The Two Princes of Calabar

AN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ATLANTIC ODYSSEY

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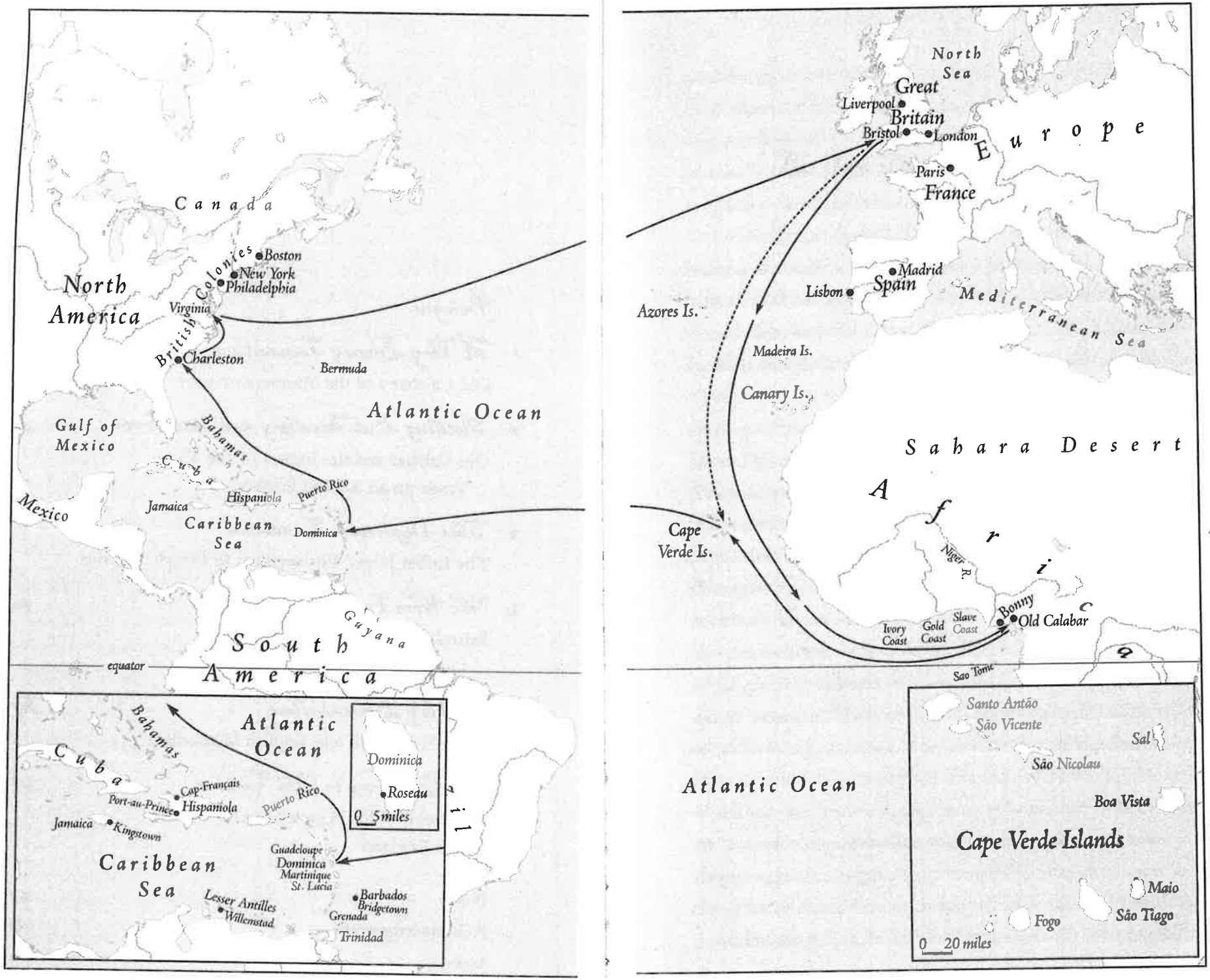
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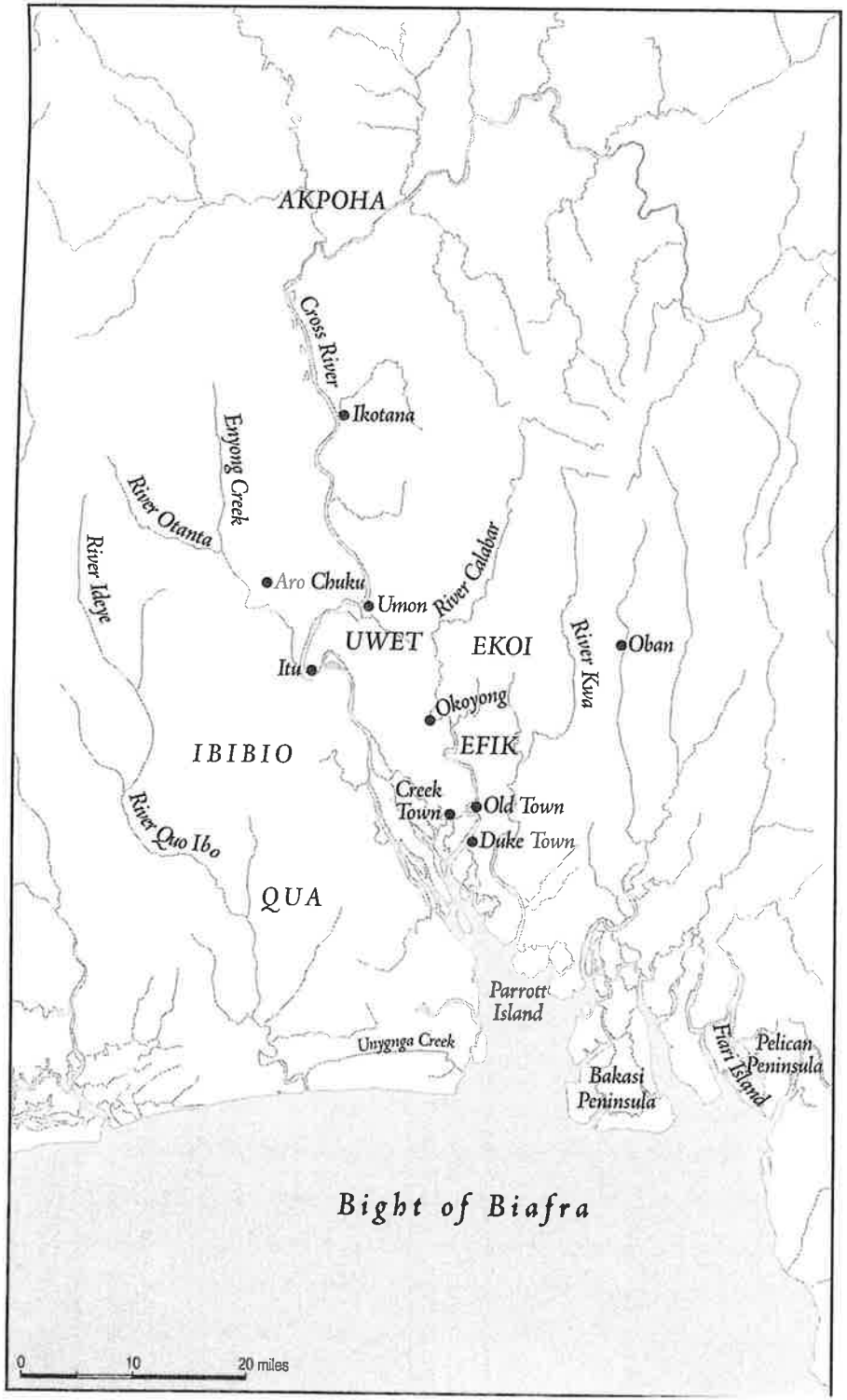

Prologue

In 1767 Little Ephraim Robin John and Ancona Robin Robin John, were captured during an ambush by English slavers in the African port of Old Calabar and sold into slavery in the Americas. The young men were members of the ruling family of Old Town, a major slave-trading town in Old Calabar. Grandy King George, the ruler of Old Town, was Little Ephraim's brother and Ancona's uncle. Those relationships led the English to refer to them as princes, though "prince" was not a title in use in their native land. Their remarkable odyssey took them from Africa, to the Caribbean, to Virginia, to England, and finally back to Africa. Their story, written in their own hand, survives as an early, and as yet virtually unknown, firsthand account of an Atlantic slave experience with important implications for the history of the slave trade, slaves' relentless quest for freedom, the early British antislavery movement, and the

role of enslaved Africans in the creation of the early modern Atlantic World.

Those of us engaged in historical research know well the joys of chance discoveries. This project began when I visited the John Rylands Library in Manchester, England, where I was researching a topic in the history of early nineteenth-century American and British Methodism. The Rylands Library was built in honor of John Rylands, one of England's wealthiest cotton manufacturers and merchants, whose business was closely linked to plantation slavery. As I scanned the catalogue to the papers of Charles Wesley, the brother of the founder of Methodism, John Wesley, and one of the greatest Protestant hymnodists, I ran across descriptions of a series of letters written by former slaves to Charles. Intrigued by the brief references in the catalogue to the collection, I asked to see the letters. What I found were a series of letters written to Wesley by Little Ephraim Robin John and Ancona Robin Robin John, natives of Old Calabar, a slave-trading depot on the West Coast of Africa, who were enslaved in the Americas before making their way to England. I found the letters so compelling that I began to find out as much as I could about the men and their story, a project that has led me to research in the histories of Africa, the slave trade, the Caribbean, and England.

With Columbus's voyage in 1492, the Atlantic Ocean was transformed from a barrier into a bridge, and com-

plex links began to emerge between Europe, Africa, and the Americas. Much important work has been done on the emergence and growth of the Atlantic World in recent years, though the topic is usually taken up in broad studies that have addressed such topics as the exchange of plants, animals and diseases, the massive movement of people, the rise of new economic systems, the transfer of culture and institutions, and the development of empires.[1] But in this book I explore the impact of the rise of the Atlantic World on a particular place in time—eighteenth-century Old Calabar—through the lives of two men who were themselves products of that Atlantic World. Their identities were shaped by it and they moved through it—often touched by those large impersonal forces that have captured so much scholarly attention, and their story can provide a microhistory of the eighteenth-century Anglo-Atlantic World. The Robin Johns can best be understood as Atlantic creoles. My use of that term is borrowed from the historian Ira Berlin. In defining Atlantic creoles, Berlin is moving away from the definition of creoles as individuals of African or European origin born in the New World toward a definition that owes more to linguists and their understanding of creolized languages. In his definition, it is culture, not birth, that designates Atlantic creoles. As Berlin wrote:

> Along the periphery of the Atlantic—first in Africa, then in Europe, and finally in the Americas—

African-American society was a product of the momentous meeting of Africans and Europeans and of their equally fateful encounter with the peoples of the Americas. Although the countenances of these new people of the Atlantic—Atlantic creoles—might bear the features of Africa, Europe, or the Americas in whole or in part, their beginnings, strictly speaking, were in none of those places. Instead, by their experiences and sometimes by their persons, they had become part of the three worlds that came together along the Atlantic littoral. Familiar with the commerce of the Atlantic, fluent in its new languages, and intimate with its trade and cultures, they were cosmopolitan in the fullest sense.[2]

The Robin Johns were such individuals, and their story will help bring the lives of Atlantic creoles into sharper focus.

