of children stolen are often employed by agents to entice the children from their homes'.⁶⁶ By virtue of at least one family member knowing the whereabouts of the child, the action could not be deemed kidnapping.

There continued to be reports involving female child dealing. In 1921 and 1923 the District Officer of Okigwe reported:

It is worthy of note that there are signs of Slave Dealing being on the wane. But there is an enormous amount of trade – in truth Slave Dealing – carried on in young girls, but convictions are practically impossible on account of Dowry being legal. These girls are bought – so called married and Dowry paid up country and then taken to the coast and passed on at an enormous profit. In so called Dowry.⁶⁷

The main form this takes in Owerri – apart from stealing children in the Onicha country – is the traffic in young children or even young women under the guise of marriage. The New Calabars are fond of that trick. They promise large dowries and pay little or nothing. On getting the woman to Degema they are sold and married off.⁶⁸

Evidence of this type of female child dealing existed at various levels across Igboland. In 1923, an Awka chief issued a £20 fine upon a man

⁶³ Chief Ugwuefi Reuben, interview by Anayo Enechukwu on behalf of Robin P. Chapdelaine, 5 August 2012.

⁶⁴ Ben Naanen, 'Economy within an Economy: The Manilla Currency, Exchange Rate Instability and Social Conditions in South-Eastern Nigeria, 1900–48', *The Journal of African History* 34(3) (1993), 442.

⁶⁵ E. Falk, 'Letter from E. Falk, District Officer at Aba to J. Ashley, Assistant District Officer at Bende "Cases of Slave Dealing"', 7 November 1920, 107, OkiDist 4/2/1, Nigeria National Archive Enugu. It is unknown the exact relation that Hart had with the girl.

⁶⁶ Major Stevenson, 'Letter from District Officer at Owerri, Major Stevenson to the Senior Resident, Owerri Province', 17 June 1933, NAE C136 Child Stealing Rivprof 2/1/24, Nigeria National Archive Enugu.

⁶⁷ *Owerri Provincial Annual Report for 1921*, 1921, 42, CSO 26/03928, Nigeria National Archive Ibadan.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

and in return he pawned his seven-year-old daughter.⁶⁹ The chief was expected to keep the child until she was old enough to marry, but instead sold her. Cases such as these continued to be a concern for the colonial officials.

Colonial Response to Child Dealing

Owerri's District Officer reported that the majority of child dealing was in young girls, but it was impossible to convict predators due to the nature of the exchange and its relationship to marriage contracts. The ability to seamlessly transform a moneylending contract into one of marriage became a point of contention for British officials. If the debt remained unpaid, the loan given to the debtor was then considered a brideprice payment, and the girl became a wife.⁷⁰ One perspective of British officials:

The case of pawning female children is somewhat different, as if the debtor does not redeem his daughter within a reasonable time, she would be liable to be married by her master to the man of his choice, but only with the consent of one of the child's parents or guardians, and the marriage dowry received would be taken, or part of it, in settlement of the debt, the parents of the girl very seldom objected to the marriage, as they know that sooner or later his debt would have to be paid, and it was immaterial to him whom his daughter married, as long as he received what he considered a fair dowry fee. It must be remembered that women and female children have no say in these matters, and are only considered a man's chattels, which he can do pretty well what he likes with.⁷¹

The quote misrepresents the realities of pawning practices and marriage customs. A pawned girl could decide whom she married, provided that her future husband paid a brideprice that covered the debt. Moreover, British officials did not understand the cultural and social implications of being a slave or being married to a slave.⁷² It was quite material to Igbo fathers 'who' their daughters married. Social anthropologist Miss M. M. Green noted that any person who had a slave ancestor who was sacrificed to a deity was considered an *Osu* (slave). A freeborn—

⁶⁹ Agbala itinerant blacksmiths dealt in slaves and it is likely that the chief intended to sell the girl to a blacksmith.

⁷⁰ Archival and primary sources and informants suggest that there were no fixed limits on the time a girl pawn would be held before she was taken as a wife. In each case, the prevailing personal situation of both the moneylender and debtor determined the outcome of the pawning transaction.

