

“[I]n Search of their Relations, To Set at Liberty as Many as They Had the Means”: Ransoming Captives in Nineteenth Century Yorubaland

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ABSTRACT

The practice of ransoming, which upon payment of a fee or prisoner exchange, restored captives to freedom and prevented their enslavement, was a universal institution. Similar, but different from slave redemption, ransoming prevented the transition of captives into slaves. Captors supported ransoming because it fetched them higher value than the sale of the same captive into slavery. Market forces, as well as the ethnicity, gender, religion, class, and skill of captives among other considerations were all central to successful ransoming operations.

Keywords: Warfare, captives, slaves, ransoming, market forces, social networks.

1. INTRODUCTION

The study of slavery in Yorubaland has focussed on enslavement and its abolition to the neglect of aspects of slaving operations that did not result in enslavement. This approach owes to close ties between warfare and slavery and particularly the enslavement of war prisoners. So entrenched was the linkage that a popular Ijesa song says *ukoko ko ba ti fo, kee mo papaakudi loun da; oni ogun ba ti mu mo p'eru loun* (broken pots become potsherds and a war captive is a slave) (Ilesanmi, 1998: 464). The implication is that slavery begins at the point of seizure, though many captives were not enslaved. Claude Meillassoux (1991: 33, 101–9) differentiates between slaves and captives though he sometimes conflates redemption with ransoming and captives with hostages. He argues that initially, war captives removed from their towns were not slaves but prisoners or captives. Slavery involved “denial of kinship” and ‘de-socialisation’ or rupture of ties between captives and their homelands and their insertion into new societies as slaves. The transition from captive to slave was avoidable through ransoming or payments to the captor in cash or replacing the captive with another of equal or superior value or a combination of cash and captive substitution. While ransoming did not fully obviate enslavement, it reduced the size of the enslaved population. That is, ransoming restored captives to freedom prior to enslavement. Even though Meillassoux is concerned with the

extremities of slavery; thus ignoring instances of slaves establishing new kinship groups in the slave society and/or reconnecting with their old homes, he is right that that slaves were largely ‘foreign’ to the slave society. The Yoruba called slaves ‘*omọ*’ (child, servant) indicating lack of maturity, adult privileges, and control over their bodies and life. It symbolized inferior status and state of permanent childhood. This essay explores ransoming, a strategy for preventing enslavement in Yorubaland. It compares ransoming operations here with similar practices in some other parts of Africa and Europe highlighting parallels and differences in the roles played by profit, class, and religion among others. Specifically, it argues that some captured members of the Yoruba elite gained their freedom without ransom payment though they attracted huge ransom in other places thus attesting to the importance of social networks and limitations of market forces in ransoming operations. The essay draws on personal and family histories and archival, written, and oral sources on ransoming and distinguishes between captives and slaves and between ransoming and slave redemption.

2. CAPTIVES AND RANSOMING

The ransoming of captives, like slave redemption with which it is often confused, is an institution set out in specific social, cultural, economic, political and ritual terms. For example, not later than the tenth century in the course of Christian and Muslim expansion, leaders of these faiths banned the enslavement of their followers and encouraged the ransoming of those taken into captivity. Later on, ransoming became an article of faith and nationalism and loomed large in European-Muslim encounter in the Mediterranean region. European states and organisations like the *Trinitarians* and *Mercedarians* Christian Orders set aside funds for the ransoming of European Christian captives (Friedman, 1980; Brodman, 1985, 1986; Fleet 1999: 52–53; Davis, 2000, 2004; Garcés, 2002; Dávid and Fodor, 2007; Moureau, 2008). Therefore, it is correct to say membership of a ‘community’ conferred certain benefits as people accessed ransoming.

Studies on ransoming in West Africa have also highlighted the importance of kinship as well as profit. On the Western Sudan, Meillassoux notes that ransoming was more effective when opposing communities belonged to the ‘same society’. By same society, he refers to a situation whereby states hostile and at war with one another had common arrangements for ransoming and prisoner exchange (1991: 103). At peacetime, these societies usually banned attacks on each other and their citizens. To do otherwise could result in retaliations against the captor/s. Robin Law (1997: 18–19) holds a similar view for the Gold Coast especially in cases depicting the ‘kin’ not as a blood relative but the employer. He identifies how the British Royal African Company had to ransom two of its employees in the Gold Coast during the late seventeenth