The Atlantic slave trade was the largest forced migration in human history. Over the course of the trade, approximately eleven million men, women, and children from a wide variety of African ethnic groups were captured, sold, and transported to the New World.[3] Despite the vast scope of the trade, firsthand accounts from the victims themselves are extremely rare. Largely illiterate (though not entirely, as the example of the Robin Johns illustrates), captives had few opportunities to write down

their stories, and few slave masters had any interest in their doing so. Typically they were enslaved in brutal and harsh conditions in the plantation societies of the New World, and so there was little chance that any records from the slaves themselves could survive. For decades, historians of the slave trade played the "numbers game," a long-running and often heated debate over the extent of the trade and the number people who fell victim to it. While there can be no question that the numbers are vital to a full understanding of the trade and of its terrible costs in human lives, that focus on the numbers often obscured the individual stories of those who experienced enslavement. The challenge is to translate those statistics into people. Indeed, most of those individuals are lost to history—it is now impossible to reconstruct the lives of eleven million individuals, though only that could fully reveal the scope of the trade's tragic impact. The sheer number of victims defies easy comprehension, and yet we know that great diversity of experience lies behind those numbers. The Robin Johns offer one opportunity to portray victims of the trade in greater detail and to restore the voices of two of the individuals who survived the Middle Passage, the journey from the west coast of Africa to the Americas. Their story is filled with surprises, and they cannot be considered typical of the men who were enslaved in Africa.

Perhaps the most shocking aspect to the Robin Johns' story for modern readers is that they were themselves

slave traders. The slave trade spread its tentacles throughout the Atlantic World, and it could not have been conducted so successfully without the complicity of men and institutions in Europe, Africa, and the Americas. The Robin Johns must be situated within the history of their home in Old Calabar, an important trade depot located in the Bight of Biafra, one of the most intensely trafficked slave-trading regions anywhere in Africa. This area rose to prominence in the trade only in the mid-eighteenth century as families like the Robin Johns created thriving commercial trading houses in Old Calabar built on the profits from the slave trade.

In 1767 several British Guineamen, as the slave ships were called, lay in the Calabar River, where they engaged in a lucrative trade with their African counterparts, members of an ethnic group known as the Efik. That trade was dominated by a relatively small number of English slave traders in Bristol and Liverpool and Efik slave traders in Old Calabar. Those English and African merchants formed long-term relationships, nurtured through education, social interactions, and fictive kinship ties, but those relationships could be brittle and could quickly be undermined by the violence that plagued the trade. By the mid-1700s a bitter trade rivalry existed between Old Town and New Town, the largest settlements in Old Calabar. The competition between Old Town and New Town flared in 1767 when the New Town traders persuaded British ship captains to join them in entrapping and murdering several hundred residents of Old

Town involved in the trade, a pivotal event in the history of Old Calabar. During the bloody battle, a British captain captured two members of the ruling family of Old Town, Little Ephraim Robin John and Ancona Robin Robin John.

The captain carried the men to the Caribbean island of Dominica, where they were sold to a French physician. After several months, a ship's captain offered to help the young men escape to freedom. Their activities hint at the complexity that surrounds the African slave trade. These men were creolized Africans from a coastal region where close and long-standing ties between British and African merchants had enabled them to learn English and other skills useful to the members of a prominent merchant family. Their example serves as an important reminder that not all native Africans sold as slaves in the Americas fit the stereotype of the "outlandish" African, who knew nothing about European languages or culture. The Robin Johns attempted to use their considerable language and interpersonal skills to negotiate their escape. They may well have assumed that bargains such as the one they struck with the ship captain could be relied upon, as they generally could on the coast of West Africa, where slavers depended heavily on the good will of the local African elites. Rather than returning them to Africa as agreed, however, the captain sold the Robin Johns to a merchant in Virginia. After five years in Virginia, the princes met two of their countrymen from Old Calabar who had sailed to Amer-

ica aboard a slave ship from Bristol. The men described the princes' plight to their captain, who convinced the princes that he would return them to Old Calabar if they ran away with him. The princes escaped and boarded his ship, but the captain took them to Bristol, where he attempted to sell them into slavery once again.

Desperate to escape, the young men wrote to Thomas Jones, a Bristol merchant and slave trader, who helped get them off the ship, but they had to remain in jail until they successfully appealed to William Murray, Lord Chief Justice Mansfield, who helped free them. Their case is a significant one in the history of the legality of slavery in Britain. Their case was the first dealing with slavery in Britain following the landmark *Somerset* case, in which Mansfield ruled in 1772 that James Somerset, once enslaved in Virginia, could not be forced to return to bondage in America because slavery was not supported by English law. The Africans asked for and received spiritual instruction and reading lessons from Charles Wesley. They were frequent visitors in the Wesley household and wrote affectionate letters to Wesley and his children. They came into frequent contact with Charles's brother, John, and they were converted to Methodism and baptized. After several months in England, the princes sailed for Old Calabar, but their ship was wrecked in a storm on a deserted island off the African coast. Rescued after sixteen days by a ship bound for Bristol, they were forced to return to England. After another stay of several months, they set out again and finally made their way back to their home in Old Calabar. Once back in Africa they remained in contact with English friends and invited the first Methodist missionaries to come to Africa. The evidence indicates that they also went back to their old business as slave traders, highlighting the complexities and moral ambiguities that surround the trade.

Their remarkable story, preserved in their own hand, offers a rare glimpse into the eighteenth-century slave trade from the perspective of the Africans themselves. Recently, scholars have called into question the authenticity of the best-known eighteenth-century slave narrative, that of Olaudah Equiano, particularly his claim to have been born in Africa, his description of his homeland, and his experience in the Middle Passage.[4] The Robin Johns' story can be verified in almost every detail, and it is vital to bring to light as many firsthand accounts of the slave trade as possible. As former slaves who returned to West Africa, their case opens a window onto the creolized trading communities along the coast and the regular movement of goods, people, and ideas around the Atlantic World. We are only beginning to appreciate the full importance of these Atlantic creoles and the communities they created for the explosion of commercial and cultural exchange that revolutionized African slave-trading regions and made them central players in the Atlantic community.

1

"A Very Bloody Transaction"

Old Calabar and the Massacre of 1767

Old Town bustled on a balmy June day as its dominant slave trader, Grandy King George, and his brothers, Amboe Robin John and Ephraim Robin Robin John, and his nephew Ancona Robin Robin John prepared to lead the grand delegation soon to visit the six English slave ships anchored in the Calabar River. Hundreds of enslaved canoe boys rushed to ready the vessels that would carry scores of notable traders and their retainers out to the tall ships. Clearly this occasion was to differ from the ceremonial visits that the individual traders from the major trading "houses" customarily paid the English captains of the slavers. A fleet of nine or ten great canoes, as long as eighty feet and carrying as many as 120 men, was the center of Old Town interest as they set off to party and parley. The most gaily decorated boat carried Grandy King George, who had to present himself in a fashion that justified the title he had recently taken for himself (he had formerly been known as Ephraim Robin John). His determination to equal the majesty of the English monarch included adopting many of the trappings of English culture; the king and his sons relieved themselves in English pewter piss pots, washed in large imported brass basins, and shaved with English razors they had imported through the English slave traders. Well aware of the king's fascination with European goods and of the ambition they betokened, English slavers had supplied him with a fine "Lucking glass six foot long and six foot wide" in "a strong woden freme" that allowed the very tall and quite stout king of Old Town to admire himself from all angles. Similar mirrors reflected his sons when they too dressed as "gentlemen" in clothes whose cut, color, and style they had specified meticulously when they ordered them from England.[1]

Grandy King George presented an imposing figure as he boarded the royal canoe—dressed in a multicolored robe reaching to his knees, a red coat trimmed in gold lace, a silk sash thrown round his shoulders, a gold-headed cane in one hand, a gold-trimmed cocked hat under his arm, and a fine ceremonial sword at his side—and then made his way to the bow, where he took his place under a grand umbrella. Brightly colored ensigns fluttered in the wind, one emblazoned with his own name written in English in large letters (for the traders were

literate in English).[2] Behind him a small house stood in the center of the canoe, brightly painted yellow and red, and atop the roof were two men loudly beating drums. In the bow a small cannon pointed forward, and in front of it stood a man who shook a large bundle of reeds to symbolically ward off obstacles and dangers. On each side of the canoe sat fifteen canoe boys with paddles, and between them, lined up down the center of the vessel, stood an imposing row of attendants. On most voyages these men would have been armed with cutlasses and guns, but John Ashley Hall, an English sailor on slave ships at Old Calabar in this period, reported that "when they [the Efik traders] came on board, in the common course of trade and visits, they had very few muskets in their canoes, and they are never suffered to bring their arms into the ships."[3] As the royal canoe pulled into the river it was followed by eight or nine others, all of them ornamented in the same style, though perhaps not on quite so grand a scale, occupied by the king's sons and by the "lesser gentry" of Old Town, meaning all the town's principal slave traders. Altogether, about four hundred men sailed toward the English vessels lying peacefully in the river about three miles distant from Old Town.

The purpose of this impressive visit was an invitation from the captains of the English ships to mediate a dispute then raging between the traders at Old Town and those from its commercial rival, New Town, also known as Duke Town. European ships paid "comey" or

"coomey," essentially a custom's duty based on the ship's tonnage, to the king of the town with which they planned to trade, hence the rivalry between Old Town and Duke Town for the primary location on the river.