⁷¹ Frank Hive, *Report on the Pawning of Children in the Southern Provinces, Nigeria, as Called for by His Honour Lieutenant-Governor, Southern Provinces, Vide Secretary Southern Provinces' Confidential Memo No. C.2/23*, 17 January 1923, CSO 26/1 #06827. Vol. I. 'Pawning 1920s', Nigeria National Archive Ibadan.

⁷² Carolyn A. Brown, 'Testing the Boundaries of Marginality: Twentieth-Century Slavery and Emancipation Struggles in Nkanu, Northern Igboland, 1920–29', *The Journal of African History* 37(1) (1996), 53.

Osu marriage continued to be considered taboo in Owerri as late as the 1930s;⁷³ freeborn parents did not want their daughters to marry an *Osu*. Nevertheless, officials continued to suggest that parents gave away girls without any consideration for their status or well-being.

Colonial authorities had a difficult time intervening in many money-lending arrangements because other forms of authority existed over those matters. For those who chose not to use the warrant chiefs (indigenous rulers) and native court system, debtors sometimes chose to borrow under the direction of the *Ekpe* societies. Reverend Thomas John McKenzie, a Primitive Methodist minister, recounted his dealings between 1919 and 1921 with the *Efik Ekpe* secret society (also known as Egbo) that dealt with debt cases. The *Ekpe* secret societies provided systems of credit management and collection during the slave trade and then the palm oil trade period well into the 1920s. Under the *Ekpe*, if the debtor failed to repay on the agreed date, he would be fined and his family members, including children, could be taken as hostages; at times the *Ekpe* would seize his livestock.⁷⁴

The League members agreed that the inherent problem with the indigenous marriage customs was that it camouflaged female child dealing. They found this to be the case in other colonies, such as Hong Kong and Liberia. However, when the British attempted to pass laws in Nigeria that codified Nigerian marriage customs, in effect, the process created a way for child dealers to traffic children and avoid prosecution by showing 'legal' documents.⁷⁵ The creation of marriage certificates was established to assure that all parties involved in the union gave consent. The wives, husbands and their parents had to give written permission for the marriage to be considered legitimate. But in many cases, child dealers used false marriage certificates as 'certificates of insurance' that allowed them to travel with young girls and falsely claim that in fact their parents had given the child for the purpose of marriage.⁷⁶ Having the certificates in hand demonstrated that the girl's parents had given the child for the purpose of marriage.

In cases where pawning directly overlapped with marriage arrangements, some colonial officials did not want to intervene. In fact, the District Officer of Warri advised: 'It is difficult to say how the betrothal question should be dealt with and I feel inclined to recommend that no further steps be taken to make it illegal.'⁷⁷ In 1923, British Residents contrasted a female pawn to a domestic in England 'who is placed by her mother in service where there is no one to see

⁷³ M. M. Green, *Ibo Village Affairs* (New York, 1964), p. 158.

⁷⁴ Rev. T. McKenzie, 'A Few Words of Interest Relating to Missionary Life in Southern Nigeria, West Africa 1919–1921', June 1922, 126, MMS 1204, School of Oriental and African Studies.

⁷⁵ Report by Mr O. W. Firth, District Officer in Charge of Okigwi Division, 'Pawning of Children', 31 January 1923, in *I. Tribal Customs and Superstitions of the Southern Province II*.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Mr Butler, District Officer of Warri, *I. Tribal Customs and Superstitions of the Southern Province II*.

that the mistress does not overwork the girl and that she is properly and sufficiently fed and decently housed. This domestic is probably in a little more helpless position than the female pawn.' Influenced by Britain's rise of the middleclass where domestic servants were young girls entrusted to middle class households, it is not surprising that he used this analogy.⁷⁸

The Resident goes on to compare pauper children in Great Britain to child pawns in Nigeria and assures the reader that the pawn is never very far from his or her family. Parents and relatives visited them, and benefactors allowed children to return home for customary festivals.⁷⁹ Just as officials compared slaves to serfs during the transatlantic slave trade, colonial officials often painted a rosy picture of pawning.⁸⁰ It is important to note that not all accounts were so complimentary of the institution as represented in the colonial officials responses, but even when officials received information regarding the abuses of pawnship they shared the information cautiously. One Owerri informant recalls that, '[i]n most cases, pawned children are treated with contempt and are looked upon as instruments to be used and discarded at will. Those parental affections emanating from a family does [*sic*] not extend to pawned children.'⁸¹