century. At the port town of Anomabu, company staffs taken into captivity in 1682 regained their freedom only after the payment of ransom. The company agent offered the cost of a slave (seven and half pesos or 1.88 ounce of gold) in ransom for each of its two captured staff but the captors refused to release the captives for less than a *benda* (two ounces or eight pesos). Sylvianne Diouf shows that during the Atlantic slave trade ransoming increased as a “protective strategy” against enslavement in West Africa. Resort to ransoming, she notes was ‘frequent’ and ‘widespread’ because it helped to “buy back the freedom of people slated for deportation” (2003: 82–83). Diouf highlights three issues central to ransoming including how market forces or profit shaped ransoming transactions. First, ransoming reinforced social inequality so the political and trade elite because of their power and wealth had better access to ransoming than commoners. Secondly, ransoming was commercially rewarding earning the slaver/captor higher profit than the sale of captives into slavery. Finally, ransoming sometimes posed a moral dilemma especially when families traded off a captive for another. Diouf resolves this moral question with the argument that ransoming was a means of “last resort” for relatives seeking to protect their people from deportation (2003: 89–96). Jennifer Lofkrantz (2008, 2009) discusses how ransoming mitigated slavery in the Central Sudan and the debate among Sudanese authorities over the religious and economic basis of the institution. Elsewhere in Africa, Mariana Candido (2006: 73–81) and Hugh Clapperton (Bruce-Lockhart and Lovejoy 2005: 85) show that ransoming saved people from slavery in Angola and Liberia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In all these studies, there is a consensus that ransom must be attractive to ensure freedom for the captive hence the price is costlier than the potential return on a slave. In some cases, ransoming meant the substitution of a captive with another of the same or higher value. Therefore, whether ransoming came by cash payments or prisoner substitution or both the practice legitimised slavery and unequal social relations.

There is a rich literature on the making of captives and slaves in Yorubaland most of which are devoted to warfare, raids, kidnapping, debts and the courts. Warfare (*ogun*) involved soldiers taking prisoners as booty. Raids (*igbe*) differed slightly and consisted of small-scale operations aimed at looting, yet not excluding taking captives. Kidnappings involved even smaller activities and carried out by individuals or small bands of men.¹ Kidnappings on enemy territories were legitimate and patriotic duties—bounty hunting per excellence. Finally, the courts also took into captivity criminals like rapists, armed robbers, murderers, illegal kidnappers, chronic debtors, and people convicted of adultery with wives of senior chiefs and treason (Johnson 1976: 274–395; 413–49; Ajisafe 1948: 61; Ajayi and Smith, 1964; Akinyele 1980: 90; Akintoye 1971: 33–75, 102–31; Law 1977: 145–299; Oroge 1971: 82–142; Falola 1984: 126–45; O’hear, 2004). Nonetheless, not all captives became slaves. An unknown

¹ William Moore, journal, July 7, 1851, CA2/070, Church Missionary Society Archives (CMS).

number of people escaped enslavement and anyone wrongfully detained must be released free of ransom (Johnson 1976: 270–72).

In their book on the nineteenth century Yoruba wars J. F. Ade Ajayi and Robert Smith note with reference to the treatment of war prisoners that “the most fortunate were redeemed or even released freely” (1964: 52 cf. Bowen 1968 [1857]: 148). In a related work on Yoruba indigenous slavery, Emmanuel Oroge (1971: 115–16, 144) attributes the low quota of Yoruba-speaking slaves in the Americas before 1820 to the release of slaves prior to their shipment overseas. These are significant findings on the treatment of people destined for enslavement whether locally or abroad. Although the authors did not indicate when the redemption or free release took place or the processes involved to determining if references were to slaves or captives, to the extent these operations mitigated enslavement suggested these were ransoming operations.

Other contemporaries alluded to the process of enslavement. In the mid-1850s, American Baptist Missionary Thomas J. Bowen remarked that “[a]ll prisoners taken in [a Yoruba] war are slaves; and if not redeemed by their countrymen, are set to work by the captors, or sold to dealers” (1968: 319–20). Anna Hinderer, another contemporary with reference to the Ibadan-Ijaye war of 1860 noted that soldiers were “capturing prisoners for slaves” (Hone 1872: 216). These sources indicate that one was first a captive or prisoner then a slave. Note carefully Bowen’s conception of slavery as exploitation and sale. Ransoming precluded the sale and exploitation of captives by their captors. Thus, contrary to Oroge and Diouf ransoming served more than simply preventing the embarkation of slaves for the Americas. Slaves who stayed in Africa including many in Yorubaland enslaved not far from their homes, like Ekiti slaves in Ijesa, Oyo slaves at Ilorin, Ijebu slaves in Egba, and Owu slaves at Ile-Ife also experienced sale and exploitation. Ransoming was about preventing enslavement rather than regulating market location.

The stories of three Yoruba boys, Ajayi (later Bishop Samuel Crowther) Thomas King and Odusina (later William Moore) all of the Church Missionary Society provide some of the earliest information on ransoming in nineteenth century Yorubaland. In early 1821, a joint Yoruba and Sokoto army sacked Osogun, an Oyo town and seized its people including members of Ajayi’s family. After the war, a soldier took Ajayi and his sister, Lanre, as booty while another soldier left with his mother, Afala and baby-sister, Amosa. In captivity, Ajayi was briefly traded for an unhealthy horse and employed as a domestic staff as the captor searched for a buyer. Five months into captivity, a trader took Ajayi to Ijaye, an Egba market town for sale and there he saw people from Osogun searching for relatives “to set at liberty as many as they had the means of redeeming.”² The reference here was to ransoming not redemption for these people were war prisoners not slaves. With no one to ransom him, the trader sold Ajayi to an Oyo woman. After a few more sales Ajayi arrived in Lagos in where a Portuguese slaver bought and put him on a Brazilian-bound vessel in

² Crowther to William Jowett, 22 Feb. 1837, CA1/079/2, CMS.