Old Town had been established probably in the mid to late seventeenth century by the ancestors of Grandy King George on a high hill overlooking a ten-mile stretch of the Calabar River, an advantageous position to capitalize on the arrival of European slave traders in Old Calabar. That trade grew from a trickle in the seventeenth century to a veritable flood in the eighteenth, when Old Calabar became one of the principal slave-exporting regions in West Africa, an expansion that made Old Town one of the most important slave suppliers in the Bight of Biafra, greatly enriched the Robin Johns, and raised the envy of other traders in Old Calabar equally eager to share the spoils. Sometime between the late seventeenth century and the mid-eighteenth, one of those families, the Dukes, originally from Creek Town, established a new trading center farther down the Calabar River at Atakpa (also known as New Town and later as Duke Town), and a long and bitter struggle ensued between Old Town and New Town for preeminence in the slave trade. The stakes were extremely high for both parties, and by 1767 matters had come to a head. The rivalry had become so intense that each side was preventing the other from sending slave-raiding expeditions up the Calabar River to purchase or capture the hundreds of

men, women, and children needed to satisfy the demands of the European captains. In addition, the captains themselves had sometimes been caught between the warring factions.[4]

When the exasperated captains offered to mediate between the rulers of Old Town and New Town, Grandy King George accepted their offer to come on board the English ships for a night of festivities, then to meet on board the rulers of New Town on the following day. The king may have been a bit flattered that it was he and his entourage who had been invited as overnight guests to enjoy the hospitality that the captains offered visiting dignitaries while the New Town men would not arrive until the next day. But Grandy King George was eager to settle a dispute that impoverished both towns, and as a sign of his magnanimity and sincerity he presented one of his favorite women to Duke Ephraim, the ruler of New Town, as a wife.[5]

Duke Ephraim, Grandy King George's chief rival, was also busy making preparations for the important event to take place on the following day, but rather than decking himself and his canoes out in ceremonial splendor, he prepared for battle. Duke Ephraim was finally ready to destroy his Old Town rivals, and with the help of the English captains, he prepared a trap for the Old Town delegation. Ever since his ancestors had founded New Town generations earlier, their aim had been to supplant

Old Town and take control of the vital and profitable slave trade. Until now, however, none of his predecessors had been able to defeat the wealthy and powerful Robin Johns. Duke Ephraim had worked diligently to build alliances that would enable him to crush his opponents with remarkable speed. New Town was settled as an offshoot of an older town called Creek Town, and the rulers of New Town had maintained alliances at Creek Town whose rulers also bristled at the wealth and power of Old Town. Creek Town had long been in decline, but its fortunes revived under the leadership of Eyo Nsa (called Eyo Honesty I or Willy Honesty by the Europeans because of his honorable dealings in trade), one of the most famous and successful of the Old Calabar traders. Unlike his contemporaries in the slave trade, he was not of noble birth, and may even have been born a slave, but through marriage, hard work, intelligence, courage, and ruthlessness, he rose to the chief position in Creek Town. Eyo Honesty was as eager as Duke Ephraim to destroy the preeminence of Old Town, and the two entered into an alliance against the Robin Johns. A successful warrior, Eyo Nsa was celebrated for his bravery and feared for his cruelty. The historian David Northrup aptly describes traders like Eyo Nsa and Duke Ephraim as "men of tremendous imagination, energy, and determination who succeeded where lesser men would have failed." Although we will probably never know who laid the clever plans that defeated the Robin Johns, the

scheme certainly looks like Eyo Nsa's handiwork. On the fatal morning, Eyo Nsa and Duke Ephraim readied their war canoes and hid them behind a heavily wooded turn in the river, eagerly awaiting a signal from the English ships to launch their ambush.[6]

Why should English captains intervene in Old Calabar's internal affairs? As relations between Old Town and New Town deteriorated, the English traders suffered the consequences. The English captains could either have their ships lie at anchor for months on end, with supplies running lower and lower, tempers rising higher and higher, while the traders at Old Town and New Town quarreled among themselves, or they could look for ways to force the rival traders to resume commerce. The growing rivalry between the towns threatened the peaceful conduct of trade and brought into prominence the ambiguities embedded in a commercial system based on trust and personal relationships, somewhat brittle relations that could be used both to build confidence and to deceive.

Captain James Berry of Liverpool, who had made many trading voyages to Old Calabar, expressed his outrage at the harsh treatment he received from the Robin Johns at Old Town in 1763. After anchoring his ship in the river off Old Town, he "according to custom went ashore to shake the Kings and the rest of the getlemen Hands." The Robin Johns refused to meet his terms, so

Berry forced them to trade by simply waiting on his ship for fifteen days until he wore them down to his price. But the Old Town traders were far from happy with the transaction, and Ephraim Robin John refused to give Berry his son for a pledge, as was customary. A few days later, "that rouge Ephm. [Ephraim] Robin John Joined by Rn [Robin] John Tom Robin, Captn. John Ambo and the Rest of that Town" sent out a fleet of ten war canoes to capture Berry, whom they held hostage for twenty-nine days. He reported that in order to gain his release, Grandy King George "obliged me to pay him and the Rest of the Schoundrells just what he pleas'd[;] the amount of his imposition is 4251 Copper [copper bars were the currency in Old Calabar. By contrast, Berry had paid only 1,000 coppers to the other traders for comey]." Along with the coppers, the king also took "one of my great guns . . . three of my musquetts two Blunderbusses 2 pistols [and] 2 cutlasses," arms that the king may have planned to use against his New Town rivals. To add insult to injury, the king even forced Berry "to give severall Books and one [account book] to clear him of all palaver with me." Once freed, Berry sailed downriver to trade with the Dukes at New Town, who, he reported, "I believe did me justice in every thing." Outraged by "the vilanious [*sic*] intentions of the Old Town Scoundrells," he vowed that he "never will forgive the injury Ephm and the rest of them did me till I have satisfaction."[7]

In 1764 Captain James Briggs had a violent confrontation with the Robin Johns. Though the details of their dispute do not survive, no doubt it was similar to that between the Robin Johns and Captain Berry. As the supplies of slaves dwindled and as the rivals at Old Town and New Town tried to prevent each other from acquiring and selling slaves, the English captains tried every means to force them to trade. One tactic was called rowing guard. English captains put boats into the river to stop Efik canoes. They captured the traders, and then held them hostage until they agreed to sell slaves at a reasonable price. They could also cut the Efik off from their supply of slaves by barring their passage upriver. Briggs had his chief mate lying in wait to ambush Orrock Robin John as he came down a creek in a canoe. The English sailors chased Orrock, who jumped ashore and made for the bush. When the Englishmen tried to follow, he leveled his musket and shot the first mate through the head.[8] Clearly the traders at Old Town had violated every rule that governed the trade, and their actions soon lost them the trust that was essential to maintaining successful relations.

In 1767 another English merchant at Old Calabar wrote, "There are now seven large vessels in the river, each of which expects to purchase 500 slaves, and I imagine there was seldom ever known a greater scarcity of slaves than at present." The reason for that scarcity was the ongoing struggle between Old Town and New

Town, which had grown so serious that "for a considerable time no canoe could leave their towns to go up the river for Slaves." The captain reported that "the natives are at variance with each other, and, in my opinion, it will never be ended before the destruction of all the people at Old Town, who have taken the lives of many a fine fellow . . . I now flatter myself, I shall be an assistant in revenging the just cause of every poor Englishman that have innocently suffered by them." Thanks to the reports of captains like Berry and the others, word of the arrogance and duplicity of the Old Town traders spread quickly among the small circle of slave traders in Liverpool and Bristol.[9]

In June 1767 seven English vessels lay in the river at Old Calabar: the *Indian Queen,* John Lewis, captain; the *Duke of York,* James Bivins, captain; the *Nancy,* James Maxwell, captain; the *Concord,* William Bishop, captain—all of Bristol—the *Hector,* John Washington, captain; the *Edgar,* Ambrose Lace, captain—both of Liverpool—and the *Canterbury* of London, Nonus Parke, captain. All of these captains were seasoned veterans of the trade to Old Calabar, and were well aware of the festering dispute between Old Town and New Town. European traders usually ignored internal disputes among the traders at Old Calabar, but given the disastrous impact of the dispute on the supply of slaves, combined with the actions of the Old Town traders, the captains clearly favored the traders at New Town. Whether the English

other English ships opened fire (the *Hector* and the *Concord* did not; their captains apparently refused to join the ambush) while the war canoes from New Town and Creek Town emerged from their concealed positions and joined in the massacre. The English captains ordered their men into small boats, where they joined in the slaughter of the Old Town men swimming in the river. The river literally ran red with blood.[13]

The captives were transported to the English ships as the massacre came to its bloody conclusion. Eyo Nsa and a group of men from New Town pulled their war canoe up alongside the *Duke of York*. Bivins consulted with Captain Parke and ordered his first mate, Mr. Green, to deliver Amboe to the people of New Town. Green refused, but Eyo Nsa said, "By god, captain Parke, if you give me that man to cutty head, I'll give you the best man in my canoe . . . and you shall be slaved the first ship." That promise was enough for Bivins, who ignored Amboe's desperate pleas and ordered the transfer once Eyo Nsa handed over a man from his canoe. Amboe begged for a drink of water, but even that was denied him as he was lowered into the canoe. Eyo Nsa grabbed him by his hair, held him over the gunwale of the boat, and beheaded him with one blow as Little Ephraim and Ancona looked on in horror. Eyo Nsa waved the bloody head in the air as shouts of victory rose from the New Town and Creek Town canoes. Eyo Nsa wanted Captain Bivins to turn over Little Ephraim and Ancona as well,

but Bivins kept them on board his ship, promising to turn them over once his ship was slaved as agreed.[14]

Grandy King George, on board the *Edgar,* barely escaped with his life. Captain Lace recalled that he and the king were about to have breakfast at eight o'clock that morning. Lace was pouring a cup of coffee when he heard firing. Lace reported that the frightened king jumped overboard while ordering his son and nephew to stay behind. But one English sailor told a different story. When crewmen on the *Edgar* attempted to capture Grandy King George, he fought bravely and killed two of his English attackers. He jumped overboard and climbed into a little canoe known as a one-man canoe, and paddled desperately toward the shore. One of the English ships fired a six-pounder at the canoe, and one well-aimed shot struck the small craft and shattered it to pieces. The king survived, however, and managed to swim to shore. Despite eleven wounds from musket shot, he escaped to Old Town, with his enemies at his heels. A surgeon from one of the English ships that had not joined in the attack treated the king and helped save his life.[15]

Fortunately for Little Ephraim and Ancona, Captain Bivins was not a man of his word. Even after his ship was slaved, he refused to deliver his two captives and instead sailed away with them. The two princes of Old Calabar joined other survivors of the massacre and slaves supplied by New Town in the stinking holds be-

low the decks of the *Duke of York*, en route to the Caribbean with its valuable cargo. Their capture provoked a flurry of desperate letters from their family in Old Town to English slave traders. Orrock Robin John wrote to Thomas Jones, one of the veterans of the trade with long-standing connections in Old Town, asking for the return of "Lettle Ephraim & Ancone." He also assured Jones that his family was eager to reenter the slave trade and that they held no grudges toward the captains who had participated in the massacre, and pleaded with Jones to boycott New Town. Grandy King George himself wrote Jones at about the same time, also asking for the return of his relatives and for a resumption of the trade. Lace took the king's son, Otto Ephraim, back to England with him. Lace later wrote, "I brought young Epm. home, and had him at School near two years, then sent him out, he cost me above sixty pounds and when his Fathers gone I hope the son will be a good man."[16] While Otto Ephraim was safe in England, the whereabouts of Little Ephraim and Ancona was unknown in Old Calabar. Despite their relatives' desperate pleas, it would be many years before anyone in Old Calabar had news of their fate.

