

Equiano Narratives

An Historical Inquiry into Igbo Drinking Culture

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Abstract

The drinking habits of the Igbo people changed with their contact with Europeans around 1600s through their coastal neighbours. Prior to this contact, the only alcoholic brand known to the people was palm wine. Prominent Igbo merchants such as the *Aro* played vital role in spreading European trade goods such as alcohol in exchange for slaves. As a result of the absence of written source, Equiano narratives of 1789 offers a useful alternative in understanding the fact that the Europeans importation of brands such as Schnapps, Brandy, Whiskey, Rum, etc altered the cultural habits of the people with regards to alcohol use. Using Equiano narratives therefore, this paper concludes that Igbo people were moderate alcohol drinkers relying solely on palm wine prior to their contact with Europeans.

Keywords: Equiano, libation, Moderate drinking, Trans Atlantic Slave trade etc

Introduction

Excessive alcoholism was not originally an aspect of Igbo life and culture. Rather, external influences such as slave trade and colonialism were responsible for excess alcohol availability. 'Equiano Narratives' published around 1789 is the first written account of Igbo life by an Igbo which raised key issue on alcohol availability and culture in his native home, Essaka. Since Equiano's publication, scholarship on Igbo studies has revolved solely on the authenticity of his account rather than utilising it as a veritable tool of development and to a large extent reconstruct the past. Unfortunately, emphasis has been limited on the question of Equiano's personality. In her account, Acholonu (2007) wrote a masterpiece that traced Equiano town to Isseke in present day Anambra State Nigeria. Unfortunately, being a backyard historian as Osiki (2008) chooses to quantify non-professional historians, she employed questionable barometers in reconstructing Equiano's nativity. Thus her acclaimed masterpiece has received critical commentaries from Igbo and non-Igbo scholars alike. One of such critics is Ozidi (2008:1) who observes as follows:

the materials written by some Igbos on this man's origin are not persuasive. In fact, some of them are silly. Consider Catherine Acholonu's book, she claimed to have interviewed Igbos who knew Olaudah. This was in the 1980's, two hundred Years after Olaudah's death.

Hence, Vincent Caretta, a professor of English at the University of Maryland, wrote that Equiano carefully, even artfully, crafted his African identity. He argues that Equiano may have fabricated his African roots and his survival of the middle passage not only to sell more copies of his book but also help advance the movement against the slave trade. According to him, Equiano knew that to continue its increasing momentum, the eighteenth century anti slave trade movement needed precisely the kind of account of Africa and the middle passage he could supply. An African, not an African-American voice, was what the abolitionist cause required. He gave a voice to the millions of people forcibly taken from Africa and brought to the Americans as slaves. Equiano recognised a way to do very well financially by doing a great deal of good in supplying the much needed voice. Caretta claims that through baptismal and naval records it was evident that Equiano was born in South Carolina around 1747. This implies that he invented his African upbringing and his much quoted account of the middle passage on a slave ship (Caretta, 2005). Scholars like Paul Love Joy (2006 :1), a leading academic in African History, challenged Caretta's claim on Equiano as Follows:

The methodological issues here relate to how historians engage oral tradition, memory and other non written sources with the written record. If Equiano was an eye witness to events and practices in Africa, that's one thing. If his account is a composite of stories and information: gathered from others, it's another matter.

Elements of Igboness as accounted by Olaudah Equiano could not have been fictionalised. This is because environmental description and traditional humane living of the Igbo people in areas like agriculture, marriages, warfare, alcohol, religion, politics, etc contained in his narratives are too unique to be fiction. Nevertheless, Douglas (1997:77) observes that the Igbo represented as much as third of all slaves that arrived British Caribbean. What then would have created doubts in Caretta's claim of Equiano's false claim to be an Igbo? Could it be possible that Equiano would have fictionalised that snakes (python-Eke) do not harm in his Igbo village? Of course, it is still the same in 21st century. Second, Equiano mentioned food in his village to include *Edeas* which is the Igbo name for cocoyam; and could Equiano have fictionalized also his name *Olaudah* which means vicissitude or fortune, loud voice and well spoken? The present writer sees Caretta's work as subjective academic piece that involved in the continuous struggle of promoting Eurocentric view of Africans contribution to world civilisations. Hence, this paper focuses on Equiano narratives as unit of analysis of the Igbo drinking culture which is an aspect of his Igbo identity.