1822.³ Shortly after parting with his family at Iseyin, an uncle ransomed Lanre for 48,000 cowries (£6) to prevent her sale into slavery. Upon her release, Lanre was back in captivity pawned for the loan used in her ransom. Around the 1830s, a band of kidnappers captured Lanre and Afala for the second time. Lanre's husband ransomed her but Afala, not been ransomed was sold into slavery (Tucker 1853: 120).⁴ The story of Ajayi's family, from which this essay derives its title, is only one among other traditions of people paying ransom to avoid enslavement. In 1825, the army which attacked Osogun reinforced by additional contingents from Ife and Ijebu sacked Egba towns including Emere, Ikereku and Itoko and moved the captives seized therein to Oko and nearby Ijebu towns for sale. Survivals from these towns traced the captives to Oko to ransom their relatives thus suggesting Egba people and their foes, like Osogun and Oyo, belonged to Meillassoux' 'same society' where hostile states had agreements to facilitate ransoming and prisoner exchange. Thomas King and William Moore, two of the captives sold after the attack learnt twenty-five years later that their relatives went to Oko and neighbouring towns seeking to ransom them. For example, two uncles raised money through pawnship and ransomed Moore's mother, grandmother, and sister (Barber 1857: 125–30). In King's case, the journey from his town, Emere to Oko took some days and the route was unsafe from kidnappers, hence King's father traveling to ransom his son and wife reached Oko only after they had been sold to Lagos.⁵

Regulations generally recognised by the groups involved governed ransoming operations. Two factors — safety from enslavement and profit — made ransoming attractive to captors and captives alike. First, ransoming protected captives against slavery and its hazards and restored their freedom with all its benefits. Unlike slaves, captives suffered no loss of honour and or torn apart from relatives. The risk of enslavement included sale into distant markets, separation from their homelands, and death during ritual sacrifices (Ojo, 2005). Even when slaves had the opportunity of regaining their freedom, they carried the scars of slavery including possible foreign names, scarification, accents, and beliefs imported from their places of enslavement. Until about 1930, ex-slaves of Ekiti origin returning from Oyo region were called *atoyobo* (Oyo returnee), *alaigbede* (foreign speaker), and *afarikola* (clean-shaved head with long tattoos); returnees from Sierra Leone were *Saro* and *Kiriyo* and those from the Americas were *Aguda*, *Amaro* and *ajereke* (sugarcane eater) the last depicting slave labour on American sugar estates.⁶ A group of informants narrated the story of a young Ekiti prince enslaved by Oyo forces in 1875. In slavery, his master scarred his face with Oyo facial marks. In 1922, the prince, since liberated, was chosen to be village head but some chiefs rejected him

³ Crowther to Jowett, 22 Feb. 1837, CA1/079, CMS.

⁴ "Meeting of the Rev. Samuel Crowther with his Mother," *Church Missionary Gleaner* (CMG) 7 (1847): 63–65.

⁵ King, journal, 7 April 1850, CA2/061, CMS.

⁶ Interview with Chief Joel Ige, 96 years, Omu Ekiti, 26 and 29 May 1998.

because of his Oyo marks. Some couched their opposition in ritual terms that the local Orisa would not fellowship with an ‘Oyo chief’. In the end, they offered sacrifices to appease the Orisa though for a part of his reign some subjects referred to him as ‘Oba Oyo’ (Oyo king).⁷

3. MORE PROFITABLE THAN SLAVE-DEALING: THE COMMERCIAL BASIS OF RANSOMING

More importantly, profit was crucial as captors chose between enslaving their captives and allowing ransoming. In a study of Mediterranean Spain, James Brodman (1985: 318) remarks that writes that “[s]ince the ransom price frequently exceeded what could be gained in the slave auctions, redemption [sic] became an attractive option to both captor and captive”. In central Europe and the Ottoman Empire, raiders launched attacks for the purpose of seizing captives and holding them for ransom. To this extent, ransom was an important source of state revenue and this weighed greatly as Muslims took European captives (Friedman, 1980; Dávid and Fodor, 2007). The quest for financial reward also manifested in the various studies on West Africa as noted above. Hence, unless afraid of losing the captives to flight or by other means the captors usually held their prizes (captives) near the point of captivity where families could easily and quickly arrange ransom (Conrad 1981: 70–71; Hogendorn, 1999). Other times, the captors took captives to towns designated as ransoming and exchange stations to facilitate payment.