The Massacre of 1767 completely altered the politics of Old Calabar. Some four hundred men from Old Town were slaughtered, a loss that devastated Grandy King George's trading house and left his world in shambles. On a personal level, the king had lost his brothers,

Amboe and Little Ephraim, his son Otto Ephraim, and his nephew Ancona. Despite the fact that Grandy King George survived, his crushing defeat and the deaths of so many of the gentlemen traders and valuable canoe boys led to the virtual collapse of Old Town. When Captain George Colley of the *Latham* visited Old Calabar on a slave-trading expedition in 1768, he reported that "our purchase here [Old Town] at present is very small, owing to a hot and troublesome war among the natives." Problems with English merchants continued as well. In 1773 the *Integrity* of Liverpool (Richard Jackson, captain) and the *Maria* of Bristol (George Bishop, captain) arrived at Old Town to trade. After a dispute over the comey payments, Jackson fired on Old Town for twenty-four hours until the king's bribes stopped the assault. Jackson warned the king that if he "went on bord of Bishop I shuld be stopped by him and my hed cut of and sent to the Duke at Nuetown." In addition, the king charged that Jackson had sailed away with his pawns after he had taken on his full cargo of slaves, a loss that included four of the king's sons. Captain Jackson, well aware of the king's weakened position and the rivalry with New Town, could manipulate the king in ways unthinkable before the massacre. In 1773, the king pleaded with Captain Lace to "send good ship and make me grandy again for war take two much copr [copper] from me."[17] Despite Grandy King George's attempts to rebuild his house, Old Town never recovered from the

massacre and fell further and further behind its New Town rival.

This is the version of events that best fits the evidence. But in 1790 the British House of Commons conducted hearings on the African slave trade and investigated the events that took place in the Calabar River in 1767, and in those hearings testimony from one English slaver gave a different version of events. The committee called Ambrose Lace, captain of the *Edgar* of Liverpool during the massacre, and one of the most important slave traders in Liverpool. By 1790 he had spent about forty years in the trade, first as a crewman, then as a captain, and finally as the owner of slave ships. As a captain, he transported over 2,700 Africans to the slave colonies in the Americas. During those voyages over 450 captives died, and were unceremoniously tossed overboard to be eaten by the sharks that trailed the vessels of death. As an owner, he invested in the transport of over 15,400 men, women, and children, of whom only about 12,600 arrived in the New World. When he entered the business in the 1740s, it was an accepted area of commerce with few opponents, but Lace lived to see a dramatic shift in public opinion about the trade, symbolized by the parliamentary hearing of 1790, which was a direct outgrowth of public petitions against slave trading. The historian David Brion Davis referred to this change as a "remarkable shift in moral consciousness," characterized by the

growing belief that the slave trade and New World slavery "symbolized all the forces that threatened the true destiny of man."[18] No doubt Lace pondered the changed climate as he recalled the events of 1767. He made his way through the bustling streets of London to the House of Parliament, where he answered the summons of the Select Committee. The hardened old captain took his seat as questioning began:

Was you ever employed in the African Trade?
Yes.
Was you at Old Calabar in the year 1767, as captain of any, and of what ship?
I was there as captain in the ship Edgar.
What number of ships were then lying at Calabar?
Nine.
Were they all ships concerned in the African Trade?
Every one.
Do you remember, that in order to make an end of a dispute which had for some time subsisted between the inhabitants of the Old and New Town, any agreement was made for both parties to meet on shipboard?
Yes.
Can you describe the nature of that dispute?
There had been for many years a dispute between the people of Old Town and New Town.
State the nature and circumstances of that dispute.

When I first went there in 1748, there were no inhabitants in the place called Old Town, they all lived at the place called New Town; some time after disputes arose between a party who now call themselves Old Town people, and those who are now called New Town people.

When the parties were invited to meet on ship-board, was that invitation made with an insidious view, to get them within the power of the English, to make Slaves of them?

No.

Did any of the parties meet on board in consequence of such agreement; and what passed on that occasion?

The principal people from Old Town came on board my ship, where the duke (the principal man of Old Town) was to have met them; they came on board about half past seven in the morning; at about eight I was going to breakfast with a person who called himself king of Old Town; there were four of the king's large canoes alongside of my ship, where the other canoes were I cannot tell: I was just pouring out some coffee, when I heard a firing. I went upon deck along with the king, and my people told me my gunner was killed; immediately the king was for going overboard; I then told him to stay where he was; he told me he would not, he would go in his canoe, which he did; the firing, by what I can recollect, might be for ten or fifteen minutes, but I cannot be certain as to the exact time. The canoes . . . most of them then got astern of my ship within about 300 or 400

yards; I had not time to make observations of the two parties, I wanted to defend myself after I was fired into; I was no further molested, the canoes were all gone.

At the time the firing commenced, were any of your guns loaded, or were any of the small arms in the possession of your crew?

The small arms are always loaden, but they were locked up, and the chest was broke open.

Was the key of the chest afterwards found, and where?

In the gunner's pocket.

Did you or your people take any share in the affray that then happened?

No more than any gentleman in this room.

Were any guns fired from your ship, great or small, upon that occasion?

No; not so much as a pistol.

Were any guns fired from any other ships upon that occasion?

Not to my knowledge.

Did the king kill any man on board your ship?

No.

Was the king on board any other ship during the battle?

Not to my knowledge; if he was, it must have been before he came on board my ship.

Were there any Slaves actually made on that occasion?

Not to my knowledge.

At what time, and how long after, did you get the complement of Slaves for your ship?

I went there in the beginning of July, I cannot exactly state when this happened, and sailed the first week of December; I was there within a few days of five months, over or under.

Did the English enter into this business with any fraudulent or improper view?

Not that I ever heard of.

Did the English, as you know or believe, reap any benefit whatever from this transaction?

No; it was against the trade.

Previous to this transaction, had there been any consultation amongst the English captains, relative to the difference between the Old and New Towns, or relative to any other matter connected with this transaction?

If there was, it was before I came into the river, and unknown to me.[19]

Was Captain Lace telling the truth? Were he and the other English captains innocent in the Massacre of 1767? There is little evidence to support his version of events. Lace showed a very poor understanding of the history of Old Calabar (suggesting that Old Town came into existence *after* New Town, for instance), and appeared to have no real knowledge of the dispute between Old Town and New Town. A letter he wrote to Thomas Jones in 1773 revealed a very different understanding of

Old Calabar. He carefully recited the genealogy of the Robin John family and reported that "as to Grandy Epm. [Grandy King George or Duke Ephraim] you know very well [he] has been Guilty of many bad Act[i]ons, no man can say anything in his favor, a History of his life would exceed any of our Pirates, the whole sett at Old Town you know as well as me." Lace took one of Grandy King George's sons back to England with him after the massacre, sent him to school, and returned him to Old Calabar almost two years later.[20] It is inconceivable that Lace's memory could have been as faulty as it appeared in his testimony.

It comes as no surprise that Lace did his best to defend his actions and those of the other English captains. The Massacre of 1767 was the most egregious case of English slavers' use of violence to interfere in the internal politics of Old Calabar. They did so, of course, with the expectation that their activities would never come to light. Their actions clearly violated the Acts of Parliament for Regulating the Slave Trade, which stipulated that "no commander or master of any ship trading to Africa shall by fraud, force or violence or by any indirect practice whatsoever take on board or carry away from the coast of Africa any negro or native of the said country or commit or suffer to be committed any violence to the natives to the prejudice of the said trade." And now Lace found himself, and the entire trade, on trial in the court of public opinion. He must have cursed his luck

that the episode had ever come to light and that it continued to be a subject of investigation nearly twenty years later.[21]

Grandy King George humiliated, defeated; Amboe Robin John, dead; Little Ephraim Robin Robin John and Ancona Robin Robin John, princes of Old Town and slavers themselves, now enslaved. Four hundred of the gentry and canoe boys of Old Town massacred or enslaved. Duke Ephraim and Eyo Nsa triumphant. The English captains, their slave ships now loaded and the troublesome Robin Johns of Old Town brought low, sail away with their ships loaded with slaves and fully satisfied with the outcome of events. It certainly was, as one of the English captains described it in the language of commerce, "a very bloody transaction."[22]

These are the chief protagonists of the Massacre of 1767, but if we are to fully understand how this event came to pass, why the traders of Old Calabar willingly slaughtered one another, and why English ship captains actively plotted an attack against men they routinely referred to as friends and gentlemen, we must delve into the history of Old Calabar. And if we are to fully grasp the long-range implications of the massacre, we must carry the story forward, especially the story of Little Ephraim and Ancona, whose capture and enslavement sent them on a remarkable journey around the Atlantic World.

