Trust, Pawnship, and Atlantic History: The Institutional Foundations of the Old Calabar Slave Trade

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"Pawns Will Live when Slaves is Apt to Dye."

Richard Rogers, Bristol shipmaster, 1788.1

When Adam Smith wrote in 1776 that the “greater part of the exportation and coasting trade of America is carried on by the capital of merchants who reside in Britain,” he was commenting on Britain’s dominance of the North Atlantic world at that time.2 The causes of that dominance and its connections with British industrialization have been the subject of much debate. For some, both industrialization and commercial supremacy stemmed from socioeconomic forces within Britain itself, among which early productivity advances in agriculture, success in creating a system of public finances, and a socioeconomic environment conducive to technological innovation have been seen as important. Others, by contrast, have argued that it was the fruits of empire that allowed Britain to emerge as the first industrial nation. Specifically, the slave plantation complex of the Americas is frequently seen to have been a major engine of capital accumulation in Britain, with Liverpool’s late eighteenth-century dominance of the Atlantic slave trade and its subsequent control of the cotton import trade symbolizing the apparently intimate relationship between slavery and the rise of industrial capitalism in Britain.

Whatever contribution the Atlantic system made to capitalist development in Britain, the ability of British merchants to mobilize finance capital for commercial purposes was a major factor in turning the North Atlantic into “an English inland sea.”3 Following Adam Smith’s lead, various historians have studied the mecha-

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1 Public Record Office (hereafter, PRO), Chancery Masters’ Exhibits, C 107/12, July 20, 1788, Richard Rogers to James Rogers.


isms and patterns of capital flows between Britain and the Americas. In some cases, these studies have highlighted important institutional and other innovations for securing and protecting debts, including guarantee payment systems for post-dated bills of exchange. Much less attention, however, has been paid to the role of capital in the procurement and export of slaves from Africa, which was seen by Malachy Postlethwayt as the “Great Pillar and Support” of the American plantation trade in the 1740s. Nearly one out of every two enslaved Africans shipped across the Atlantic was transported in British vessels between 1660 and 1807, and in the quarter-century before British abolition, the British share of the trade accounted for more than half the slaves transported to the Americas. Hence the slave trade in Africa depended heavily on the capital of British merchants, principally in the form of advances of trade goods to African dealers in slaves.

The levels of credit advanced to African merchants have yet to be quantified, and indeed quantification may be impossible. But the amounts advanced almost certainly grew in tandem with the magnitude of the trade and the opening of new slaving frontiers, both inland and along the coast. Whatever the absolute levels of credit were, moreover, it is likely that advances by Europeans were as important in facilitating the seizure and movement to market of slaves in Africa as they were in allowing slave purchases and the clearance and cultivation of land in the Americas. In this respect, the credit situation in Africa mirrored that which underpinned American colonial expansion and the development of a transatlantic economy. Without credit to African merchants, the scale of the transatlantic traffic would have been much lower than it actually was.

Compared to British America, where credit was a matter for negotiation between agents of British or European heritage who often shared family or other ties, credit relations in Africa almost always involved parties who lacked common ancestry and whose cultural traditions could not have been more different. Nonetheless, the evidence of rising slave shipments suggests that British merchants and African dealers in slaves were able to agree on forms of accommodation that reduced the risks of advancing credit for the British and allowed African dealers to compete with other groups in the Atlantic world for British commercial capital. But the mechanisms by which this accommodation was reached remain far from clear. The aim of this article is to explore some of those mechanisms in order to shed light on

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9 See Price, “Credit in the Slave Trade,” 335–36.
how western Africa became integrated into the Atlantic economy and how in general British merchant-investors interacted overseas with local agents to work out mutually advantageous conditions for trade.

British merchants achieved their dominance of the slave trade by shipping slaves from various parts of Atlantic Africa. Since trading and credit relations varied by region and by port of slave supply, Britain attained its position by adjusting to local political conditions, which were shaped to a considerable degree by the commercial and political elites who served as slave suppliers. We will focus on conditions at one African port dominated by British merchants, the port of Old Calabar, in the Bight of Biafra. British merchants were easily the largest source of credit for slave transactions at Old Calabar before 1807, and how they handled credit arrangements with local merchants offers insights into the commercial strategies pursued by British merchant-investors elsewhere in Africa and throughout the Atlantic world.

We shall argue that British commercial relations with Old Calabar in the hundred years after the middle of the eighteenth century were in large measure a story of evolving institutional adjustments to changing economic and political parameters of trade. In seeking to tell this story, we follow others, notably Douglass C. North, Oliver E. Williamson, and Avner Greif, who have used insights from "new institutional economics" to explore in other contexts the relationship between institutional change and levels of economic activity. Our analysis of credit at Old Calabar highlights a number of features of the personal and commercial relations of British and local merchants at the port, but, we argue, the adaptation by British and Old Calabar merchants of the local institution of debt bondage, or "pawnship," proved crucial as a way of securing credit until Britain abolished its slave trade in 1807. As abolitionist Thomas Clarkson learned in the course of his investigation

10 For a survey of the ports of western Africa involved in the export slave trade, see David Eltis, Paul E. Lovejoy, and David Richardson, "Ports of the Slave Trade: An Atlantic-Wide Perspective," in Robin Law, ed., The Ports of the Slave Trade (Bights of Benin and Biafra) (Stirling, forthcoming).


into the slave trade in 1788, African merchants received goods on credit from the slave ships “for the purpose of slaving those ships, on whose account they travel. These are in a particular predicament, being obliged to leave a pledge or security for their return. This pledge consists of their own relations, who are detained till they come back.”13 The use of human pawns to secure goods advanced against the delivery of slaves represented, we believe, an extension of local credit arrangements to British ship captains enabling them to enforce repayment of debts in compliance with customary law.14 Moreover, as pawns were subject to possible transport and sale in the Americas should they be unredeemed, ship captains were sometimes faced with making judgments about whether or not to sail with pawns instead of waiting for slaves to be delivered. The comment of Bristol slave trader Richard Rogers that is cited at the beginning of this article suggests that pawns were more likely to survive the Middle Passage than slaves brought from the interior, thereby tempting ship captains to sail with pawns rather than wait for delivery of slaves, despite the underlying premise prohibiting the shipment of pawns from the port. Hence Rogers’s comment that “Pawns Will Live when Slaves is Apt to Dye” reveals a complex structure of credit and a mechanism for enforcement of the contracts implicit in slave transactions at Old Calabar, with those being held as pawns providing apparently good security for credit because of their connections with local traders. This institutional adjustment brought some alleviation of the risks to British traders of advancing credit at Old Calabar while allowing local merchants to compete for access to commercial credit. Pawnship, therefore, underpinned the expansion of slaving at Old Calabar before 1807. Once Britain abolished its slave trade and then sought to develop other forms of trade with the port, different mechanisms had to be found to secure credit relations.