Data from Yorubaland also point to instances of captives becoming free after the payment of expensive ransom. In assessing the cost of ransoming, captives, like slaves, upon capture were inspected and sorted into groups based on ethnicity, class, age, skill, sex, and health with an eye to freeing those captured illegally and putting a monetary value on those set for ransom and sale (Bowen 1968: 20). The quality of individual captives, shaped by market and non-market forces, accounted for their ransom for more or less than their value as slaves.

The ransoming of mostly elite citizens and their allies dictated who became a slave. Hence, in the Western and Central Sudan friends of captives paid double or thrice the ‘market price of a slave to ransom a member of the elite.’ Wealth disparities enabled upper class citizens to have better access to ransoming than commoners because the former could pay huge prices. The father of Ayuba Suleiman of Bondu sent down several slaves as ransom his son on a slave ship in the Gambia in 1730 (Curtin 1967a: 40; also Dunbar 1977: 161; Conrad 1981: 70–71; Lofkrantz, 2009; Diouf 2003: 81). Members of the Yoruba upper class also attracted high ransom. Chiefs taken in war by the Ijebu were “never sold into slavery, but kept in custody until ransomed, for a large amount, by their

⁷ Interviews in an Ekiti village, 15–16 and 19 June 2001.

country or family.”⁸ Egba armies also seized some chiefs, and held them for ransom at enormous prices (Ajisafe-Moore 1924: 32).

In socio-economic terms, the Yoruba counted Europeans and their allies like Christians and Yoruba returnees from America and Sierra Leone exposed to Western civilisation and international trade among the elite (Ajayi, 1965). In 1862, Ibadan authorities captured Edward Roper, a British agent of the CMS at the fall of Ijaye, and charged him with treason for aiding the enemy. As a high-value captive, Ogunmola (Ibadan deputy army chief) detained Roper in his house and vowed to sell him into slavery. When reminded no one would buy a white slave, the chief joked the captive would be his poultry attendant.⁹ Finally, he set Roper’s ransom at 200 bags of cowries (£200), 200 guns (c. £216), and 200 kegs of gunpowder, which for the period amounted to the value of about 100 slaves. After a long but unsuccessful demand for the captive’s release free of ransom the CMS sought help from the Alaafin of Oyo (Ibadan’s overlord) who implored Ogunmola to release the captive freely (Johnson 1976: 353). This story is significant for it shows how the Yoruba perceived Christian officials—white and black—as elite captives, though their religion appealed mostly to slaves or in the words of Henry Townsend of the CMS, those “taught in the school of adversity.”¹⁰

Though the ransoming of other categories of captives did not cost as much as the elite, it was worth more than the value of a prime slave. In the west, an Egba family paid to Dahomian authorities a slave and 40,000 cowries totalled at one and half slaves as ransom for a member in April 1851.¹¹ This transaction involved two processes: handing over a slave to replace detained family member in captivity. Because the substitute was not an adequate replacement for the detainee — that is, the valuation in monetary terms — the captor received the balance in cash. In the north we have a report from Oyo in 1859 that Ijaye forces seized about 240 Oyo citizens including some chiefs and their relatives and demanded that each captive could regain his/her freedom upon the payment of ransom pegged at ten bags of cowries or twice the price of a prime slave for the period (Johnson 1976: 331–32). Three years later also in Egba an Oyo captor rejected the offer by Chief Ogundipe of Egba to pay two slaves as ransom for his wife and infant child held at Ile-Bioku, an Oyo village. The source is silent on why the captor rejected the offer. Did he want more ransom or was the rejection a show of force and defiance of Egba power? For refusing to release the captives, Ogundipe led an Egba army to destroy Ile-Bioku in 1878 (Johnson 1976: 456). In another case the family of an old woman at Ejio, near Ketu ransomed her by substituting a prime female in 1881 (Johnson 1976: 453). By

⁸ J.H. Kirk, ‘Epe and Ikorodu Districts: Report on the customs and superstitions of the Ijebus, Feb. 1921,’ 39, Ikeja Div 1/CP122, National Archives Ibadan (NAI).

⁹ This is a satire about Europeans love for eggs and poultry birds.

¹⁰ Townsend to Henry Venn, 29 July 1852, CA2/085a, CMS.

¹¹ Isaac Smith, journal, 11 Oct. 1851 in *Church Missionary Record* 23 (1852), 282 and Crowther’s journal cited in *CMG* 2 (Oct. 1852), 116.