2

"Nothing But Sivellety and Fare Trade"

Old Calabar and the Impact of the Slave Trade on an African Society

In 1773 Grandy King George urged English slave traders to come to Old Calabar with promises of "Nothing but Sivellety [Civility] and fare [fair] trade."[1] That the king was able to write to English merchants in English, and that his promise of favorable trade was couched in the language of civility prevalent in the eighteenth century, says a great deal about the evolution of the slave trade in this distinctive region. Several characteristics of Old Calabar's history and development paved the way for it to become a major slave-trading society. The Efik, a branch of the Ibibio-speaking people, were traders with well-developed long-distance networks stretching

from one of the best harbors on the west coast of Africa deep into the interior, networks that could easily be turned toward the slave trade when that opportunity presented itself. Their semiautonomous towns, dominated by well-structured, kinship-based merchant houses, provided ideal institutions to facilitate the trade and gave them the necessary political and military strength to control it and to ensure that Europeans did not gain a foothold in their territory. The Efik were also remarkably adaptable. The introduction of the trade demanded major changes in their social, economic, and cultural life, changes that the Efik made quickly as the slave trade grew to dominate their economy.[2]

Old Calabar, part of the Lower Guinea coast in present-day Nigeria, lies in the curve of the African shoreline just where the Bight of Biafra is separated from the Bight of Benin by the Niger River delta.[3] The Cross River provided one of the best harbors in West Africa, and the larger Cross River network provided the Efik with access far into the interior. At its mouth the river stretches ten or twelve miles across and remains that wide up to Parrot Island, about thirty miles from the coast. Above that island, the Cross River meets the Calabar, and small, marshy islands crowd the river. Below Parrot Island, the river banks were low and marshy, covered with mangrove swamps. "Efik" is derived from the Ibibio verb *fik,* which means "to oppress," a name given to them by other Ibibio-speaking people who came into

conflict with them. The Efik adopted the name despite its negative connotations, but also referred to themselves as Iboku, derived from two Ibo words meaning those who quarrel with the Ibo. Both names suggest that the relations between the Efik and their neighbors were once hostile, and according to one legend, the Efik settlements originated from that hostility, but by the seventeenth century, when the first Europeans arrived, the Efik were carrying on a thriving trade with the Ibo and others.[4]

Whatever the motivation for their emigration, evidence suggests that by the early to mid sixteenth century the Efik had established their settlements in the Cross River estuary, where they lived primarily as fishermen and traders. They carried on an active commerce, exchanging coastal products, particularly fish and salt, for agricultural products, especially yams and palm oil, from Ibo people in the interior. The principal Efik towns were built up the Calabar River, about thirty miles from the coast, where the mangrove swamps gave way to higher ground. Their first major settlement, called Ikot Etundo (Creek Town by Europeans), was situated on a creek connecting the Cross and Calabar rivers. When the English trader John Barbot visited Old Calabar in the late seventeenth century, he found the area to be "well furnish'd with villages and hamlets all about, where Europeans drive their trade with the Blacks, who are good civiliz'd people." The fact that Barbot regarded the Efik as civilized suggests that good relations between them

and the Europeans were already well established, and Barbot reported that Old Calabar was a principal trading post for English slavers. He noted payments to to several traders, including "duke Aphrom" (Ephraim) and "king Robin," the ancestors of Duke Ephraim and Grandy King George. Barbot's account suggests that Old Town and New Town were already in existence when he arrived there. Efik towns ranged in population from 1,000 to 5,000 people, and were divided into sections or wards. The members of a ward considered themselves to be descendants of their ward's founder, and might be further divided into the descendants of a son or grandson of the founder. These lineages were known as houses. Each ward had a head and a council of elders, but before the rise of the slave trade there was no centralized authority. The European title of "king" appears in early slave trader accounts from the late seventeenth century, but the title was an honorific one adopted by the leading Efik traders who were heads of a local community or an important ward (called *obong* by the Efik) and did not imply the existence of a monarchy based on the European model. The head of a ward or other subdivision of a town was called a duke, a title that some elite traders considered "higher and more expressive of power than that of King." Creek Town consisted of three houses: Eyo Ema, Atai Ema, and Effiom Ekpo. Creek Town grew and prospered until conflict between the Eyo Ema and Atai Ema houses resulted in the establishment of

Obutong (Old Town) by members of Atai Ema, the ancestors of the Robin Johns. The exact date of this division is unknown, but Old Town certainly existed by the late seventeenth century, when it appears in European records.[5]

Slavery was well established among the Efik before the rise of the European slave trade, as it was across most of West Africa, but slavery may have played a more important economic role among the Efik than among other coastal groups. Nearby coastal states like Bonny and Elem Kalabari were located in mangrove swamps and had to import much of their food; they had little need for large numbers of enslaved laborers. The situation was different in Old Calabar, which had a fertile hinterland that could be profitably farmed with enslaved labor, and the Efik had a market for their products with their trading partners in the interior. Barbot found that slaves were essentially "a form of money among these Africans." He observed that individuals were enslaved through a variety of means: "Slaves are either those who, having no means of subsistence, sell themselves to rich men for life, or those taken in war, or children sold by their parents because they cannot keep them, or finally, those sold as slaves because they cannot pay the fines to which they have been condemned. But of all these, the largest number are those taken in war or seized in their homes and carried off." Initially, slaves were drawn from among the Efik themselves, and the

system was not based on ethnic or racial differences. Slaves referred to their owners as "father" and "mother." As one of the slave traders reported in 1773, "You know very well the custom of that place whatever Man or Woman gos to live in any family they take the Name of the first man in the family and call him Father." The missionary Hope Waddell, who resided in Old Calabar in the mid-nineteenth century, recorded the various ways that people could fall into slavery. Although it is problematic to read backward from such sources, the means of enslavement that he described were consistent with the practices that Barbot observed and with those followed in other parts of Africa in the eighteenth century. According to Waddell, slaves came from several sources, and scholars of African slavery agree that "there were numerous ways to enslave people." In Old Calabar, as in other regions, individuals sold themselves into slavery to escape famine, to seek protection, or to improve their circumstances, since a well-placed slave might prosper more than an impoverished free man. Individuals could also be enslaved for debts, and entire families could fall into slavery by that means. James Morley, a sailor on board slave ships at Old Calabar in the 1770s, reported that he knew of persons who were sold because they committed adultery or theft. Among those sold for adultery was one of the wives of Duke Ephraim, though the woman, who spoke very good English, told Morley that she was innocent of the crime, and since Ephraim treated

her "with the greatest civility" when he brought her on board, Morley believed the charge to be false. Men might also be enslaved as punishment for crimes or taken as prisoners of war, but those enslaved in these ways were generally in a worse position than other slaves; their lives were considered forfeit and they might be subject to sacrifice or sale, unlike those enslaved by other means. In Waddell's day, a common maxim in Old Calabar was that a person could easily fall into slavery, but could seldom recover his freedom. Slaves could not purchase their freedom, and indeed if a master freed a slave the act often was seen as a disgrace to the slave, who had to find another master to protect him or suffer the worst possible abuses. Slaves could, however, improve their position by acquiring slaves of their own, which would free them from hard labor and raise their status. If an enslaved concubine bore her master's children, both she and the children became free.[6]

Old Calabar accounted for the export of over 17,000 slaves from 1725 to 1750, and the trade increased dramatically from 1750 to 1775, when the number of persons exported soared to over 62,000. All told, approximately 1.2 million slaves were transported from the Cross and Niger Rivers in the eighteenth century. Merchants in Bristol and Liverpool dominated the trade from Old Calabar, and approximately 85 percent of the slaves exported from the area left on English ships.[7]

On the African side, the trade was controlled by Old

Calabar merchants like the Robin Johns who used the profits from the trade and the firearms they acquired to expand their power in the region. Because of their increasing wealth, Efik communities grew in size and number in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as the slave trade expanded, and this growth accounted for the subdivisions of lineage groups and other changes within their society. Successful slave traders required more and more canoes, manned by more and more slaves, and became the masters of large numbers of dependents. Before the expansion of the slave trade, the oldest member of the family was head of the house, but as the trade grew leadership passed to the wealthiest member of the house (called Etubom, father of the canoe, as opposed to Ete Ufok, father of the house). David Northrup has outlined the three major features of canoe houses that set them apart from the old lineage houses: first, the canoe houses expanded rapidly with the growth of the slave trade and the addition of slaves from the interior; second, the leaders of the canoe houses were "men of talent promoted rigorously from among slave and free members alike who demonstrated the necessary abilities"; and third, canoe houses "formed a single economic unit, a sort of trading company." The new title Etubom highlights the importance canoes played in the lives of the traders who could launch large fleets of them. The change retained the patriarchal structure of Efik society, but downplayed the importance of lineage

as larger numbers of persons who were not truly related were incorporated into the houses. These increasingly large and powerful trading houses commanded the labor of hundreds or even thousands of enslaved rowers, soldiers, relatives, domestics, agricultural workers, and other dependents, and wealth was measured by the number of people the Etubom commanded. The Etubom used European trade goods not only to acquire slaves for sale to Europeans, but also to attract followers, since goods were also distributed among dependents. Houses used slave labor to farm plantations, where they raised crops for consumption as well as to supply the slave ships. Along with the male slaves came their families and the extended infrastructure necessary to support them. Houses that grew rich enough and large enough were essentially able to establish themselves as new lineage groups, though they still acknowledged their descent from the original lineage founders. Originally, the Efik were divided into two lineage groups, but as the slave trade expanded, the two subdivided into seven wards or city-states. Given their skills as traders, their trade networks to the interior, and their fleets of canoes capable of ferrying large numbers of people, the Efik were well positioned to capitalize on the arrival of European merchants.[8]

Europeans had no onshore base or factory in Old Calabar as they did in some parts of West Africa, and the Efik refused to allow them to permanently reside

there. When ships arrived, they stopped inside the river's mouth at Parrot Island and fired a cannon to signal their arrival. A response was fired from shore, and a native pilot was sent to lead the ship upriver. European ships paid comey to the king of the town with which they planned to trade, hence the rivalry between Old Town and New Town for the primary location on the river. Once the comey was paid, Old Calabar kings and chiefs, referred to as the "gentlemen of the towns," kept up a lively social intercourse with the Europeans, known as the "gentlemen of the river." The Ekif entertained Europeans on the shore, and the Europeans returned the hospitality on board their ships. Such festivities were essential before trade negotiations could begin. English captains soon learned the best times to arrive in Old Calabar to trade. Barbot reported that it was best for European traders to arrive in Old Calabar from May to September. Yams could not be harvested before July, so after that date provisions could be purchased more cheaply. May and June were also advantageous because continual rains kept the heat down and allowed the Efik to devote their full attention to acquiring slaves from the interior, "and are consequently the fittest time for us to purchase slaves with expedition, and less hindrance and fatigue." October, November, and December were considered the worst months for trade because of the dry, scorching heat and the harmattan winds that blew in from the deserts to the north and created a haze so dense "that it is

not possible to see from one end of the ship to the other." English ships might remain at anchor for months or as long as a year before they acquired their full cargo of slaves. During that time, the Europeans lived on their ships, roofing them with palm thatch for some relief from the tropical sun. Sailors were not idle; they unloaded the cargoes of trade goods so that the ship's carpenters could build the platforms in which the slaves would travel across the Atlantic. As the trade goods and supplies were unloaded from the holds, the ship's carpenters transformed the lower deck by building the platforms along the sides of the ship, so close that each captive had only a few feet of space. John Newton reported that "their lodging-rooms below the deck, which are three (for the men, the boys, and the women), besides a place for the sick, are sometimes more than five feet high, and sometimes less; and this height is divided towards the middle, for the slaves lie in two rows, one above the other, on each side of the ship, close to each other, like books upon a shelf."[9]