To consider the impact of British credit on commercial institutions at Old Calabar, it is first necessary to examine the historical context of the slave trade there in the eighteenth century. We will then describe the extent to which a relatively few merchants in Bristol and Liverpool, on the one side, and Old Calabar, on the other, dominated the trade in slaves. This oligarchical structure, we argue, promoted personal interaction and resulted in longstanding relationships based on business, education, and friendship, but by itself was insufficient to provide the security necessary to allow British merchants to “trust” goods on credit to their counterparts at Old Calabar. We then consider how local institutions, notably the male secret society, Ekpe, and human pawnship (in Efik, the word is ubion),15 were modified as debt-enforcing agencies at the port, allowing British merchants to advance goods on

13 Thomas Clarkson, An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Particularly the African [1785], 2d edn. (London, 1788), 27–28. The second edition of the Essay included Clarkson’s observations arising from his research in Liverpool and Bristol in 1788, as well as letters and other materials sent to him. Both Northrup and Noah have mistakenly assumed that Clarkson actually visited Old Calabar, but he never did; see Northrup, Trade without Rulers, 66; Noah, “Social and Political Developments,” 95. According to Clarkson’s own testimony before the parliamentary inquiry in 1789, “he had never been to Africa, but had made a Tour last Year through England, in the View of collecting Information on the Subject of the Trade to Africa; and in this Tour had passed Two Months at Liverpool, and Two at Bristol”; see Sheila Lambert, ed., House of Commons Sessional Papers of the Eighteenth Century, 145 vols. (Wilmington, Del., 1975), 69: 73.


15 Hugh Goldie, Dictionary of the Efik Language (Farnborough, 1964), 300.
credit with greater confidence than would otherwise have been the case. Finally, we explore the implications of the Old Calabar case for our understanding of British commercial and financial relations with the Atlantic world from the mid-eighteenth century.

Until the 1740s, the Bight of Biafra was a minor source of slaves for the transatlantic trade as a whole. Biafran slaves only constituted about 6 percent of the slave trade as a whole early in the eighteenth century, but the Bight of Biafra became a leading source of slaves, especially for the British trade, by the end of the century, when it accounted for 20 percent of the trade. Annual shipments of slaves probably amounted to less than 3,000 in most years during the first three decades of the eighteenth century but then rose rapidly, increasing over fourfold from the 1730s to the 1760s, or from about 34,100 in 1731–1740 to about 152,100 in 1761–1770 (see Table). The trade peaked in the 1780s, when an estimated 175,400 slaves left the Bight, but then began slowly to decline up to and beyond British abolition in 1807 before experiencing a final resurgence between 1820 and 1840. Shipments of slaves from the Bight almost totally collapsed after 1840. About 900,000 slaves were shipped to the Americas during the height of the British trade from the 1740s through 1807. This represented about 60 percent of the total number of slaves, estimated at perhaps 1.5 million, who embarked on ships in the Bight of Biafra during the whole period of the slave trade.

Although British merchants took an increasing share of the slave trade on many parts of the African coast in the eighteenth century, the expansion of British trade was most heavily concentrated in the Bight of Biafra. Of the slaves known to have

left the Bight of Biafra from 1701 to 1810, some 85.8 percent left on British ships. French ships came a distant second, transporting less than 10 percent of exported slaves. While some slaves were obtained from the region called “Calabar” in the early seventeenth century, most of these usually came from Elem Kalabari, not from the Cross River. By the second half of the seventeenth century, English ships began to call at Old Calabar, but the trade remained relatively small until Bristol ships became active in the slave trade early in the following century. Much of the trade in the first three decades of the eighteenth century appears to have been in Bristol hands. Thereafter, sustained expansion in exports from the Bight of Biafra was almost entirely attributable to Liverpool shipping, although Bristol continued to be important until the early 1790s. Based on a sample of 640,806 slaves, it has been calculated that Liverpool ships took 60.9 percent of all slaves leaving the Bight of Biafra, while Bristol ships accounted for another 20.2 percent. Of slaves leaving Old Calabar from 1701 to 1810, 49.4 percent (86,810 slaves in a sample of 175,684) went on Liverpool ships, a smaller percentage than for the region as a whole, while 25.1 percent (44,112 slaves) went on Bristol ships, and another 6.6 percent (11,560 slaves) went on London ships. French ships accounted for 13.8 percent (24,238 slaves), mostly from 1780 to 1793. Other countries accounted for the remaining 5.1 percent (8,964).

It is evident from shipping data that merchants residing in Liverpool and Bristol provided the bulk of credit advances that fostered the large expansion in slave shipments from Old Calabar between 1740 and the 1780s. It is also evident, however, that merchants at Old Calabar were not the only ones in the Bight of Biafra to gain by such advances, as merchants from the same two British ports dominated other ports in the region, notably Bonny. Given this dominance, British abolition of slaving in 1807, though perhaps anticipated by well-connected merchants at the coast, still brought some disruption to commercial relations and credit movements at ports in the region. Unfortunately, evidence relating to the commercial relations between the British and local merchants at other ports in the Bight of Biafra is, at present, much weaker than for Old Calabar. Therefore, we concentrate on the management of credit at Old Calabar in the period 1750–1807 and, to a lesser extent, during the transition to palm oil trading following British abolition. The growth of palm oil exports attracted British merchants again, as A. J. H. Latham, Kannan Nair, and more recently Martin Lynn have shown, but in advancing goods to local traders they now had to find ways of protecting credit that differed from those used in the era of the slave trade. Further developments in the

17 See Eltis, , Atlantic Slave Trade.
19 Eltis, Lovejoy, and Richardson, “Ports of the Slave Trade.”
21 Latham, Old Calabar, 55–90; Nair, Politics and Society, 28–113; and Martin Lynn, Commerce and
At Old Calabar, as Latham has shown, credit, and the mechanisms for guaranteeing that credit arrangements were honored, depended on “trust,” as credit between European firms and African suppliers was known in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Goods were advanced to “trusted” merchants in the river towns of the Niger Delta and Cross River estuary. These goods in turn were sent to interior markets controlled by slave traders from Aro Chukwu, whose dispersed settlements in the interior gained control of the slave trade in much of Igbo and Ibibio country in the course of the eighteenth century. Aro merchants in effect “bulked” slaves at their monthly fairs at Bende and Uburu for re-export to the coast, almost always through Bonny, Elem Kalabari, or Old Calabar, depending on the line of credit.