1870, the average cost of ransom at Ibadan was ten bags of cowries or a prime slave.¹² In the southeast in 1875, the captors of an Ondo man seized and detained at the neighbouring town of Okeigbo demanded and received ransom fixed at twelve bags of cowries before the man was released.¹³ The monetary value of ransom increased in the 1880s to offset the impact of currency depreciation especially when the value of the cowry currency fell by nearly half. In 1883, a report from Abeokuta showed that Madam Efunporoye Tinubu seized a man whose relative had slept with her female slave. She asked for the value of two and half slaves in ransom without which she vowed to sell the captive into slavery. A huge amount for the period the captive's family borrowed money and pawned eight of its members to service the loan.¹⁴

Ransom was also big business for ransom negotiators. The amount payable to a negotiator depended on the status of the captive and the troubles involved in completing a negotiation. In case the mediator must travel far to meet the captor, hire intermediaries, or bribe people, the cost of which must be paid by the captive or his/her family. In 1871, the wife of a Lagos trader detained in Porto Novo paid ten heads of cowries to some chiefs for pleading her husband's case and twelve bags of cowries and eight cases of gin for the man's ransom.¹⁵ Ransom brokers sought full payment for their assignment even if captives desperate for freedom agreed to fees they could not afford. Poor captives and slaves who could not pay their guides nearly always became indebted and detained as pawns, and possibly resold into slavery.

Since no price was too big for freedom, relatives of captives raised ransoming fee by surcharging each other unless someone agreed to pay the bill. Families with the means paid ransom with relative ease offering cash, substitute captives or/and an assortment of products. Wealthy families took from their pool of captives and slaves, bought new slaves, or took money and variety of other goods from their savings to pay for ransom. Poor families on the other hand took loans, sometimes at high-interest rate, and pawned people to secure and service the debt. A few examples show linkages between ransom payment, pawnship, and indebtedness. As earlier noted, at Osogun and Egba, Ajayi's sister and William Moore's uncles became pawns for money spent on ransom. In 1852, an Abeokuta woman found herself heavily in debt some of which owed to money spent on her ransom from captivity. Her inability to pay the debt resulted in a creditor seizing or panyarring her (Barber 1857: 115–21). The highest fee so far traced to a ransoming operation came from an 1883 report that an Egba man

¹² James Okuseinde, journal, April 25, 1871, CA2/074, CMS. For ransoming at Badagry, see Pearse, journal, 5 April 1862, CA2/076, CMS.

¹³ Charles N. Young, journal, 13 May 1875, CA2/098, CMS.

¹⁴ John B. Wood to Marshall Lang, 12 Nov. 1883, CMS (Y) 1/7/6, NAI.

¹⁵ Roger T. Goldsworthy to Colonial Secretary, 20 Dec. 1871, Royal Commonwealth Society Library, John Hawley Glover Papers.

pawned eight members of his family for seventy bags of cowries each to pay ransom for another relation in captivity.¹⁶

From the cases explored above the cost of ransom for ordinary citizens ranged from the value of one to two and half slaves. Thus, whether captors accepted cash or new captives in ransom they made big profit allowing ransoming than enslaving or selling captives including infants with very little market value. A Yoruba proverb *bi t'enikan ko baje ti elomiran ko ni dara* (someone's misfortune is another person's good fate) encapsulates ransoming by captive exchange.

4. NON-MARKET MOTIVES FOR RANSOMING

In spite of the market basis for ransoming the institution was also shaped by non-commercial considerations. Other times social factors moderated how the market behaved. Owing to their elite status and/or social ties certain captives became free without ransom. Like Islam and Christianity, whose power transcended ethno-political borders Yoruba *Orisa* worship also provided an ideological basis for ransoming across ethnic lines. Oyo custom stipulated that *Orisa Oko* worshippers could not be enslaved so any adherent taken into captivity was released free of ransom. Migrations between Oyo and Egba districts aided the planting of *Orisa Oko* and its protective power in Egba and converts to the cult had ritual protection against enslavement (Barber 1857: xviii–xx). Male devotees of *Orisa Oko* wore cowry chain on their necks and the women had a small, flat, piece of white and red clay on their forehead.¹⁷

Another factor obviating ransoming is the sacredness of Yoruba monarchs. This derives from the myth the kings descended from a common ancestor. Yoruba kings, in local mythology, symbolised collective secular and spiritual power. With slavery, the Yoruba people frowned at the detention of monarchs and demanded their release without ransom. In 1874, after a successful raid of Ado-Ekiti, Ibadan chiefs freed the Ewi (king) and 92 of his subjects including wives, children and chiefs because, in Johnson's words Latoosa (Ibadan head chief) chose "to do honour to his [Ekiti] second wife" (1976: 397). More than mere honour, Latoosa's wife probably pressured him to release the monarch. Put differently, for some of the time, there were as much social benefits as financial reward in ransoming operations.

Local traditions also stated that Yoruba war chiefs got favourable treatment from their captors. Army officers enjoyed a sort of *esprit de corps* and under specific circumstances protected one another across battle line. By the 1820s, there was a popular belief that any Yoruba army officer ordering the death of an equal or superior would suffer similar fate (Johnson 1976: 241–43, 377–82, 443–46). Moreover, some officers in opposing armies were former allies. For

¹⁶ Wood to Lang, 12 Nov. 1883, CMS (Y) 1/7/6, NAI.