English traders and the Old Calabar elite communicated with one another in English or in a "trade language" consisting predominantly of English words but using an African grammatical structure, and elite members of the trading houses like Little Ephraim and Ancona were fluent in both the spoken and written versions of the trade language. Theirs is one of several West African trade languages that emerged from Gambia

to Cameroon which the linguist Ian Hancock refers to as "English-based Atlantic Creoles." Not simply a pidgin English, this creolized language was a hybrid combining linguistic influences from various sources into a new and fully complete language with its own systemic structure, and it even became a mother tongue. The evolution of such languages and their adoption all along the West African coast and their transfer to the Americas illustrates the complexities of cross-cultural contact and the ongoing transformations that the slave trade brought about.[10]

One English sailor who visited Old Calabar reported that "all of them [the African traders] speak English, some of them very good," and another agreed that "the Black Traders of . . . Calabar . . . are very expert at reckoning and talking the different Languages of their own Country and those of the Europeans." Many of the leading merchants of Old Calabar were also literate in English and creole; they kept their own accounts, sometimes inspected English slave traders' account books, corresponded directly with English merchants, and some even kept diaries. Surviving letters between English and Efik traders show that close personal relationships developed between them, relationships reinforced by regular correspondence that included expressions of endearment and even small gifts to traders' wives and children. That ability to communicate directly was especially important in a commercial system based on face-to-face negotiation and an understanding of character. Efik merchants and their English counterparts understood the prevailing conven-

tion that "letters of trade, wrote with judgement, and language suitable to the subject, beget respect and confidence." Although it is not clear how Little Ephraim and Ancona mastered the trade language, in some cases, the African traders arranged to send their sons to England for further education, often at the encouragement of the English traders. As a group of Liverpool traders reported, "It has always been the Practice of Merchants and Commanders of Ships trading to Africa, to encourage the Natives to send their Children to England, as it not only conciliates their Friendship and softens their Manners, but adds greatly to the Security of the Trader, which answers the Purposes both of Interest and Humanity." An English education also had benefits for the African traders; as one of the Liverpool traders noted, "The motives which principally induce the Natives of Africa . . . to send their Children to England, are to receive such an Education as will fit them for trading with greater Advantage, as the Trade is principally carried on by trusting the Goods to different Hands, and sometimes to a very large Amount. The Acquisition of that Knowledge gives them a confessed Superiority over their less informed Countrymen, which by associating with the Whites and following their Manners, they are ever after studious to retain." He observed that "the Prevalence of Example have diffused among the Natives a Love of Society and a Desire for the Ornaments of Dress and Conveniences of Life."[11]

The English traders noted that the Old Calabar slave

traders sent their sons to England to learn English manners and to create the personal bonds vital to the trade. The quest for civility on the part of the African merchants does not reflect some European cultural project aimed at overcoming African savagery or remaking natives in their own image. Rather, African merchant elites sought to adopt the trappings of civility in order to bridge the distinctions that separated them from their European trading partners, a venture that the English slavers encouraged. Young men like Little Ephraim and Ancona were carefully groomed to play essential roles in trade with English merchants, developing skills that served them well later. The quest for civility functioned also as a marker within Old Calabar's society. Elite slave traders carried many aspects of their quest for civility into their internal relations so that European dress, language, dining utensils, and other luxury goods linked them together as members of a self-fashioned elite. Most important, the traders of Old Calabar used their knowledge of the English language, their ability to keep in touch with favored English merchants through correspondence, and a conscious adoption of English customs and conventions to facilitate trade. For instance, when Antera Duke and his companions went to dinner on a slave ship, he recorded that "we three dressed as white men." Similarly, when he entertained Englishmen on shore, he wrote, "we wore fine hats and fine clothes and handkerchiefs. All the Captains and we gentlemen had

dinner." Traders in Old Calabar followed many of the conventions that governed polite communication in the eighteenth century. They often closed their letters to England with greetings to traders' wives and other family members and sometimes sent them gifts of ivory or other exotic goods. This was part of an effort to create lasting commercial relationships based in part on feelings. Indeed, the letters between the African and English slave traders bear many of the marks of courtship epistles. For instance, in 1761 the Liverpool trader William Earle assured his Old Calabar counterpart Duke Abashy that "You know very well I love all Calabar, I do not want to wrong." Old Calabar traders tried to woo the English merchants to trade with promises of rewards. As Grandy King George wrote his "friend" Thomas Jones of Bristol, "I hop you send ships for My oun Water. I will slaves you ship & Desire all Marchant in Bristol to them."[12] Little Ephraim and Ancona, like most young elite members of a prominent canoe house, had mastered these epistolary conventions.

If traders happened to be in Old Calabar on Christmas or New Year's Eve, Efik gentlemen arranged parties to celebrate the occasions. Among the items of trade Old Calabar merchants requested were fashionable clothes, dinner ware and eating utensils, furniture, ink and paper; and some prominent traders in Old Calabar used joiners and carpenters from slave ships to help build their houses in the English style. The trappings of English culture

helped confirm Old Calabar traders' status as gentlemen worthy of trust in financial dealings. English traders advanced credit in the form of trade goods, which could amount to substantial sums, a practice referred to as "trust." As Liverpool slave traders noted, "the Trade [at Old Calabar] is principally carried on by trusting the Goods to different Hands, and sometimes to a very large Amount." The English ships carried out large cargoes of trade goods, including fabrics, brass and copper kettles and pans, pewter basins, iron pots, bars of iron and lead, plates, dishes, wineglasses, knives, spoons, razors, soap, gunpowder and muskets, rum and brandy, beads and other trinkets, laced hats, jackets, mirrors, axes, hatchets, and cutlasses. As security, the traders turned over "pawns," often their own sons or daughters, to be held on board the slave ships until the debts were settled. Using this system was another way that members of the elite trading families came to know the English traders well and vice versa. The development of the system of credit and pawnship was essential to the expansion of the slave trade and gave the African traders access to the British capital that allowed them to become important figures in the emerging Atlantic economy. This system occasionally broke down, and letters from Old Calabar's rulers sometimes complained that their sons had been taken away by mistake. For example, in 1773 Grandy King George complained to Ambrose Lace about Captain Richard Jackson, who had carried away several

pawns; the angry king wrote, "you may think Sir that it was vary vaxing to have my sons caried of by Captn Jackson and Robbin sons and the King of Qua son . . . and yet thy say I do them bad." Such events could seriously damage trade relations, and the Efik traders sometimes held all captains responsible for such acts until their pawns were returned to them. Captains were often willing to find and return lost pawns in an effort to better their own position in the trade. John Newton, for example, redeemed a free boy who had been taken away illegally to Rhode Island and returned him to his home.[13]

The Old Calabar traders did not keep slaves on hand ready for trade, but rather acquired them after a ship arrived and a deal had been struck. The traders took the goods advanced to them by the English traders, and set out upriver in their war canoes. Fleets might have as few as three or as many as a dozen canoes, each of which carried up to 120 people and measured up to eighty feet long. Led by the heads of the canoe houses, their sons, and other relatives or lieutenants, the canoes were manned by a crew of forty to fifty enslaved "canoe boys" who paddled the craft, twenty to thirty traders, and other armed men. In addition, each canoe had a three- or four-pound cannon lashed to the bow. These expeditions lasted from ten days to three weeks. Little Ephraim and Ancona were probably of an age to have participated in these raids. Using the extensive Cross River network as their highway or traveling over land,

the traders sought out slaves, often from Aro merchants, members of the Igbo ethnic group, who built a successful commercial network that reached from the Niger delta up the Cross River into Ibibio and Igbo country. Skilled in the use of firearms, the Aro employed mercenary soldiers who acquired slaves, but their trade relied primarily on judicial activity and kidnapping of individuals rather than all-out war. They established trade settlements and market fairs, and contracted with local merchants for the purchase of slaves. Through the Ekif, they obtained the credit they needed to expand their operations. Even with fleets of ten canoes, it required many expeditions for the Efik to fill a slave ship, and the Cross River was often crowded with many ships from several nations, though the overwhelming majority came from England and France. Most of the slaves exported from Old Calabar throughout its involvement in the trade were drawn from people of the Igbo and Ibibio language groups who lived in a densely populated region between the Niger and Cross rivers. Their small village system left them vulnerable and made it possible for the Efik to rely on raiding as one source of slaves far longer than most suppliers along the coast were able to do. One Englishman participated in a slaving expedition from Old Calabar in 1787 made up of twelve canoes. He reported that during the day the traders "called at the villages we passed, and purchased our slaves fairly," but at night they raided villages and captured as many men, women,

and children as possible. Another sailor "heard from the Traders and Canoe Boys of Bonny and Calabar, that some of the Slaves sold to the Europeans . . . have become so in consequence of Debt, and others in consequence of Crimes. The great Bulk of them, however, . . . were . . . taken in piratical Excursions, or by Treachery and Surprise." The Ekif traders probably acquired most of their slaves from the Aro, but as eighteenth-century sources suggest, they continued to launch surprise raids on villages themselves, a practice that may have increased when the usual supplies were inadequate.[14]

The Efik packed their canoes with slaves, generally twenty or thirty in each canoe. Some slaves, particularly the men, had their arms tied behind their backs with twigs and grass ropes, and a few were pinioned above the knees as well. They were thrown into the bottoms of the canoes, often in pain and nearly covered with water, until they made the journey to Old Calabar. Once the canoes landed, the slaves were taken to the traders' houses, where they were fed and their skin was oiled to make them appear healthier. The traders then summoned the Europeans to inspect them. Generally, the captain and the doctor of the English slavers examined the slaves and made their purchases. Prices were computed in copper bars. When Barbot traded in Old Calabar in the late seventeenth century, he found that male slaves cost from forty to forty-eight coppers, women from twenty-eight to thirty-six, boys from twenty to forty, and girls

from seventeen to thirty. At the same time he paid sixty coppers for forty baskets of plantains. Once purchased, the slaves were transported in groups of forty to fifty, sometimes in the traders' canoes, sometimes in the ships' boats, to the ships, where they were housed belowdecks. Some of the slaves, the men in particular, were put into irons for the duration of the Middle Passage.[15]