For Old Calabar, slaves were often sent to Itu on the Cross River, from where they were transferred downriver. Unlike Bonny and Elem Kalabari, however, merchants at Old Calabar traded directly with Ibibio country and with Cameroons. Whether through commercial arrangements with the Aro network or with other merchants, the delivery of slaves liquidated debts that stretched into the interior. Liverpool and Bristol merchants had no direct access to Aro traders and other inland sources of slaves, but they could, and indeed actively sought to, establish good relations with coastal merchants, protecting their investments through institutional arrangements that could be enforced in these towns and apparently through similar means into the interior. It is probably not a coincidence that the great expansion in slave exports from the Bight of Biafra occurred at the same time as the consolidation of the Aro commercial “diaspora.”

At any time in the second half of the eighteenth century, a limited number of Liverpool and Bristol firms dominated particular ports in the Bight of Biafra. Probably no more than fifteen or so commercial houses were operating at any one time, with usually twice as many from Liverpool as Bristol. At Old Calabar, partnerships headed by William Whaley and Edward Forbes of Liverpool and James Laroche of Bristol controlled much of the early trade in the 1740s and 1750s. William Davenport, who has left some of the most detailed accounts for the eighteenth-century trade, was a major Liverpool trader from 1757 to 1784 and perhaps the largest single British trader at Old Calabar in the period 1768–1774.
Davenport had been apprenticed to Whaley in the 1740s, and the Whaley-Davenport connection with Old Calabar was to continue into the 1770s and beyond through other Liverpool merchants. By 1785–1795, Liverpool merchants John, James, and William Gregson and Thomas and William Earle and Bristol merchant James Rogers were the leading traders to the port. Members of the Earle family had earlier been partners with Davenport, and the Earles continued to trade into the early nineteenth century. Moreover, another continuity in the concentration of commercial knowledge of trade at the port is evident in the close association of Sir James Laroche, member of Parliament and nephew of the Bristol merchant of the 1750s, with James Rogers, at least before Rogers went bankrupt in 1793.

Although the evidence is more patchy, the pattern of local merchant participation in the slave trade at Old Calabar appears to have mirrored that at British ports. A few Old Calabar merchant families, descended from the original Ibibio-speaking settlers but adopting a new ethnic name, Efik, dominated the African side of the trade. For most of the seventeenth century, when the scale of the slave trade was not very large, the principal settlement was at Creek Town (Obio Oko), but other wards or “towns” were founded, the most important of which were Old Town (Obutong), Duke Town (Atakpa or New Town), and Henshaw Town. By the end of the seventeenth century, Old Town, where the Robin family was dominant, appears to have emerged as the leading commercial ward, and it remained so until the middle of the eighteenth century. Old Town was located on the Calabar River downstream from Creek Town and was therefore in a better location to serve slave ships. Another trader active in the 1690s, Ephraim Duke, may have been the founder of the Duke family, which was initially resident at Creek Town but which established its ward, New Town or Duke Town, a few kilometers downstream from Old Town, apparently in 1748, and became a serious rival to Old Town as the slave trade expanded.26

By the last third of the century, there were at least thirty local traders at Old Calabar who were active in the slave trade; they are mentioned in a diary kept by Antera Duke (Ntiero Edem Efiom), fragments of which have survived for 1785–1788.27 As many as half of these merchants were supplying slaves to British ships in


the late 1760s, and each was associated with one of the Old Calabar wards. Prominent among them were Eyo Nsa of Creek Town, Tommy Henshaw of Henshaw Town, and Egbo Young, Antera Duke, and Edem Ekpo and his son, Edem Efiam (both known as Duke Ephraim) of Duke Town. Moreover, several of those active in 1785–1788 remained involved in slaving beyond 1800. When Edem Ekpo died in 1786, his son not only took his commercial name, Duke Ephraim, but also continued the business. Indeed, the continuity in names is one indication that merchants were succeeded by their descendants.

It appears, then, that a few trading houses controlled slave exports from Old Calabar between 1750 and 1807, just as a relatively small number of Bristol and Liverpool merchants and their agents or ship captains tended to dominate European trade with the port. In this respect, at least, slave trading activities and credit relations at Old Calabar may have become embedded in social relations. More specifically, they may have come to resemble a situation described by Mark Granovetter in which agents had recurrent dealings with each other and might be assumed to rely on their past record of dealings to determine whether “a particular other may be expected to deal honestly.” It is important, therefore, to try to assess the degree to which trust permeated commercial relations at Old Calabar after 1740.

It was observed in 1789 that the “Black Traders of Bonny and Calabar” were “very expert at reckoning and talking the different Languages of their own Country and those of the Europeans.” British dominance of trade at these ports helped ensure, however, that English, often in pidgin form, became the language of commerce. There are signs that the leading traders at Old Calabar appear to have been both literate and relatively fluent in English or pidgin versions of it as early as the 1750s. In 1761, William Earle of Liverpool responded to a letter of complaint that he had received from Duke Abashy; Abashy’s letter has, unfortunately, not survived, but those of some other Old Calabar merchants have. For example, a letter dated June 16, 1769, from Ephraim Robin John to Thomas Jones of Bristol was later

28 For the names of traders supplying slaves in 1769–1770, see Account Book of the Dobson, in Hasell Papers, Dalemain House, Cumbria. We are grateful to Mr. Robert Hasell-McCosh for permission to use material from his family’s papers.
30 In 1805, Henry Nicholls reported that Egbo Young, Duke Ephraim (the younger), Eyo Honesty, and Antera Duke were active traders; see Robin Hallett, ed., Records of the African Association, 1788–1831 (London, 1964), 197, 199.
31 Latham, Old Calabar, 33–37; Nair, Politics and Society, 4–14.
32 Similar patterns of British merchant participation in slaving voyages to other places in the Bight of Biafra are also evident; see Behrendt, “British Slave Trade,” 301–03; Eltis, Lovejoy, and Richardson, “Ports of the Slave Trade.”
34 Evidence of William James, in Lambert, Sessional Papers, 69: 49. Also see John Adams, Remarks on the Country extending from Cape Palmas to the River Congo (London, 1823), 144. Adams, who was at Old Calabar in the 1790s, observed that “many of the natives write English.”
35 William Earle noted that he had only received one of several letters that Duke Abashy had written; see February 10, 1761, William Earle to Duke Abashy, Merseyside Maritime Museum
submitted as evidence in an affidavit in a British court in 1773. Other letters were also presented to the court. Hence it is perhaps not surprising that in 1773, Robin John Otto Ephraim asked Ambrose Lace of Liverpool to “Send me some Writing papers and 1 Bureaus to Buy.” Perhaps like Antera Duke, he used some of the paper requested to keep a diary; there are suggestions that other diaries were being kept circa 1800, at least. Furthermore, we know that trading accounts were registered on board slave ships and that Old Calabar merchants kept their own accounts and “comey books” to record which ships had paid tax. Thus in 1792, Captain Thomas Codd lodged provisions and gunpowder from his ship the *African Queen* with Duke Ephraim, Egbo Young, and Antera Duke and reported to the Bristol merchant James Rogers that he had “taken their receipts” for the same.