Alcohol in Pre-Colonial Igbo Society

Moderate drinking was part of the Igbo traditional humane living. The emphasis here is that intoxicants such as rum, beer, gin and spirits accompanied Trans Atlantic slavery and colonialism into Igbo land. Brewing historically dates back to Egyptian civilisation, as *Osiris* was the god in charge of wine. By

1690, England passed an act encouraging the distillation of Brandy and spirits from corn. By 1736, it was recorded that about 1.5 million people drank over 18 million gallons of gin. Thus there was legislation, because of the harmful effect of alcohol, to reduce the sale of gin by increasing taxation (Hanson, <http://www.2.potodam.edu/hansod/controversies/1114796842.htm>). Hence, the activities of the sailors who visited the coast of Africa show that they used gin to entice the native chiefs for exchange in slaves and probably because of its restriction in the western world. A dumping ground for a generation of drunkards was then actualised. (Okonkwo, 2013:60) This marks the origin of alcohol in large quantities into our area of study, the Igbo and Basden (1966:31) concurs to this-view that:

In their primitive state, the Ibos were not acquainted with any method of brewing intoxicating liquor. They never made use of corn or bananas for manufacturing beer or spirits. Their favourite drink was and is still palm wine. This they extract from the tree, the common oil palm or the ngwo (*raphia vinifera*).

Equiano's narrative also informs us of the moderate drinking habits in pre colonial Igbo society. According to him:

They are totally unacquainted with strong and spirituous liquor and their principal village beverage is palm wine, this is got from a tree of that name, by tapping it at the top and fastening a large gourd on it; and sometimes on tree will yield three or four gallon in a night. When just dawn, it is of a most delicious sweetness; but in a few days it acquires a tarnish and more spirituous flavour; though I never saw anyone intoxicated by it. (Equiano, 1968)

By implication therefore, the traditional Igbo society did not accommodate drunkards. In any case, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* reveals Igbo drinking culture as well as gender sensitivity that surrounds alcohol intake. In his account, men always drink two or three horns before inviting the women folk. Nwakabie was accounted to have invited his eldest wife Anasi who took a horn from the husband, knelt down and drank a little and other wives followed suit based on age and status. And the men, as Achebe recorded, continued drinking (Achebe, 1958). The need to invoke Achebe's work to ascertain Equiano's realities of the Igbo past in his narratives has been discussed by relevant authorities in the field of humanities. One of such scholars wrote as follows:

Even though they were formed by oral story telling both men have their contributions in written stories, Equiano in the story of his personal life and Achebe in fiction. Both men also use their narratives not only to explore personal and fictive experiences but also to recreate their societies and culture with care and integrity and indirectly, to help rehabilitate the image and the black world under attack by anti-Black writers and philosophers. (Obiechina, 1994:31)

Alcohol in the Igbo days of Equiano was moderate compared to contemporary Igbo society. The overall use of alcohol in Igbo culture varied especially in pre-colonial times. In most cases, alcohol played significant role in sexual satisfaction of newly married couples. Achebe recorded that the dregs

of palm wine were the reserve of men "with jobs at hand." The case of Igwelo the eldest son of Nwakibia confirms that:

Everybody agreed that Igwelo should drink the dregs. He accepted the half full horn from his brother and drank it. As idigo had said, Igwelo had a job in hand because he had married first wife a month or two before. The thick dregs of palm wine were supposed to be good for men who were going into their wives. (Achebe, 1958)

Hence, palm wine served useful purpose for fertility and breast feeding mothers. Another account by the first Igbo female novelist Flora Nwapa asserts the relevance of palm wine to the newly delivered mother as follows:

That evening, Efuru complained that her breasts were not full. In fact they were getting dry. She was afraid her baby might die of starvation if there was no milk in her breast. Ajanapu was sent for at once. It is simple. When I had my first baby, the same thing happened to me. You have to drink plenty of palm wine. (Nwapa, 1966:33)

The mild intoxicating nature of palm wine led Basden (1966:33) to conclude that it is almost a physical impossibility to get drunk on fresh palm wine. It is important to note that alcohol in pre colonial Igbo society assumed relevance in Igbo ritual practice. Such socio-cultural change in Basden's view destroyed some old customs. According to him, to be offered whisky or German beer when visiting a native chief is an innovation greatly to be deplored, especially when compared with the old ceremony of sealing friendships by sharing kola nuts (Basden, 1966^b:33). Hence Equiano notes that pouring libation was part of the people's culture for departed relations, for presiding over the conduct of the living as well as guarding them from evil. (Equiano, 1968:73) It has also been recorded that market days, festivals and during burial ceremonies, are times when the effects of drinking are more evident (Basden, 1921:125, Babor 1986:99). Nevertheless, the use of alcohol in pre-colonial African has been summarized to be closely linked with the economic and social events of the village such as harvest celebrations, family feasts and business agreements. (Babor, 1986:97)

Equiano Narratives, the Igbo and External Alcohol Influence

Equiano since 1789 has informed us of his experience with alcohol on board as a slave to the new world. He recalled as follows:

One of the crew brought me a small portion of spirituous liquor in a wine glass; but being afraid of him, I would not take it out of his hand. One of the blacks therefore took it from him and gave it to me, and I took a little down my palate, which instead of reviving me, as they thought it would, threw me into the greatest consternation at the strange feeling. it produced having never tested any such liquor before (Equiano, 1968:93).

The emphasis here is that alcohol availability into Africa became so pronounced with the Trans Atlantic slave trade. Hence foreign spirits became introduced into African cultural festivals such as the Igbo yam festival (Smith, 2004:131). Basden(1966:125) recalls that imported liquor has given cause for

concerns and comments. According to him, the introduction of spirits on the coast is a practice centuries old, but it should be remembered that it is a foreign feature. Scholars like Babor (1986:49) and Dike (1956:7) in their analysis of liquor trade in Africa argues that its availability was because it was not expensive to produce and second, it was economical to transport. It has been argued that during the days of barter, alcohol and guns remained constant in supply. Laying serious claim on the reasons of alcohol availability, Dike continues:

Both in the days of the slave trade and throughout the nineteenth century rum was one of the most important items of trade on the coast. In the eighteenth century distilleries were established at Liverpool for the express purpose of supplying ships bound for Africa. In 1770 New England exports of rum to Africa represented over four-fifths of the total colonial ports of that year (Dike,1956:7).

Babor maintains that liquor was relatively available because it was cheap and was even prescribed by every colonial physician. The relevance of alcohol in pre-colonial Igbo society at the wake of trans Atlantic slave trade led to the transportation of people living around the Niger River not excluding Essaka Village of Olaudah Equiano to the coasts and sold at European trading ports in exchange for muskets and manufactured goods such as cloth or alcohol. Hence Equiano narratives made an important observation, which seems to demonstrate that alcohol acculturation into the hinterland under took a gradual process. He captured the life and style of various village groups he passed and made a bold statement that:

All the nation and people I had passed through resembled. Our own in their manners, customs and language; but I came at length to a country, the inhabitants of which differed from us in all those particulars. I was very much struck with this difference especially when I came among a people who did not circumcise, and eat without washing their hand They cooked also in iron pots and had European cutlasses and cross bows, which were unknown to us and fought with their fists among themselves. Their women were not as modest as ours for they eat, and drank and slept with their men (Equano,1968:91)