Isaac Parker, a sailor on board an English slaver in Old Calabar, left a rare firsthand account of slave raids into the interior. Parker sailed from Liverpool in 1765 on board the *Latham*, with Captain George Colley. Colley was a harsh man who alienated many of his crewmen, including Parker, during the nine months they spent at Old Calabar. Parker's major cause of dissatisfaction was the poor rations Colley handed out to the crew. The complaint may seem trivial, but undernourishment could cause serious illnesses among sailors. Parker may well have feared that poor rations on the African coast, where supplies were plentiful, were likely to get worse during the Middle Passage, with potentially terrifying results. He was frequently on shore at the house of Dick Ebro, a "great trader" at New Town, transporting slaves from the shore to the *Latham*. When the ship had taken on its full cargo of slaves and prepared to sail for America, Parker deserted the ship and appealed to Dick Ebro for protection. The African trader locked him in one of his rooms for three days until the *Latham* set sail.[16]

Afterward, Parker lived for five months with Dick

Ebro, and spent his time fishing, hunting parrots, and cleaning the large supply of arms, pistols, and blunderbusses owned by the trader. On one occasion, Dick Ebro asked, "Parker, will you go to war with me?" Parker agreed. He watched as the canoes were fitted out with ammunition, cutlasses, pistols, powder and balls, and two three-pound cannons affixed to blocks of wood for each canoe, one for the stern, another for the bow. The party paddled up the river in the daytime, but when they approached a village, they hid under the bush along the riverbank until nightfall, when they pulled the canoes ashore. They left two or three men in each canoe, then raided the village, capturing everyone they could see, handcuffing them, and carrying them to the canoes. They did the same farther up the river, until they had captured forty-five slaves—men, women, and children. The party then returned to New Town, scattered the slaves among different houses, and sent word to the captains of the many slave ships that slaves were now available. The traders made no effort to keep families together; only nursing children remained with their mothers. The captains then sent a couple of men in boats to collect the slaves and transport them to the ships. Parker took part in another expedition about two weeks later, an expedition exactly like the first. After five months, Parker found a position on another slaver and made his way home to England.[17]

African traders used every means within their power

to control the trade, but English traders were not completely at their mercy. Captains sometimes agreed among themselves to keep the price of slaves down. Isaac Parker recalled that a group of captains at Old Calabar placed themselves under a fifty-pound bond if any of them paid more than the others for slaves when the African traders tried to increase the price. The sponsors of a 1762 expedition to Old Calabar instructed the captain, Ambrose Lace, to make such arrangements; "on your arrival at Old Callebar if one or more ships be there you will observe to make an agreement with the Master or Masters so as not to advance the Price on each other and we doubt not you will use the utmost endeavors to keep down the Comeys which in Generall are to extravagant there." The African traders tried to break the cabal by refusing to sell at the lower price set by the captains. The captains then put patrols in the river to prevent the Africans from traveling upstream to capture slaves, and they took anyone they captured as hostages until the traders agreed to sell slaves at the old, lower price. Captains might also resort to violence to force the traders to sell slaves. There were reports of English captains firing their cannons either into or over the towns in Old Calabar to force traders to the table.[18]

The growth of the slave trade not only increased the power of the wealthy traders at the expense of traditional leaders whose authority had been based on age and kinship, but also complicated the relationships be-

tween the towns as they competed for a larger share of the trade. The simple economy based on agriculture, fishing, and trade with the interior was transformed as Old Calabar's economic life came to revolve around the slave trade. The highly profitable slave trade and the ready availability of credit from the Europeans gave the traders access to considerable wealth, which they largely spent on the conspicuous consumption of goods and in amassing an ever larger retinue of slaves, a pattern that led to a highly stratified and unequal social structure sharply divided between free and slave and rich and poor. As in other parts of Africa, control of European trade goods allowed the African elites, in this case the heads of the canoe houses, to convert these goods into "the fundamental values of the African political economy, into dependents and dependency."[19]

The growing wealth from the slave trade and the growth in the number of slaves brought fundamental changes to Efik society. Houses no longer consisted of a related group of freemen and their families, all of them on the same economic footing, growing gradually through natural increase, with wealth and leadership concentrated in the hands of the elders. Instead, houses that grew as a result of the slave trade had only a limited number of freemen with a far larger number of dependents, including larger numbers of slaves, who had been added rapidly and may not have been as fully integrated into the social structure as they would have been previ-

ously. As traders grew wealthy on the basis of their abilities rather than rank or age, many freemen who did not prosper from the trade or who belonged to houses left behind in the growing competition became poor and were little better off than servants. Some slaves, on the other hand, prospered and were in the position of masters over their own slaves. But slaves recently purchased from the interior, probably the most rapidly growing segment of the population as the trade expanded, had no rights at all.

Most of the freemen, their servants, their canoe boys and favored slaves, lived in the towns. English sailors were struck by the treatment of household slaves. James Morley, who made many trips to Old Calabar, reported that slaves were treated "with the greatest kindness that I ever have seen." He reported that masters did not sell these slaves; "they do not care to part with such for any price . . . I mean their canoe boys, or house servants." Indeed, it was considered a disgrace, and a mark of poverty, for a master to sell household slaves. Slaves in town provided a wide range of services. Morley observed them "raising provisions, fishing, getting palm-oil, palm-wine, making grass cloths, and other cloth of their own manufacture, making and thatching of houses, going in their canoes backwards and forwards to different places, and attending the necessary duty of their own families and houses." He also remarked that slaves recently imported from the interior were most likely to

be employed on the plantations outside the towns, where the introduction of American food crops, especially maize and manioc, greatly increased production and profitability. The importation of European trade goods and the expansion of the slave trade enabled the heads of the canoe houses to increase the number of dependents under their control, for their power continued to be determined by the size of their entourage. With more dependents they could produce more goods, particularly crops for domestic use and for sale to European shippers, and strengthen their own autonomy.[20]

More and more slaves, along with poorer freemen, lived permanently on the plantations. Growing houses greatly expanded the number of plantations under their control to feed the larger number of dependents and to trade with the English ships, which had to buy provisions while they spent months lying at anchor waiting to be slaved. Profits from the sale of provisions to the slave ships could be considerable. Barbot noted that at Old Calabar "we get, in their proper seasons . . . all sorts of eatables, yams, bananas, corn, and other provisions for the slaves." In 1763, for example, Captain James Berry paid Duke Solomon Henshaw 605 coppers for yams, and Antera Duke regularly sold provisions to English captains for substantial sums. The yam trade was vast; captains estimated that it required from 50,000 to 100,000 yams to feed a cargo of 500 slaves during the Middle Passage. Founding new towns and farms in carefully

chosen strategic positions along principal waterways gave the chief traders control over important trade routes and greatly increased their supply of foodstuffs and palm oil. Laborers from the plantations could also be brought into town when necessary. Poor freemen, or head men, supervised the large numbers of slaves who worked on the plantations. Here, as in other regions of Africa influenced by the slave trade, Efik slave traders worked within a traditional African economic system based on long-distance trade with the interior through their houses. In keeping with African traditions, they invested most of their profits in dependents, including slaves, and built larger and larger houses. But they also operated within an Atlantic economy; they kept inventories of trade goods, expanded their trade contacts deeper into the interior to acquire more slaves for sale, operated on credit and hard currency, and expanded their commercial activity through the production of agricultural goods for sale to the Europeans.[21] Though still relying on traditional structures, their culture became increasingly commodified.

The establishment of new houses and towns and the growth of the slave-trade economy was accompanied by the need for more effective and centralized governance of society and the trade. The towns became increasingly competitive as the slave trade expanded, and the Efik political system, based on the autonomous lineage houses, lacked any central administration to control these growing tensions. Local kings exercised control over their

own towns and conducted negotiations with European slavers, but the slave trade required a more centralized authority capable of exercising some control over these kings and enforcing the peaceful conduct of the trade and payment of debts that the European traders demanded. The Efik traders introduced a complex secret society known as Ekpe (the Efik word for leopard), or Egbo to Europeans. Through the voice of the feared beast, the traders enforced morality, meted out punishments, issued laws that governed all Efiks, forced the payments of debts, and collectively challenged the Europeans. The Ekpe society was not indigenous to Old Calabar, but arose among the Efut, who lived to the east of Old Calabar. According to legend, like good merchants, Efik traders from Old Town purchased the secrets of the society from an Efut man, probably around 1650, just as the slave trade accelerated.[22]

Ekpe introduced a new source of authority into Old Calabar, one firmly controlled by the elite traders and one that held sway over the autonomous towns. Membership was open to all men, including slaves, though only freemen could advance into the highest grades in the society's hierarchy. Entry into each grade had to be bought, so membership in the upper grades was confined to wealthy merchants, who often paid the initiation fees for their free dependents and for their favored slaves. Along with the grades were two prestigious titles, eyamba and ebunko, which could also be bought and

were often controlled by a single town or family. Since power within the Ekpe society was exercised from the top down, the elite slave traders controlled it. Each town eventually had its local branch that exercised authority there, but the society's "grand council," composed of the society's powerful traders, made laws that applied to all the traders and towns. The society served several purposes; it helped to integrate the new wards and operated to promote the expansion of the slave trade and related commerce by enforcing the payment of debts, levying fines, impounding property, and imposing trade boycotts on individuals who violated its code.[23]

Through Ekpe, the Efik traders presented a united front to European slavers. For instance, Antera Duke recorded a 1785 incident where a new ship threatened to go to the Cameroons to purchase slaves rather than pay the Old Calabar traders the required comey, which European traders regarded as excessive and higher than the charges imposed elsewhere. "All the gentlemen" met at the home of Egbo Young, a principal trader (who had named his house Liverpool Hall), to discuss the matter. The traders wrote the captain inviting him to come ashore to discuss business, but he refused to leave his ship. Antera Duke and two other principal traders then went on board to negotiate face to face, but the captain still refused to meet their terms, "so we come ashore and tell all the gentlemen, and they say 'Very well, he may go away, please go.'" Duke also records incidences where

African traders "had blown" Ekpe on European traders; blowing Ekpe was one of the most severe Ekpe sanctions because it stopped all trade with them until the dispute was settled. The society punished men who fought with European sailors, ordered traders to replace slaves or pawns who escaped from European slave ships, and otherwise ensured the good conduct of the slave trade. Over time Ekpe spread beyond Old Calabar to include those peoples with whom the Efik had close economic relations, such as the Aro, further facilitating the slave trade.[24]

The Ekpe society's complex rituals and practices helped define Efik social and religious life. The last day of the Efik's eight-day week was sacred to Ekpe. Every town had its Palaver House, a large, low shed with a thatched roof supported by giant mangrove posts. Seats of hardened clay ran the length of the building and one end was enclosed so that the Ekpe's secret ceremonies could be performed in private. In front of the Palaver House hung a great Ekpe drum, fixed on a frame, which was used to signal important events. Ekpe day, or the eighth day of the week, was marked by feast and drink. On that day the feared Ekpe runners scoured the town, masked and dressed in elaborate leopard costumes. The runners carried long whips, and nonmembers of the society remained hidden indoors or suffered lashings at the runners' hands. More elaborate pageantry marked initiation days and other events significant for the society; on these occasions the leopard runners were joined by other run-

ners, some dressed in colorful silks and feathers, some with bows and arrows, followed by musicians, by the great Ekpe drum, and finally by the Ekpe itself, hidden in an ark carried on the shoulders of high officers, who ceremoniously carried the Ekpe into the woods where it was ritually "released" into the bush.