British–Old Calabar commercial relations in the late eighteenth century were, therefore, underpinned by a shared language, and, as Codd’s experience indicates, Old Calabar traders became accustomed to at least some of the commercial conventions of European merchants. Although many Old Calabar traders learned English without leaving Africa, some merchants and their offspring went to Britain to be educated. In 1767, Ambrose Lace brought “young Ep[rai]jm” (Robin John Otto Ephraim) to Liverpool for schooling. The youth was the son of Robin John Ephraim, alias King George, of Old Town. In Lace’s view, the father “has been Guilty of so many bad Actions, no man can say anything in his favour.” The boy spent two years at Lace’s expense at school in the city before returning to the coast, carrying Lace’s hopes that “when his Fathers gone . . . the son will be a good man.” In 1804, Archibald Dalzel informed the African Association that “there are many negroes who speak English; and that there is rarely a period that there are not at Liverpool, Calabar negroes sent there expressly to learn English.” As seems to have been the case with young Robin John Otto Ephraim in the late 1760s, these students often lodged in the homes of the Liverpool slave traders, perhaps forming attachments to their families. In this respect, overseas travel by the Old Calabar elite helped cement ties with British

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36 Ephraim Robin John to Thomas Jones, June 16, 1769, in affidavit of Thomas Jones, Bristol, October 21, 1773, PRO, King’s Bench, KB 1/19 Mich 1773.
38 Asuquo, “Diary of Antera Duke,” 34.
39 Antera Duke, “Diary,” 29, 33, 41, 46, 54, 56, 60. The diary also suggests that letters were being exchanged between Old Calabar merchants; see 52.
40 PRO, C 107/6, March 11, 1792, Thomas Codd to James Rogers & Co.
41 According to Adams, *Remarks on the Country*, 144, literacy in English was “an art first acquired by some of the traders’ sons, who had visited England.”
42 Evidence of John Ashley Hall, in Lambert, *Sessional Papers*, 72: 537. The connection between King George’s son and Lace was made by those questioning Hall; Hall himself denied first-hand knowledge of the connection.
43 Ambrose Lace claimed to have spent £60 on young Robin John Otto Ephraim; see Lace to Thomas Jones, November 11, 1773, in Williams, *History of the Liverpool Privateers*, 541–42.
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slave traders. At the same time, some of the merchants in Bristol and Liverpool visited Old Calabar as commanders of slave ships before establishing their own firms at home and thus had opportunities to develop ties with their Efik counterparts. Ambrose Lace of Liverpool and Thomas Jones of Bristol, for example, commanded ships trading to Old Calabar before establishing their own firms in the 1770s. Sometimes, moreover, ship captains may have become attached to specific families in Old Calabar. In October 1785, for instance, Antera Duke referred in his diary to the house of Captain Potter’s “mother” and “father.” When Potter welcomed Antera Duke to his “father’s” house, he killed a goat in accordance with local custom.

Business relations at Old Calabar seem, therefore, to have become, in Granovetter’s phrase, “mixed up with social ones.” In the 1780s, captains regularly attended dinner parties given by Old Calabar merchants, including parties on Christmas and New Year’s Day. Captains reciprocated by hosting Old Calabar merchants on board their ships. They also went on fishing trips together. Discussion of business matters doubtless helped enliven conversations on such occasions. In this sense, these gatherings of masters and traders perhaps helped produce the conspiracies against the public interest that Adam Smith feared, except in this case the victims were those who had been enslaved. While slaving transactions clearly took place at Old Calabar between agents of radically different cultural backgrounds—British and Biafran—some accommodation of these differences seems to have taken place through education, social interaction, and even fictive kinship. Indeed, efforts to personalize relationships contrast sharply with the endemic violence that accompanied and underpinned the slave trade.

Both British and Old Calabar traders used terms and expressions of endearment and familiarity in seeking to build confidence or to repair damage caused by disputes. As William Earle of Liverpool wrote to Duke Abashy in 1761, “You know very well I Love all Calabar.” He also claimed that “I do not Want to wrong Nor I never did wrong any man one Copper,” a reference to the local copper currency at

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45 Literacy remained common into the early nineteenth century, at least among the male offspring of the leading merchants. In 1819, G. A. Robertson claimed that “the greater part of the male-natives” at Old Calabar “can read and write English”; see Robertson, Notes on Africa: Particularly those Parts which are Situated between Cape Verd and the River Congo (London, 1819), 313. Similarly, in the early 1820s, Adams observed that the traders of Old Calabar “have had the sagacity to retain up to the present period” knowledge of English: “They have established schools and schoolmasters, for the purpose of instructing in this art the youths belonging to families of consequence”; see Remarks on the Country, 144.


51 Smith, Wealth of Nations, 282.
Old Calabar. The personal dimension of this correspondence should be noted: Earle even passed on the greetings of his wife, who “Sends you her Love.” Similarly, in a letter dated July 19, 1773, Robin John Otto Ephraim asked Ambrose Lace to “Remember me to your Wife,” almost certainly because he had known her in Liverpool when he was there a few years earlier. Marital relations were certainly far different in Old Calabar than in Liverpool or Bristol, but this did not prevent traders on both sides from using knowledge of each other’s families to try to cement relations. The language of sociability obviously permeated correspondence between British and Old Calabar merchants.

Many of the problems that created tension between British and Old Calabar merchants arose from the way in which slave ships conducted their business. Merchants in Liverpool, Bristol, and London delegated the responsibility for their affairs to ship captains, who might well jeopardize long-term relations in the pursuit of short-term gain. One source of tension was uncertainty over the definition of slaves, and the resulting problems that arose through arbitrary seizure and illegal shipment to the Americas of allegedly free persons. Such occurrences provoked “panyarring,” that is, retaliatory seizure of goods or people, and perhaps most unusual, the poisoning of ship captains by Old Calabar traders in 1773. Friendship and personal relationships aside, violence often accompanied slave trading and could be sudden and severe.