¹⁷ James Johnson, Annual Report for 1879, CA2/056/55, CMS.

example, shortly before his death in the hands of junior Ibadan soldiers around 1833, Maye, the head of Ife army, pleaded to meet Lakanle, an Ibadan chief and former colleague with whom he fought in the Egba and Owu wars of the 1820s. Suspecting that Lakanle might order the release of his former ally the soldiers murdered Maye (Johnson 1976: 238–42). Thirty years later, in 1859 Balogun Ibikunle protested against Ibadan fighting against Ijaye, whose leader, Kurunmi, he described as his father's equal (Johnson 1976: 333). Other officers ignored the plea and attacked Kurunmi killing his sons. The old chief himself committed suicide to avoid humiliation by junior soldiers. It is not difficult to explain the violation of laws protecting chiefs and their senior men. The nineteenth century was marked by violence between rival armies and between officers in the same camp. Elite rivalry encouraged coups and abandonment of certain traditions.

Elite ties, the law of reciprocity and strategy also shaped Ibadan-Ijebu ransoming operations. More than the Egba, Ijebu provided the shortest route for Ibadan to trade with Lagos on the Atlantic coast. After 1850, the Ijebu authorities closed the route occasionally to protect their role as trade brokers between Lagos and the Yoruba interior as well as a mechanism for preventing the flow of munitions to Ibadan. After a pitched battle in 1881 Ibadan forces captured twenty Ijebu prisoners including Omitogun, the brother of Ijebu's army chief. Rather than kill or sell Omitogun into slavery or demand ransom he was released and "allowed to go back home to arrange his own ransom" (Johnson 1976: 451, 480, 485).¹⁸ One possible explanation for the action of Ibadan chiefs was that the release of captives could go a long way in keeping the road with Ijebu open. These are significant stories and they illustrate elite networks across opposing camps amidst intense ethnic warfare. Unclear what happened to other captives but the non-elite among them might have had to pay ransom.

We should add cases of captives ransomed below market price under the category of instances where non-market forces played crucial roles in ransoming operations. There is the example of a girl at Abemo six to seven miles north of Ijaye whose case began as that of illegal enslavement. Around 1838, a civil war broke out at Abemo, six to seven miles north of Ijaye, and produced captives. Neighbouring Oyo chiefs including Oluyole of Ibadan condemned the conflict and advised the release of all captives free of ransom because they must not "be regarded as prisoners of war but as fellow townsmen and victims of civil fight" (Johnson 1976: 270). Ironically, Oluyole accepted a beautiful female captive as gift from Abemo as appreciation for his peace making efforts. The captive's mother invoked kinship as she begged Oluyole to free the girl: "she cannot be your wife for she is your relative; we also are of the Basorun descent like yourself." Oluyole released the woman after receiving fifteen heads of cowries as ransom (Johnson 1976: 271). The message here is that it was incest and illegal for Oluyole to marry a blood relation hence the ransom, perhaps in this case a fine fixed at sub-market level.

¹⁸ See 'Statement of Apena's Mission to the King of Jebu, 16 Jan. 1883' in Samuel Rowe to Derby, 15 Feb. 1883, no. 4 in C4957, PP.

5. ORGANISING RANSOMING: RELATIVES, NEGOTIATORS, AND KINSHIP

Captors had upper hand in ransoming negotiations. They could agree or refuse to negotiate, or raise the cost of ransom during negotiations. In such cases, a captive's relatives must keep the captor interested in a deal by offering attractive ransom. Where possible, they pressured the captor through third parties to reduce the cost. Such behind the scene and arm-twisting tactics required more study on the roles of mediators and ransom brokers. People who had influence with the captor such as chiefs, patrons, friends, spouses and traders were good candidates for mediation. In 1851, Egba Christians sought assistance from Madam Tinubu believed to have great contacts within the merchant community in the Bight of Benin and some influence with King Gezo of Dahomey to help negotiate the ransom of some captives held at Abomey.¹⁹ We have also seen above the influence of the Alaafin on Ogunmola as the CMS negotiated freedom for Rev. Roper.

Speed was of essence in ransoming operations. The more time elapsed between captivity and ransom the greater the risk of a captive becoming a slave. Sooner than later, a captor would return to his original town and the captive with him. Captives torn from their families had little chance of ransom and risked enslavement. For Crowther, after spending two months with his captor at Iseyin, he was transferred to Dada, the captor's original town, where he was detained for another three months while the captor searched for a buyer. That is, he did not become a slave until five months after his captivity. For other captives, transition to slavery was quick. William Moore, Thomas King²⁰ and Joseph Wright, three Egba boys seized in the 1820s were sold into slavery within weeks of captivity (Curtin 1967b: 325–29).

