

A chief in Uzuakoli talks about the stones of disorientation, which were used to keep slaves from finding their way back home.

Tracing the Trade Routes of the Slaves

BY CAROL CUMMINGS

PHOTO BY DR. JOHNSTON NJOKU

DR. JOHNSTON A.K. NJOKU'S RESEARCH INTEREST IN TRACING THE SLAVE ROUTES IN THE NIGERIAN HINTERLAND CAME FROM A CERTAIN EPIPHANY AND DEEP REFLECTION UPON AFRICAN AMERICAN FOLKTALES IN KENTUCKY. WHILE FACILITATING PRESENTATIONS AT A NARRATIVE STAGE DURING THE KENTUCKY FOLKLIFE FESTIVAL IN 1997, NJOKU, AN ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF FOLK STUDIES AT WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY, HEARD A FOLKTALE BY AFRICAN AMERICAN STORYTELLER NANA YA ABOUT "A LITTLE LIGHT ON THE WINDOW ACROSS A GLASSY SEA AT NIGHT."

Responding to Njoku's question, the storyteller agreed that this particular tale could have a remote connection to the Underground Railroad in Kentucky. "The cultural reasoning behind my question was that the frozen river might have allowed the escaping slaves to cross the Ohio River and to follow the light in the window on their way to freedom," Njoku wrote. "I thought of looking for other stories such as this that will lead to the material culture of the Underground Railroad."

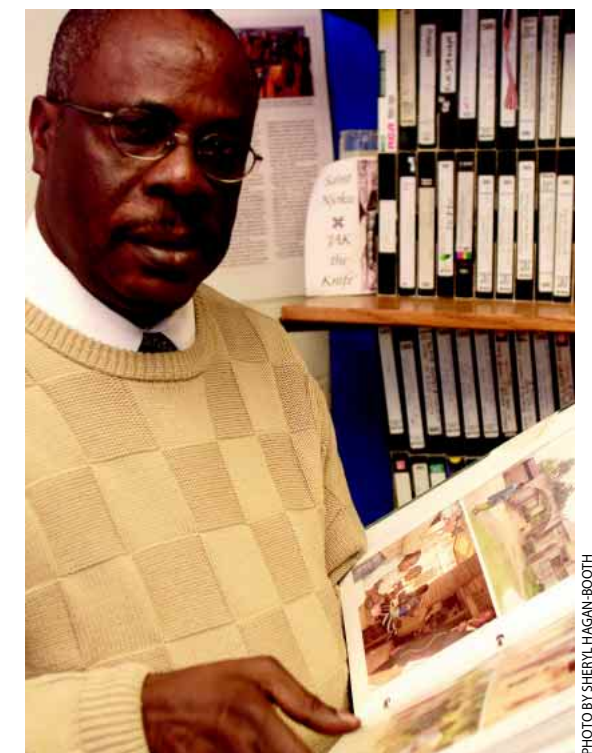
Njoku learned of the abundance of oral information of how local traders and escorts took enslaved Africans from their villages to slave markets and slave quarters in the interior, and from there to the dealers and traders in the coastal towns.

His deep reflection upon the African American traditional mechanism for escape in that folktale and other folksong examples triggered within him a curiosity about slave trade and escape routes in his native Nigeria, and opened the door of his memory to recall legends and places from his youth. Through his research, Njoku learned that written accounts of how enslaved Africans departed aboard ships from Goree in Senegal, Elimina in Ghana, Abomey in Benin, and Badagry, Calabar, and Bonny in Nigeria across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas were rich and abundant. "The published histories of the transatlantic slave journeys to the Americas are in museums, public libraries, and archives in Africa, Brazil, Europe, and North America," Njoku wrote. "However, we do not find the accounts of the ways through which enslaved Africans were forced to travel from their villages to the coastal towns in Western Africa before they began the journeys through the Middle Passage to the New World."

During his fieldwork in Nigeria, Njoku learned of the abundance of oral information of how local traders and escorts took enslaved Africans from their villages to slave markets and slave quarters in the interior, and from there to the dealers and traders in the coastal towns. "The oral

information on hinterland slave journeys appears in songs, proverbs, memory tales, and legends," he said. "Africans have kept alive their collective memories, common experiences, and group knowledge of the transatlantic slave trade. There is also a body of historical narratives about things associated with transatlantic slave trade in the cultural landscape — trees, roads, footbridges, caves, streams or rivers, houses, and markets."