William Earle’s correspondence with Duke Abashy of Old Town in 1761, noted above, began in fact because one of Earle’s shipmasters had seized Abashy’s son. In early 1763, perhaps in retaliation, traders from Old Town seized the master of the Dalrymple of Liverpool, temporarily held him captive, and confiscated some of his goods. It is significant that Earle was part owner of the vessel, and, the personal nature of Earle’s letters notwithstanding, the dispute over Duke Abashy’s son had to be resolved. This was not, moreover, an isolated incident. In 1789, Duke Ephraim informed James Rogers and Sir James Laroche that two of his canoemen had been seized illegally. Ephraim complained that while he had been a “very good friend” to the ship Jupiter, owned by Rogers and Laroche, its master had sailed away with the canoemen, both of whom were “free men.” In response, the outraged Duke threatened to “make Bristol Ship pay for them two” unless they were returned by “Any other Ship or himself [Rogers].” Whether the two men were returned or Duke Ephraim carried out his threat is unknown, but the fact that those seized worked for Old Calabar’s leading merchant at the time is significant. Even when

53 Robin John Otto Ephraim to Ambrose Lace, July 19, 1773, in Williams, History of the Liverpool Privateers, 547. Also see Hall’s testimony in Lambert, Sessional Papers, 72: 537.
54 According to John Ashley Hall, two ship captains from Liverpool were imprisoned and poisoned in 1773; see Lambert, Sessional Papers, 72: 538–39. This incident, combined with the sharp fall in British trade with Africa following the outbreak of war, may have prompted King Henshaw, Duke Ephraim, and Eyo Honesty to write in 1780 to the merchants of Liverpool to assure them that “no whitman shall be stop onshor any more as we be Callabar and we make Great Law about whitemen not hurt and Suppose one family Stop any whitman We Will Brock that family because all country Stand by that Law this time.” The letter was published in the Liverpool General Advertiser, February 21, 1788. We wish to thank Stephen Behrendt for drawing our attention to this letter.
56 PRO, C 107/12, October 16, 1789, Duke Ephraim to Rogers & LRouche [Laroche].
British merchants dealt regularly with Duke Ephraim, as Rogers and Laroche evidently did, the behavior of one of their ship captains could still undermine trust. Perhaps the single most important event to undermine trust in British–Old Calabar relations was the “massacre of 1767,” when British ship captains assisted in the entrapment and subsequent slaughter of some 300 Old Town residents and the shipment overseas into slavery of many more, including two sons of the head of Old Town, Robin John Ephraim. The roots of the massacre lie in the ongoing struggle between Old Town and Duke Town for mastery of the trade and the right to charge “comey” and other fees on slave ships. The struggle may have intensified because the Seven Years’ War in Europe disrupted levels of British trade with Old Calabar. The move to resolve the conflict by force began when the ship captains invited the Old Town merchants to the ships on the pretense of mediating the dispute between the wards. Critical in the deception of the Old Town merchants was their belief in “the sincerity of the proposition of the captains to bring about a reconciliation.” Illustrating Granovetter’s argument that personal relations can be used to deceive as well as build trust, the massacre of 1767, even if it benefited the merchants of Duke Town, can ultimately have done little to promote “expectations of trust” in British–Old Calabar relations.

In pursuing commerce in late eighteenth-century Old Calabar, British traders were plainly eager to cultivate good relations with the heads of local trading houses. Despite being implicated in the 1767 massacre, Lace benefited from rescuing Robin John Otto Ephraim and taking him to Liverpool, although Lace himself never returned to Old Calabar. In 1773, Robin John informed his benefactor that he supplied slaves to a ship commanded by Captain Doyle “because he told me you have part of his ship.” Other masters of ships expected to gain from personal relations with Efik merchants as well, but, while there are signs that “social content” may have infiltrated economic relationships in the region, this did not produce the “abstention from opportunism” that one might expect to arise from strong personal or social relations. On the contrary, even when trust was apparently established, there was no guarantee that some deception by one of the parties might not undermine the order that underlay transactions. The ambiguity of social relations may have made it, as Sara Berry has suggested, “imperative for people to invest time and money in maintaining them,” but the social relations that developed among the parties involved in slaving activities at Old Calabar did not prevent malfeasance. In such circumstances, other mechanisms were required to support...

57 For evidence on the massacre, see PRO, KB 1/19 Mich. 1773, affidavit of William Floyd of Bristol, October 5, 1773, and affidavits of Thomas Jones of Bristol, September 18, October 21, and November 15, 1773; Minutes of Evidence of John Ashley Hall, March 1–2, 1790, and of Ambrose Lace, March 12, 1790 in Lambert, Sessional Papers, 72: 515–60, 633–36. Thomas Jones of Bristol was involved in the repatriation of at least two of the Old Town residents. Also see the material reproduced in Williams, History of the Liverpool Privateers, 536–38; and the more recent discussions in Latham, Old Calabar, 49; Noah, Old Calabar, 17–19; Nair, Politics and Society, 24–25; and Paley, “After Somerset.”

58 Hall’s testimony in Lambert, Sessional Papers, 72: 516.


60 In the same letter, Robin John Otto Ephraim asked Lace whether or not the two boys he had sent Lace’s son Joshua as companions had arrived in Liverpool. See Robin John Otto Ephraim to Ambrose Lace, July 19, 1773, in Williams, History of the Liverpool Privateers, 547.


and protect commercial exchange and, above all, to promote the growth of credit that bound British and Biafran traders together.

It has been claimed that, within Old Calabar, the institution that provided enforcement mechanisms for debt recovery was the Ekpe society. Latham identifies the rise of Ekpe with the external slave trade, at which time “the Efik began both to receive and give credit, adopting a new institution, Ekpe, to cover the inevitable problem of bad debts. It was an elementary capitalist institution, of entirely African origin. Yet the credit which the Efik gave was dependent upon the credit which they received from the Europeans.” It appears that the foundation of Old Town in the second half of the seventeenth century was associated with the introduction of Ekpe into Old Calabar, and may have represented an attempt to manipulate the secret society to advance the commercial interests of the settlers at Old Town.

Associated with the leopard, Ekpe has been well described in the anthropological literature as a masquerade and an exclusively male secret society that was divided into a series of grades under a chief priest/official, the Eyamba. Each grade, the number of which appears to have increased during the past three hundred years, required payment of dues to be a member, the highest grade costing the most. Members of the most senior grade shared the income from dues of all grades among themselves. Wealthy individuals could purchase more than one share or finance the memberships of junior kin, thereby capturing a higher proportion of the income from dues.

According to Monday Efiongh Noah, those who introduced Ekpe tried to transform the society into an “effective governmental institution” that enabled the different wards to interact and thereby resolve disputes. He concedes, however,

On May 4, 1786, Antera Duke, “Diary,” 45, recorded that Ekpe was used to collect a debt from Aqua Bakassey for goods advanced on credit; a payment of one slave was received.

Latham, Old Calabar, 29–30. It should be noted that Latham suggests that Ekpe was only introduced in the middle of the eighteenth century, but in fact William Snelgrave had already documented its existence in 1713, and it is likely to have been introduced at least several decades earlier. See Snelgrave, A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea and the Slave-Trade (London, 1734), 7–12. Snelgrave referred to a boy, whom a prominent Old Calabar resident was about to sacrifice to “his God Egbo.” An earlier incident witnessed by Snelgrave in 1704 was similar, implying that Ekpe was established by then.