Another important factor for ransoming was communication between the captor, captive, and their relatives. As soon as possible relatives of a captive must identify the attackers, their location and intentions. Based on long years of inter-group relations, people had no problems knowing the enemy and its motives. After Crowther reunited with his family in 1846, his sisters settled in Abaka, in Egbado district. Weeks later, after a four-month siege, a combined Egba and Porto Novo army sacked Abaka and took captives. As the captives arrived at the Abeokuta gate, Crowther posted people to search for his sisters and their families whom they soon found in the crowd and ransomed for about £40 or \$150 (Tucker 1853: 117–22). Johnson (1976: 352) has another case where besieged communities had no difficulties identifying their attackers. During the Ijaye war

¹⁹ Charles Gollmer, journal, 13 Nov. 1851, CA2/043, CMS.

²⁰ King, journal, 7 April 1850, CA2/061, CMS.

Ijaye and Ibadan being sister towns and the people one, many wise heads in the former place made captives (as it were) of their wives and children, putting halters round the necks of their own brothers and led them out to Ibadan to the house of their relatives without being detected. Once there, they were free. But knowing each other so well, some were detected and captured. Some...missed their way in the town and were captured.

In addition to knowing the enemy, friends of captives also interrogated prisoners taken from among the enemy for intelligence on their side. Finally, they paid traders and gatekeepers to monitor the movement of captives and their captors.²¹ Yoruba traders like American slave conductors (Sprague, 1990; Buchanan, 2001), knew the routes used by slavers. In addition, they had contacts with senior chiefs, soldiers, and traders in other lands whom they patronized as trade brokers and patrons. Gatemen and traders or 'spotters' hired to search for captives were provided with the names, scarification, age, sex, language, height and other physical attributes of the captive for easy identification. Body marks and accent helped identify captives. Robert Stone (1899: 30–31), a Baptist priest during the mid-nineteenth century described the role of scarification as Yoruba ethnic symbol: "These tell-tale marks on the face make it quite impossible for strangers to conceal their identity ...[G]atekeepers are thoroughly posted in this kind of lore and they know the nationality of every one passing through their gates...by their face marks."

The most crucial search period to ensure ransom could last up to two years and intense within the first few months of captivity to prevent enslavement. Captives also searched for information about their families and made contact whenever possible. By contacting their relatives and providing information about their movement, captives left a trail to ease the search (Lovejoy 1993: 169). In another case involving a member of Crowther's family, the news of Crowther's liberation and return to Abeokuta in 1846, twenty-five years after separation from his relatives spread like wild fire.²² At the fall of Osogun in 1821, one of Ajayi's uncles, Sanu, escaped into the interior where he had lived ever since. By some means, perhaps through traders, he heard of his 'lost' nephew's return to Yorubaland and he set out with six friends to meet him. The men fell into the hands of kidnappers and sold into slavery. As he awaited shipment from Badagry, Sanu met some Christians whom he told of his predicaments that they might take some action to ransom him. The Christians told Charles Gollmer of Badagry CMS station of what had occurred to Sanu and he requested to see him. After confirming his story and tie to Crowther the church paid 42,000 cowries (£10 5s) for his ransom (Tucker 1853: 116–17).

²¹ Interviews with Jacob Aduloju, Eleyoo, Ado-Ekiti, 1 Aug. 2009 and Adeyanju Oyelade, Odo-Uri, Igede Ekiti, 3 Aug. 2009.

²² Reports of ex-slaves arriving in coastal towns were of interest to people in the interior who wanted to hear about their lost relations.

This was one instance of Yoruba Christians, like European churches bankrolling ransom.

Communication between the parties involved in ransoming could be written or oral but the message must be detailed and unambiguous. Literate captives contacted their allies by sending letters while others who could not write used other techniques. No matter the means of communication, the message must indicate the captors, their location, cost of ransom and other useful details. During the Egba-Dahomey war of March 1851 Dasalu, an Egba Christian soldier, was captured and taken to Abomey. From captivity, he contacted his family at Abeokuta through fellow captives who had been ransomed and returning home in May 1851 and again in 1852. The second message, “a country letter” (Yoruba: *aroko*) (Gollmer, 1885) consisted of a stone, a piece of coal, a pepper-pod, a grain of parched corn, and a piece of rag—all tied up in a small piece of cloth symbolised distress. This was a desperate message symbolising the writer was as strong as a stone, his prospects dark as coal; he was feverish with anxiety, his skin was as hot as pepper that corn could be parched upon it, and his clothing was nothing but rags.²³

In their communications Dasalu failed to inform his family the captors called him by a different name, Hougan. In battle, Dasalu wore a European shirt popular with Christian missionaries that the Dahomians mistook him for a pastor. Therefore, they named him *Hougan* (priest) and as an elite captive detained him in the palace of King Gezo at Abomey. Due to change of name, agents sent to Abomey to arrange Dasalu’s ransom did not know they should have asked for ‘Hougan’. After spending three years in captivity and no one coming forward with a ransom, Gezo sold Dasalu to Cuba on board the *Grey Eagle* (voyage database #4190), a 185-ton United States ship under Captain Darnaud in 1854.²⁴ The sale marked Dasalu’s final transition into slavery.