This research led him to the conclusion that, "Standing exclusively by itself, the written academic history of the slave journey that begins from the coast and passes through the Middle Passage to the Americas, though factually accurate, is an incomplete historical record." Njoku's premise was that one could use historical folklore to help to fill the gap that exists in our knowledge of the transatlantic slave trade, and broaden historical inquiry. His first research efforts have focused on Abia State, a state in the southern portion of Nigeria, bordered on its south by the Imo River. The purposes of his research were varied. First, his goal was to refine existing scholarly generaliza-



Dr. Johnston A.K. Njoku

PHOTO BY SHERYL HAGAN-BOOTH



PHOTO BY EMEKA OKORO

Dr. Njoku looks at chains and other material objects from the slave trade in Badagry, Nigeria.



PHOTO BY DR. JOHNSTON NJOKU

Omenuko (a slave trader) kept his slaves in a cell house before he sold them on the market.

tions about orally communicated history and to record the many stories and legends through a written format. He would then present these oral traditions and folklore of the transatlantic slave, and establish a direct connection between the hinterland slave routes and major slave trading locations in the coast using the material culture of slave trade. He also recognized the high value of historical folklore of the transatlantic slave trade routes to tourism and rural economic development.

During Njoku's many visits to Nigeria, as soon as the local people learned he was researching the slave trade routes and relics of the transatlantic slave trade, they shared information with him about various locations, even taking him to view the ancient sites and inviting him to visit with their families. "I knew right from that time that many people were willing to share what they know about places that have become legends in their minds in regard to the transatlantic slave trade," he said. The stories they shared invariably struck a chord with Njoku's memories of the tales he had heard as a youth. One of these stories was the Ohafia local legend of Eke Kalu, who escaped from slaveholders in Arochukwu and returned to his village in Elu, Ohafia. Njoku had the opportunity to visit the fine home this Nigerian legend built after his escape and to talk with his children.

Njoku also visited the legendary Achi tree, whose surface roots measured 25 feet, and the site of one of the "stones of disorientation." When slaves were captured, they were tied to the root of this massive tree and before being taken away were seated on the stone as a way to deter them from running away from their masters. "They were like shrine objects," Njoku said of the stones. "I call them the stones of disorientation because local legends and historical narratives suggest that some buyers took their slaves to the stones and made them sit on the stones for a brief moment so that they [the slaves] would lose their senses of direction. Evidently, they believed that, once the slaves were placed on the stones, they would not find their way back to their homes." Two "blind houses" were also among the sites Njoku saw in Abia. "These houses were actually cells that one Aro slave merchant built in Bende, which was one of the most active slave markets in the nineteenth century," he said. "They served as a holding place for slaves ready to be sold."

According to Njoku, the slave raiders and recruiters were mainly warriors from a number of villages. "The warriors raided villages and, especially after some kind of intertribal wars, captured people," he said. "The warriors or raiders would line up the people that they captured just like prisoners of war and lead the captives to quarters of Aro slave holders and merchants. Sometimes, the same warriors or recruiters helped to escort slaves from Aro quarters to the many slave markets in the hinterland." One legend records that the Aro traders did most of their long distance traveling to markets close to the coastal towns at night or through forest trails during the day. Among the escorts were medicine men or

herbalists who provided treatments to slaves who fell sick.

Njoku retraced these initial slave routes in the state and was collecting historical narratives of particular landmarks and relics of the slave trade when he learned that tourism was one of Abia State's priority areas of development. "To make the research useful and relevant to Abia State's strategic plan, I contacted the Honorable Commissioner of Information, Culture, and Tourism to discuss the tourism potential of the slave routes projects," he said. State officials worked with him in his research efforts, granting Njoku additional credibility with the people of Abia State. "Abia State of Nigeria is endowed with rich natural tourism potentials capable of transforming the economic base of the state," he said. "The profiles of the tourist sites include historical and monumental archives, landscapes, beaches, rolling hills, caves, shrines, cultural heritage, and friendly and industrious people of the state. Some of these abundant tourist sites are yearning for development." One such potential tourist site is the city of Abiriba, a serene ancient town that has long held the status of a big city; hence it has been referred to as "Small London." The people of the this town, apart from being versatile traders, also engage in crafts like blacksmithing, animal skins crafts, and wooden crafts of all sorts.

Njoku's project continues to focus primarily on Abia State in Nigeria. Unique landmarks in Abia State include the Cave Temple Complex of Chukwu Abiama (Kindhearted Supreme God) and the Iyi Eke cave in Arochukwu, the Cave Rendezvous and cave tunnels in Abuma Ututu, the Eke Oba Agbagwu market in Uquakoli, the Slave Cells in Bende, Hollow Tree Tower in Amamkamma, and the Blue River in Aumini.



PHOTO BY UOMA UGWU

Dr. Njoku and others cross the footbridge to the Iyi Eke cave on the slave routes in Arochukwu, Nigeria



PHOTO BY DR. JOHNSTON NJOKU

The Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Azumini retraces the slave routes.