Noah, Old Calabar, 30.
that the effectiveness of Ekpe was only achieved with difficulty, especially since the society was initially associated with one ward, Old Town. Indeed, the foundation of Duke Town, also referred to as New Town, by settlers from Creek Town, apparently around 1748, appears to have been an attempt to counteract the influence of Old Town and its control of Ekpe. Inter-ward conflict, much of it doubtless related to struggles for control of Ekpe itself as well as access to the taxes and fees of slave ships, continued into the 1750s and 1760s, the decades of the great expansion in the trade. The most obvious manifestation of this tension was the 1767 massacre, after which Old Town, and presumably its domination of Ekpe, was undermined. Thereafter, Duke Town came to control Ekpe and to manipulate it for its own political and commercial ends, even securing the appointment of the younger Duke Ephraim to the office of Eyamba.68

By the 1790s, virtually all males at Old Calabar were being forced to purchase membership in Ekpe, if they did not join willingly. Those individuals who were not members of the society but were in the streets when ekpe was being “run” were punished, usually by whipping. In “running ekpe” through the different wards, the “grand council” turned the Ekpe society into a type of protection racket, akin in its operation to organizations like the Mafia, and with its religious functions seemingly subordinated to commercial and political ends. In the nineteenth century, political conditions allowed the society to function in the way that Noah describes and to become a more effective debt-policing agency. As residents of Henshaw Town noted in a brief history sent to George Offer and Company of Liverpool in 1877, the different wards lived separately, “each under its own laws except in the line of Egbo [Ekpe].”69

Despite political intrigue and commercial rivalry, Ekpe allowed the principal merchants “to put in force any law that may exist and to punish offenders.”70 Whether for debt enforcement or other things, the society’s council had the power to “blow” ekpe, that is, impose summary justice on offenders, which could involve seizure and sale into slavery or execution of the accused and his family.71 Often, Ekpe held families collectively responsible for the actions of its members. The ability to impose sanctions and otherwise enforce its decrees was assisted through the reduction to writing of the nsibidi sign language, which consisted of a series of over five hundred signs. Although it is not clear when nsibidi were first used, the spread of Ekpe, together with its rituals and symbols, required mechanisms for announcing decrees that resulted in the evolution of the system. Nsibidi were drawn on calabash gourds and walls, and signs were placed on roadways. By the end of the nineteenth century, at least, Ekpe members sometimes kept accounts and held court proceedings in nsibidi.72

Political and legal leadership was thereby concentrated in the hands of members

68 Simmons, Holman’s Voyage to Old Calabar, 12, 18.
69 Brief Statement of the History of Henshaw’s Town, Old Calabar River, West Coast of Africa for the information of George Offer and Co., London, December 30, 1877, PRO, Foreign Office Papers, FO 84/1527, as cited in Noah, Old Calabar, 30.
70 Ibid.
71 For a description of the sanctions that could be imposed, see Jones, “Political Organization,” 142; and Holman, Voyage round the World, 393.
of a cartel who maintained control of trade and society through secret knowledge, including literacy in English and use of an indigenous script. Moreover, Ekpe spread into areas where Old Calabar merchants traded, together with the use of nsibidi. The Aro maintained their own secret Ekpe association, and Ekpe also spread to the Ibibio region along the Cross River and to neighboring Cameroons. This interlocking grid of secret associations served to regulate the behavior of members and to control the trade routes that supplied slaves for the transatlantic market.

It is important to emphasize, however, that while Ekpe was involved in condemning debtors to enslavement and in policing other aspects of the slave trade, it did not do so in direct support of British interests, at least before 1807. On the contrary, Ekpe often acted against British interests by attempting to control ship departures and, as we shall see later, by trying to protect pawns on board ships. For example, on September 16, 1787, Antera Duke reported that “Grand Ekpe” had imposed sanctions on several ships to protect individuals from being wrongly seized. Moreover, as revealed in Antera Duke’s diary, Ekpe was not only an important agency in safeguarding Ekpe members and their dependents from enslavement but also in settling and collecting “comey” or duties on trade as well.

Clearly, therefore, Ekpe was used to collect debts and to protect members who were in debt, but its debt-related functions essentially applied to insiders. There are claims, based on nineteenth-century evidence, that British traders became members of Ekpe and could thus exploit its powers. As far as our evidence reveals, however, they did not, and perhaps were not allowed to, join Ekpe before British abolition in 1807. James Holman, who was at Old Calabar in 1828, reported that masters of British ships were being admitted to Ekpe in the 1820s, but, in our view, European membership was an innovation associated with the expansion of the palm oil trade, not with slaving, and arose from changes in both political and commercial conditions after British abolition. British membership in Ekpe became therefore the preferred method of securing credit traders to Old Calabar only when other methods developed earlier in the context of the slave trade were no longer effective.

In the absence of a local political or legal agency capable or willing to act on their behalf before 1807, British traders sought security for credit, as Thomas


74 Antera Duke, “Diary,” 59–60. “Grand Ekpe” appears to have involved sanctions imposed by or on the most senior officers of the society who comprised the council. It was designed from “ekpe,” which might be “blown” by any member or ward of the society against an offending party. Members or wards might be pressured into removing the “blow” by senior officers or the council.

75 On the basis of evidence from 1828, Latham, Old Calabar, 38, concludes that “several European traders joined the [Ekpe] society during the nineteenth century if not earlier” (emphasis added). Eyo Okon Akak may have misinterpreted the diary of Antera Duke to reach a similar conclusion; see Akak, Efiks of Old Calabar, 4 vols. (Calabar, 1981–83), 3: 292.

76 According to Simmons, Holman’s Voyage to Old Calabar, 12, “They sometimes admit Englishmen into this assembly [Ekpe]: Captain Burrell of the Ship Hayward of Liverpool held the rank of Yampai, which is one of considerable importance, and he found it exceedingly to his advantage, as it enabled him to recover all debts due to him by the natives.”
Clarkson recognized, by exploiting another local institution, namely human pawnship. Taking humans as collateral or “hostages” for loans of trade goods may be seen as an appropriation by the British of African value systems, in which people are more highly valued than territory: using debt to expand the number of one’s dependents was a widely accepted means of accumulating wealth and power. But in conceding pawns to British traders, African dealers in slaves also gained, since the trade goods received in exchange, albeit on credit, increased their capacity to spread debt and thereby to create dependents. Thus, in underpinning credit arrangements in slave transactions at Old Calabar, human pawnship helped promote expansion of pawnship and slavery within Old Calabar itself and, indeed, in the interior.