Alcohol availability in pre-colonial Igbo land was not in excess, as illustrated in Equiano's account. Nevertheless alcohol production (palm wine) was in the orbit of men who held the means of production. (Smith, 2004:218). Most surprising is the fact that the slaves from Igbo land and other West African states arrived the Caribbean and imbibed in serious alcohol culture of the natives. They used alcohol in oath taking and birth ceremonies to demonstrate group identity just as it is obtainable at home (Smith, 2004:217-221). However, at the inception of alcohol (rum and gin) into Igbo land and its neighbours of the old Eastern region of Nigeria, it was so exorbitant and thus served the thirst of only the elites. With this development, an alternative measure was introduced to enable the poor have access to gin and rum. Ofonagoro (1979:80-81) rightly observed that liquor was so exorbitant that it could cost the earnings of a labourer in nine days. Hence gin and rum were adulterated so that the poor could access them. This demonstrates how expensive liquor was, hence, Latham (1973:75) points out that by 1845 Calabar only imported 788 hog head from rum from liver pool. But with the opening of a steamship line from Clyde

in 1869, cheap spirits flooded into Calabar in increasing quantities. Of course most of the imported gins came with promising medicinal label, thus the local people called it *ogwo nmu oria* - curer of many ill health (Ofonagoro, 1979:96).

Nevertheless, with the increase in adulteration and exorbitant prices of original gin, alternative was sought by the natives. This indigenous method of distillation drew the attention of the colonial government who declared it illicit. Then laws were promulgated to restrict the local production of gin. This generated lots of controversies and questions. Basden queries:

If the Whiteman maintains that spirit drinking is beneficial. Then its production should be encouraged and that, its importation is permitted, surely it is only reasonable that the Blackman should be granted similar favour (Basden 1966:125).

However, the colonial administration from the 1920s imported alcohol in large volumes in Eastern Nigeria as follows:

Table 1
Importation of Gin (Colony and Protectorate)

Year	Quantity	Value in pounds
1927	548,128	146,555
1928	505,065	133,964
1929	386,768	107,593
1930	331,833	93,473
1931	141,311	44,172
1932	115,384	39,567
1933	82,931	29,080
1934	59,312	22,518
1935	77,457	29,610

Source: NAE RIVPROF 2/1/16 file no.c68 vol.2 "illicit Distillation"

The 1930's witnessed indigenous gin production in Eastern Nigeria in spite of colonial Liquor ordinance 131 of 1931 created to suppress indigenous gin production. Meanwhile, the expertise to brew gin was transferred to the local people by an American in Kwa Iboe and from where it spread to Egwanga, Oron, Ikot Ekpene, Aba, Owerri and Ahoada area (N.A.E CSE 1/85/488). The process of distillation requires fermented fruit juice or palm wine and sugar, two bottles or calabashes and a metal worm, a hollow stick of sufficient length such as Bamboo was used (NAE RIVPROF 2/1/17). Thus palm wine is fermented and boiled in a metal drum. The drum is connected to a copper pipe which passed through a wooden filled with water. The water acts as condenser just as distilled liquor is collected at the other end of the copper pipe (Korieh, 2003). This development led to scarcity of materials like copper, sugar and even metals which were being used for native gin production. However, the colonial government in Eastern Nigeria failed in every attempt to stop native gin distillation. But to a large extent they encouraged the domestication of beer brewing and also succeeded in changing the drinking taste of the people from drinking *ogogoro* to beer.

Conclusion

In this paper, efforts were made to establish the fact that hinterland people in West Africa especially the Igbo speaking people were not used to excessive alcohol. Equiano narratives confirm that alcohol forms part of the people's social life in ceremonies and libation but dismisses its excessiveness as not an integral aspect of the people's life and culture. In recent times, consumer protection laws on alcohol has been hypocritically not enforced because of the enormous benefit in terms of taxation derived from alcohol sales. This is against the traditional method where the brewers (palm wine tapers) mostly men controlled its consumption. In conclusion, efforts should be made to address the growing quest for alcohol by an appropriate law that will determine and enforce who is to drink, what to drink and what time to drink. Issues on the misinformation contained in the labels of alcohol bottles as well as excess advertising of alcohol products should be checked.

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