With an ambivalent approach to ending child pawnship or girl marriages, Southeastern Nigerians continued to find ways to use the institution of marriage to disguise forms of female child dealing with minimal intervention. It was only for the most obvious cases that colonial officials intervened. For instance, an Ijaw man named Bob Onana was caught with a 12-year-old Igbo girl Uche Abeaku in his canoe in Isu, Okigwe District. When questioned about the girl, Onana claimed that her father, Maduekwe, agreed to offer her in marriage for a £20 brideprice. When officials interrogated the father, Madueke said that Onana only paid him half of the requested brideprice and that he married his daughter off to 'gain money'.⁸² Police did not believe that a real marriage had been contracted because Onana did not have a marriage certificate and because neither party spoke the other's language. In this case, authorities did prosecute Onana because, according to the colonial perspective, the father had sold the child.

⁷⁸ 'Letter from W.A. Ross, Senior Resident, Oyo Province to Secretary of Southern Provinces', 14 March 1923, 26-7, CSO/26/1 #06827 Vol. I Pawning, Nigeria National Archive Ibadan.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Frank Wesley Pitman, 'The Treatment of the British West Indian Slaves in Law and Custom', *The Journal of Negro History* 11(4) (1926), 616.

⁸¹ Anthony Nwadinko interview.

⁸² 'Letter from the Chief Inspector to the Commissioner of Police at Port Harcourt', 3 February 1927, OkiDist 4/9/42 Slave Dealing, Nigeria National Archive Enugu.

Conclusion

International efforts that sought to highlight and end the traffic in women in children enjoyed limited success. However, the investigations into child pawning, stealing and dealing, in general, produced colonial documents that outlined the trade in children and women in intricate detail as colonial officials understood it. Oral testimonies provide location specific details about how parents, guardians, moneylenders and slave dealers went about transferring children. We also see how British concerns about the colonial economy often subordinated international concerns about child dealing, especially when palm oil product revenue declined dramatically.⁸³ This ambivalent approach is identified in the views offered by colonial officials as they compared English pauper children to Nigerian child pawns, suggesting that the welfare of the indigenous child was always better sustained. Reading the colonial documents with a critical eye has allowed for an analysis that recognizes that some colonial officials were much more focused on buttressing the Nigeria's economic output than they were in unpacking the complexities and conditions of child pawnship. Oral testimonies also highlight how child pawns suffered from abuse in the environments in which they lived, refuting any claim by authorities that it was an innocuous social status. Moreover, personal accounts, which illuminate the porosity between the statuses of slaves, pawns and child brides suggests that it was nearly impossible for the colonial government to identify and stop all instances of child trafficking.

As I have shown in this chapter, Southeastern Nigerians enabled the movement of children under several auspices during the 1920s. While it is relatively easy to describe the number of ways a child might be transferred, it is not as easy to ascertain how or when one form of servile status transitioned into another. Understanding that these categories are not always mutually exclusive, one can imagine how parents, guardians, moneylenders, slave traders and others could work within the colonial system without much intervention.

For the larger international community focused on ending modern-day slavery, child trafficking and child labour, it is imperative that the unique history of each geographical location is assessed. For Nigeria, its extensive history related to the transatlantic slave trade, integration into the global economy via palm oil exports, which necessitated an increase of domestic labour, contributed to the normalization of child trafficking. In addition, an analysis of the decades following the 1920s offers an explanation of how the global economic crash of the late 1920s influenced child trafficking as it related to the increased pressure Nigerians experienced with colonial taxation, the

⁸³ I. *Tribal Customs and Superstitions of the Southern Province II*; see also S. P. George, *Slave Dealing and Child Stealing Investigation* (Bende, Owerri, 4 February 1935), C136 Child Stealing, Rivprof 2/1/24, Nigeria National Archive Enugu.

increased need for personal loans and the eventual consequence of the integration of British currency. Understanding West Africa's history will provide a cultural analysis that economic analyses may lack. In doing so, perhaps scholars and policy makers can shape a culturally specific approach to mediate the economic and social issues that cause child trafficking.