Although we cannot establish the antiquity of the practice of pawning individuals as collateral for debts at Old Calabar or in its interior, pawning almost certainly existed before the middle of the eighteenth century, as E. J. Alagoa and A. M. Okorobia have suggested. The earliest direct evidence of pawning in the export trade dates from the early 1760s; in 1763, for example, the master of a Liverpool brig reported getting “pledges” from the “Kings Town [Old Town], Dukes and Tom Henshaws [towns].” There are other glimpses of pawnship in the 1760s, and, by the 1770s, pawning was common in the slave trade. Thus John Ashley Hall, a London captain who traded at Old Calabar in 1772–1773, accepted pawns as collateral, which he reported to a Parliamentary Select Committee in 1790, as “the way the trade is carried on” in the Calabar and Del Rey rivers, that is in the estuary of the Cross River. And there are references to pawning in Antera Duke’s diary from the 1780s, and significantly, he used the term “pawn” (“pown,” “paun,” or “prown”), which he distinguished from “slave.”

“Commercial” pawning involving British ships was in principle governed by a more precise time schedule than its domestic equivalent, which by all accounts might continue indefinitely and even across generations, unless other arrangements were made. Often, such arrangements, involving women, resulted in marriage contracts that terminated the debt. Sometimes in domestic pawning, pawns became slaves, although the justification for such actions is seldom clear. The possibility that commercial hostages might become slaves was, therefore, not the only situation in which the status between slave and pawn became blurred. Nonetheless, the commitment in the export trade to the delivery of slaves by a specified date in order to redeem pawns represented a significant modification of the institution of

78 Letter of James Berry of Liverpool, April 3, 1763, in Williams, History of the Liverpool Privateers, 533.
79 Evidence of James Morley, in Lambert, Sessional Papers, 73: 149–54. Morley told the parliamentary inquiry that his ship, the Amelia, was at Old Calabar in 1763 or 1764, but from other evidence provided by Morley, it appears that the voyage in question was made in 1761–1762; see also Richardson, Years of Decline, 139.
80 Evidence of John Ashley Hall, in Lambert, Sessional Papers, 72: 227. The Calabar River, on which the various wards of Old Calabar are located, is a tributary of the Cross River, while Rio del Rey flows into the estuary where the Cross River joins the Bight of Biafra.
81 Antera Duke, “Diary,” 86, 95, 109, 110, for the original pidgin.
domestic pawnship and may be seen as an important innovation, provided that the mechanisms and the will existed to enforce the contracts implicit in trade bargains based on credit. A number of important issues arise from these contracts, of which three are perhaps crucial in terms of the credit relationship involved. First, how was the number of “pledges” or pawns deposited as security for goods determined? Second, what protection, if any, existed for pawns and the interests of those that pledged them? And third, and perhaps most important of all, what evidence is there that British traders enforced contracts by sailing away with pawns when there was defaulting on debts?

The number of pawns deposited by slave suppliers with shipmasters appears to have been subject to individual negotiation, the outcome of which depended, among other things, on general trading conditions at the time of negotiations and the relative skills and probably the status of the parties involved. Including relatives of traders among pawns was clearly seen by masters of ships as improving the likelihood of contracts being fulfilled, although, given asymmetries in information of masters and traders regarding the relationship of pawns to traders, some deception by the latter in negotiating such matters was possible. Calabar merchants would not always allow their kin to be held as pawns, as a Liverpool brig discovered in 1763, when Robin John Town refused “a son for pledge.”83 Some pawns, nevertheless, were related to Old Calabar merchants. In 1762, for example, it appears that Archibong Robin John was a pawn on the Amelia of Bristol,84 while in 1787 King Ambo was required to “give one of his sons to [Captain] Tatam” of Liverpool in place of a pawn who had absconded.85

Other things being equal, British shippers tried to obtain a high ratio of pawns to slaves. In April 1788, Richard Rogers reported trying to achieve a ratio of two pawns for every three slaves to be delivered to his ship, the Pearl; he was not alone in expecting such a ratio.86 While ship captains naturally tried to increase their leverage over local dealers, Old Calabar merchants equally preferred a low ratio. Indeed, if possible, they preferred to trade without providing any pawns, since the incarceration of pawns on board ship represented a loss of labor and the costs of maintaining them apparently fell on the debtor. Such costs provided powerful incentives to redeem pawns on schedule or even earlier.87 Moreover, pawning arrangements shifted much of the risk associated with advancing credit against future slave deliveries from the British to the Old Calabar merchants, because, in the event of default, unredeemed pawns could be shipped to America for sale. Pawnship gave masters of ships important insurance against default by Old Calabar

83 James Berry, April 3, 1763, in Williams, History of the Liverpool Privateers, 533.
84 Evidence of James Morley, in Lambert, Sessional Papers, 73: 154. For another example, see the account of James Berry, April 3, 1763, when four sons of Robin John Ephraim (Grandy King George) of Old Town were among the pawns being held by James Berry; see Berry’s letter, April 3, 1763, in Williams, History of the Liverpool Privateers, 534.
86 For instance, James Arnold, in evidence to Parliament in 1790, reported that the master of the Bristol ship Ruby, which traded at Bimbia in Cameroons in 1787–1788, had released eleven slaves and some ivory to three local merchants in order to allow them to redeem pawns from another ship, the master of which was threatening to sail away with pawns. Arnold reported that the eleven slaves secured the release of “Six or Seven” of the merchants’ pawns; Lambert, Sessional Papers, 72: 52.
slave suppliers. Credit arrangements at Old Calabar were therefore consistent with “economizing on transactions costs,” but they also placed at risk the kin of local traders. As John Ashley Hall observed in 1790, relatives were “always particularly anxious” about their fate and “seemed much distressed whenever they took up an idea that the ship would sail away with the pawns.”

The fate of pawns was, then, more than simply a question of protecting friends, relatives, and dependents; it went to the heart of debt enforcement. Much depended on the personal bond or trust between the ship captain and local merchants and, for those Liverpool and Bristol firms trading regularly to the region, between the ship captains and their employers. Since, however, ship captains were not always reliable, Old Calabar merchants had to find ways of safeguarding their pawns. Sailors were sometimes seized or “panyarred” to force the return of pawns. But the principal method by which Old Calabar merchants sought to protect their pawns was through Ekpe. Antera Duke describes occasions when “grand ekpe” was collectively “blown” against ships close to completing their loading of slaves and perhaps contemplating taking away pawns. Sometimes, ekpe was “blown” to force an Old Calabar merchant to replace a recalcitrant pawn, perhaps in an attempt to deter other ships from leaving with pawns. In this respect, at least, Ekpe functioned as a “merchant guild” of Old Calabar’s leading traders and the principal body for coordinating local action to monitor the treatment of pawns and to safeguard the interests of the merchants who used them as collateral.