These ceremonies were laden with symbolism; arrows, for instance, represented martial skill, arrows pointed downward represented death, and those pointed upward represented the passage to the other world. This symbolism was also represented by a complex script consisting of over five hundred emblems and ideographs called *nsibidi*. While many symbols were widely recognized, complex ideographs were sacred to ranks within the society and could not be shared even with junior grades. These figures might be displayed on the bodies of Ekpe members, drawn on the ground, engraved on calabashes, woven into fabrics, or exhibited on great cotton banners called *ukara ngbe* cloths.[25]

While drawing on aspects of traditional Efik religion, Ekpe also helped reshape those religious beliefs. The Efik worshiped one god, Abasi, the creator of all things, often referred to as Etenyin Abasi, "our father God," who lived in the sky. The eighth day of the week was sacred to Abasi, and the Efik did not open markets, hunt, fish, or beat drums on that day.[26] They believed that every person had a soul *(ukpon)* which was shared with a particular wild animal (called the "bush soul"); the person shared whatever fate befell the animal. The second day of the week (Auqabibio) was called "prayer day," a day dedicated to the worship of ancestor spirits. Men carried out these ceremonies at a household shrine. Every yard had a small tree, and beside it were human skulls; the shell of a land-turtle hung from the tree, and at the foot of the tree rested one or two basins of water that were never emptied. On prayer day, men poured more water into the basin, called "God's dish," and said prayers to the ancestors. The ceremony might also include the sacrifice of a goat. These vessels carried great symbolism, and Efik slaves who ran away from their masters could claim sanctuary if they broke the god basin.[27] Efik religion was closely tied to place—trees, bodies of water, and other physical features were considered sacred. Supernatural powers known as *ndem*, closely associated with nature and females, could be found in large trees, pools, stone features, and in the Calabar River. Ndem could be worshiped either singly or collectively. Every town had its spirit protector; Anansa, for instance, was the protector of Old Town and lived in a nearby spring or in the Calabar River itself. Occasionally human sacrifices were made to these deities to bring fish to the nets or to encourage the arrival of European slave ships.[28]

The slave trade depended upon a complex marketing system based on credit, governed on the African side by Ekpe, but by long-standing business ties and trust

when it came to dealings between English and African traders. Designed to promote personal ties and harmonious relationships, the system did not always function as intended, but it was remarkably effective. Ekpe facilitated commerce, protected the credit arrangements that were more crucial to the trade at Old Calabar than anywhere else in West Africa, and usually prevented the competition between towns from breaking out into open conflict. The Massacre of 1767 was the most glaring example of that failure, but the society became more effective, and more feared, as time passed. Ekpe provided the slave-trading elite with the means to enforce their orders and decisions, and successfully governed individual behavior, including exerting control over the ever-expanding ranks of newly acquired slaves. The commercial aspects of Ekpe were central to the efficient conduct of the slave trade. The society protected the property of its members, adjudicated disputes over debts, and imposed trade boycotts against European traders or Efik towns. For instance, in 1785 Duke Ephraim was summoned before the Ekpe court for his refusal to pay a dept to an English slaver, and was ordered to pay at once. The Ekpe could place individuals under an interdict that prohibited anyone from trading with them, and it could even impose such sanctions on entire towns. By contrast, the Great Duke Ephraim, son of Duke Ephraim, used the society to best his father's old ally, Eyo Nsa (Willy Honesty). Duke Ephraim died in 1786, and his son, known as

the Great Duke Ephraim, built on the foundations his father had laid and carried New Town to a position of dominance that it never lost. The Great Duke maintained the excellent relations with English traders that his father had forged and guided Old Calabar from a dependence on slave trading to a position as successful marketer of palm oil in the nineteenth century, a trade he controlled. The Great Duke brought a serious charge against Eyo Nsa in the Ekpe court; he alleged that since Eyo Nsa was not of royal birth he could not be king of Creek Town. The Great Duke had used his considerable wealth to buy up all the grades of the Ekpe society, including the eyamba title, one of the two high titles in the society. Given his control over the society, he was able to have the Ekpe impose a fine so great that it virtually ruined Eyo Nsa.[29]

In part, a struggle for control over Ekpe may actually have encouraged the Massacre of 1767, for the society was initially associated with Old Town, and control over it became a part of the growing friction between Old Town and New Town. Grand Epke was the highest title in the society, and Grandy King George may well have taken that name when he assumed the top position in the society. One result of the massacre was to break Old Town's hold on the society, an outcome that allowed other slave traders to share its growing power. Evidence provided by letters from the Old Calabar traders to English merchants in the wake of the massacre demonstrate

that Duke Ephraim and his allies were able to use the Ekpe society to completely crush their Old Town rivals. Grandy King George wrote Ambrose Lace in January 1773 that "the New town peeple . . . blowed abuncko for no ship to go from my water to them nor any to cum from them to me." That this crippling Ekpe sanction was imposed on the king indicates that Old Town had lost control of Ekpe, which then became another weapon in the hands of Duke Ephraim. In 1776 Otto Ephraim, another principal trader at Old Town, wrote Captain Lace that "I please I pay Egbo men yesterday. I have done now for Egbo," which may indicate the final settlement of Ekpe financial sanctions against Old Town. In 1780, King Henshaw joined Duke Ephraim and Eyo Nsa (who signed the letter "Willy Honesty"), the victors of the 1767 massacre, in writing an open letter to the slave traders in Liverpool intended to encourage the traders to return. In the letter, which appeared in the *Liverpool General Advertiser,* they assured the English that "now we make peace . . . No whitemen shall be stop onshor any more long as we be Callabar and we make Great Law about whiteman not hurt. and Suppose one family Stop any whiteman, We will Brock [Break] that family because all Country Stand by that Law this time." By 1780, then, the principal traders could use Ekpe to make "Great Laws" that they could enforce throughout Old Calabar—indeed, by then the elite traders could claim to *be* Calabar.[30] Their boast that they could use their power

to "break" a family no doubt referred to their triumph over the Robin Johns.

Ekpe, therefore, had complex and extensive religious, economic, and social authority. More than any other institution, it welded the various Efik towns together and provided a uniform system of government firmly under the control of the slave traders. Almost every conceivable function, from having the streets cleaned to administering justice in criminal cases, fell to Ekpe. In most Ibibio and Ibo communities, only laws accepted at a general council attended by all segments of society were considered valid, but thanks to Ekpe this was not the case among the Efik, where the society made laws that the entire community was bound to respect. The vast power that the society exercised over all of Old Calabar made it essential for everyone who could afford to do so to join the society. Membership dues, along with fines imposed on transgressors, also provided a regular source of income for the elite traders since the money was divided among the members of the highest grade. The Ekpe could impose penalties ranging from fines and boycotts, to arrest and detention, to execution. The Massacre of 1767 indicates that there were important exceptions, particularly when Europeans intervened (as they seldom did), when one town threatened to monopolize the trade, or when the offenders controlled Ekpe (as Old Town did initially). But it is surprising that the intense rivalries between the autonomous towns did not more often erupt

into conflict, as occurred elsewhere among slave-trading communities in West Africa, where all-out wars between competing kingdoms or civil wars within slave-trading states could lead to severe disruptions in the trade, a complete collapse of commerce, or the destruction of kingdoms or disintegration of states. In other regions, relations between the European traders and their African counterparts lacked any elements of the trust that undergirded the trade at Old Calabar. On the African coast at Sestos, for example, along the Grain Coast, an ongoing cycle of kidnapping, ransom, and retaliation poisoned relations between English and African traders to the extent that one of the English sailors, John Atkins, noted the "mutual distrust" that existed there.[31]

Trust and close personal relationships between English and African traders were of primary importance, but the slave trade in all its aspects was a brutal business, and violence was never entirely absent from it. In many respects, the Africans at Old Calabar dealt with European traders as equals; they operated within their own market economy, successfully resisted European attempts to monopolize or control their trade, adapted indigenous institutions such as Ekpe to the needs of a commercial economy, and maintained control over their local trading arrangements. Surviving letters between African traders and their English counterparts demonstrate that the English merchants attempted to meet the demands of the local market and even the individual tastes of their African suppliers. The unique aspects of the slave trade at Old

Calabar—the long stays of the English ships in the river, the close personal and economic ties between individual English captains and Efik traders, the creolized society of the literate Old Calabar elite—facilitated close cooperation among these English and Efik merchants.[32] Yet, as the massacre testified, violence and treachery were never precluded.

The rapid changes confronting Efik society after the rise of the Atlantic slave trade were a root cause of the Massacre of 1767. The growth of the canoe houses, the shift in power from the lineage elders to the increasingly rich and influential merchant elite, the population growth and the establishment of new towns, and, most significant, the bitter competition between the towns for the control of the slave trade created a situation where an event like the massacre could occur. The final ingredients in the mix were the presence on the scene of a group of English ship captains intimately aware of the political divisions in Old Calabar and prepared to exploit them by intervening directly and violently in the towns' internal affairs. An alliance between Eyo Nsa and Duke Ephraim to destroy the Robin Johns presented the English captains with an opportunity for cooperation, a degree of cooperation made possible by personal ties, a shared language, and the Efik's willingness to incorporate aspects of English culture into their own. The gracious letters of invitation from English gentlemen to Grandy King George and the gentlemen of Old Town were the necessary first step leading to the downfall of the Robin Johns.