Captives faced the danger of been caught in disagreements between their relatives and captors or the former and ransom negotiators before a deal is brokered. For example, failure to pay a negotiator after fulfilling his/her task often led to the transfer of a captive from one captor to another. That is the mediator could detain the freed captive for as long as payment was outstanding. A report from Igbobini in southeastern Yorubaland in early 1885 showed that Ike, a Mahin trader from Oketoro had gone to Gbogun in Ijebu to collect certain debts. Gbogun people seized the two slaves accompanying Ike in retaliation for a prior Mahin attack on them. Labite, owner of one of the slaves, begged Takuro, an influential Ijesa trader to help negotiate the release of the captives. Takuro agreed and he sent his men to broker a deal with Gbogun people while Labite sent another slave to witness the transaction. The captors again seized this second slave giving them three captives and more power in future talks with Mahin. After some time, Takuro paid sixty bags of cowries of his own money in ransom and secured freedom for the three men. However, he detained them until

²³ Gollmer, journal, 16 Jan. 1852, CA2/043, CMS.

²⁴ “Cuba and its slave traffic,” *Church Missionary Intelligencer* 7 (Dec. 1856), 265.

the Mahin paid him 100 bags of cowries including forty bags of cowries as brokerage fee.²⁵

On the basis of these sources, it is without doubt kinship or family was important in ransoming operations. People ransomed from captivity usually had social networks rooted in their membership of a kin group. Therefore, it is important individuals maintain good relations with their affiliates prior to, during, and after captivity to count on continuous family support. An incident from Ibadan in 1877 illustrates how tension within a family affected ransoming operations. Idowu, an Ijaye man captured in 1862 was ransomed by his brother living in Ibadan. Members of the family, including Idowu, were devoted Orisa worshippers. Around 1877, Idowu came under Christian influence and he discarded his Orisa objects. In retaliation, the brother ordered him to refund the money spent on his ransom fifteen years earlier.²⁶

A related problem was the status of market towns whose officials also brokered ransom. As we have seen above the location of market towns half way between rival communities motivated their choice as ransoming stations. To enjoy this privilege authorities in charge of ransoming stations must be impartial or risked their position as honest brokers. Yet both the captor and captive wanted these authorities to support their cause by pressurising the other party to yield ground as ransoming negotiations progressed. This put residents of market towns in awkward positions and possible danger of attack. In May 1851, when negotiations broke down between Egba and Dahomey over the ransoming of captives taken in war, Dahomey planned an invasion of Ketu coinciding with the Egba bringing captives to the town for ransoming or exchange. According to Bowen (1968: 148–49) “on the eve of the market day it was reported that a Dahomian army was coming to Ketu to free their countrymen by force.” Ketu immediately put her forces on alert and expelled Dahomian traders already in town for the day’s market. Possibly Dahomey did not trust Ketu to be a neutral broker more so it shared common Yoruba culture and traditions of origin with Egba or it felt she had the forces to free the captives. As earlier noted Oko, Ijaye and Ketu as regional markets served as locations for the ransoming and swapping of captives for the Ijebu and Egba, Oyo and Egba, and Dahomey and Egba respectively (Crowther 1853: 246).²⁷

²⁵ Phillips, diary, 11–23 Nov. 1885, Phillips 3/1, NAI.

²⁶ William Allen, journal, 24 Dec. 1877, CA2/019, CMS.

²⁷ Also see Townsend, 4 March 1851, CA2/085, CMS and King, journal, 28 May 1851, CA2/061, CMS.

6. CONCLUSION

This essay sees ransoming as a mechanism for obviating enslavement. Although the status and treatment of captives and slaves were similar, ransoming prevented the sale of captives into slavery. Ransoming was a transactional business. Thus, every party involved had stakes and expectations. The captor wanted profit or social benefit while the captive desired freedom. The power to ransom a captive and the cost lay with the captor. Often times, the captor imposed high ransoming fees to hold on to their prize whose labour could be exploited as a slave, or if a woman married by the captor or to another man in exchange for bridal payments. Expensive ransoming fee forced poor families to borrow funds to prevent the sale of their detained relatives. Yet, captives, through their families and negotiators shaped ransoming operations by ensuring the captor agreed to an affordable price. Furthermore, there was a social cost to a captor's decisions during a ransoming negotiation. What did the captor stand to gain or lose by charging exorbitant fees or refusing the ransoming oh his/her prize? For the landlocked state in the Yoruba interior like Oyo and Ibadan whose existence relied on access to coastal trade, the fear of their citizens falling victims to captors on the coast played significant roles in their treatment of captives especially those of coastal origin. It was important for parties involved in ransom to have binding rules otherwise negotiations could not proceed. Dahomey and Egba and Oyo, Egba and Ijebu, in Meillassoux terms, belonged to a great ransoming society yet Dahomey sought to circumvent the process. In Yorubaland, ransoming differentiated between citizens and foreigners (insiders and outsiders), the rich and poor, elites and commoners and adults and children. Through a process of commuted sentencing, citizens punished with enslavement paid ransom in lieu of enslavement.

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