Because of the potential damage to future commercial dealings that might arise, ship captains were often reluctant to deport pawns and even transferred pawns from one ship to another in exchange for slaves to avoid carrying them away. In 1788, when Richard Rogers had sixty pawns on board the Pearl, for example, he noted that “most of the Pawns [had been] redeem’d from other ships.” A captain close to having a full shipload of slaves had to consider the trade-offs between sailing with the pawns or waiting further for pawns to be redeemed with slave deliveries, with the risk of losing to disease slaves already purchased. Whether transfers of pawns between ships needed permission from Old Calabar merchants is unclear, although, in local practice, as far as known, such alterations in arrangements required the approval of close kin.

When deadlines passed and their patience ran out, however, ship captains were known to foreclose on debts and to sail away with pawns. In 1773, Robin John Ephraim complained that one ship had gone with his pawns, including four of his sons. Fifteen years later, in 1788, the Gascoigne of Liverpool left the river with 540 slaves and pawns. Captain Cumberbach, it was said, was “oblig’d to carry off . . . 120

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91 Antera Duke, “Diary,” 59. Also see Nair, *Politics and Society*, 15. In 1787, one ship threatened to sail before slaves could be delivered against trade goods that had been advanced to Henshaw and one Willy Tom. According to Antera Duke, “Diary,” 59, the Ekpe decree expressly forbade “any Captain to send any Calabar pawn, which was given for my slave goods, away in his tender.”
92 PRO, C 107/12, April 1788, Richard Rogers to James Rogers.
Pledges,” and even then the debts which the ship “left behind is 100 more.”94 As Richard Rogers observed, when he could “Gett my Debts in Such Cyuation” as he desired, he would give the dealers just two days to clear any outstanding debts, and “Should they not pay in that time,” he would then “Borrow their pawns to sell in the West Indies.”95 The idea that one might “borrow” pawns is in itself intriguing since it implies that, even after being shipped from the coast, pawns might still be redeemed, at least in theory. Be this as it may, these examples confirm contemporary suggestions that British merchants normally regarded pawns as enslavable by sale in the Americas “if their friends refuse, or are not able to redeem them.”96

When pawns were taken as collateral against future delivery of slaves, ship captains tended to assume that Old Calabar merchants recognized that they were engaging in a self-enforcing contract. This point seems to have been fully acknowledged in a deposition signed by King George (Robin John Ephraim), Jno. Robin John, Otto Ephraim (Robin John Otto Ephraim), and Orrock Robin John and witnessed by John Richards and James Hargraves at Old Town on August 22, 1776:

This is to certify whom it doth or may concern that the within is a True List of Debts owing by the Natives of Old Town to Captain Lace of Liverpoole, and that the Boy named Assogua was not stoped by Captain Lace as has been Reported, but was put on board by Orrock Robin John unto whom he belonged, and that Captain Lace carried him of [sic] for the within debts, because we made no application for him nor did we even offer to Redeem him whilst the ship staid in the River, as Witness our hands.97

The fact that pawns, including kin, could be and were carried away was, in the final analysis, perhaps the most powerful single incentive for Old Calabar merchants to fulfill their contracts. Given the political situation at Old Calabar at the time, resorting to human pawnship was thus probably the most effective means available to British merchants of protecting the credit that underlay slave transactions at the port in the late eighteenth century.

As a region, the Bight of Biafra was on the margin of the emergent Atlantic economy in the early eighteenth century. During the hundred years or so after 1740, however, it became a major supplier of slaves to the Americas and, in the early nineteenth century, a primary source of palm oil, a vital ingredient in some branches of British industry. Based fundamentally on slave exports, the Bight’s integration into the Atlantic economy was in many aspects typical of other regions in western Africa that supplied coerced labor for American plantations and mines. Perhaps more than any other region, its links with British merchants and, more specifically, access to British capital enabled the Bight of Biafra to move from the margins of the Atlantic economy to a much more prominent position. Moreover,

94 PRO, C 107/12, April 1788, Richard Rogers to James Rogers.
95 PRO, C 107/12, July 20, 1788, Richard Rogers to James Rogers.
96 Evidence of James Fraser, in Lambert, Sessional Papers, 71: 15.
97 Cited in Williams, History of the Liverpool Privateers, 541. Significantly, only Robin John Otto Ephraim, who, as noted earlier, was educated in Liverpool, signed with his own name; the others used crosses, which indicates that not all merchants were literate.
whereas the purchase of slaves in some parts of Atlantic Africa was associated with the establishment of European factories or forts at the coast, in the Bight of Biafra trade was conducted from ships exclusively with indigenous merchants throughout the history of the Atlantic slave trade. In this respect, slave trading in the Bight of Biafra was similar to the cross-cultural trades that arose from encounters between groups from different cultural traditions in other parts of the world.98

We have recently been reminded by Avner Offer that in business activities “a common identity can substitute for face-to-face relations.”99 Personal and family bonds can help cement “trust” between traders, as, for instance, in the case of merchants in Britain and North America from the seventeenth century onward.100 Similar bonds were also important in shaping patterns of capital investment in Britain itself during the first century of industrialization. To quote Offer again, “business credit is essentially a form of delayed reciprocity,” and early industrial investment in Britain “relayed primarily on funds raised locally from family, friends, and business contacts, who based their trust on family knowledge.”101 The embeddedness of trust in social relations is, therefore, an important theme in the historical literature and one that has been given renewed emphasis by the application of modern microeconomic theory to history.

The history of British trade with Old Calabar provides an important cautionary tale to those who would see trust based on social relations as shaping Britain’s relationship with the Atlantic world after 1740. Attempts were made by both British and Old Calabar merchants to form ties that might be seen to engender “trust,” but, we have argued, these proved insufficient to allow Old Calabar slave traders to attract British credit without other, essentially institutional, forms of security for capital being created. The case of Old Calabar reminds us, therefore, that flexibility and adaptability characterized British merchant capitalism on frontiers of trade where the conditions that Granovetter and others see as prerequisites for building trust were largely absent or at best poorly embedded. Although Adam Smith noted the difficulties that Europeans faced in colonizing Africa, whose “barbarous nations” were “by no means so weak and defenseless as the miserable and helpless Americans,”102 it was left to others such as Thomas Clarkson to discern that, in such circumstances and in the absence of British political control, institutional arrangements for protecting credit would have to serve as a substitute for trust.

In the case of Old Calabar, it was the local institution of debt pawnship that was appropriated and adapted by both British and Old Calabar traders for this purpose before 1807. Interestingly, while pawns were sometimes taken to the Americas and

102 Smith, Wealth of Nations, 496.
sold as slaves, the institution of human pawnship itself remained confined to Africa and did not become an alternative mechanism for supplying labor for the Americas. Pawnship was tied to credit, not labor, and remained effective only when pawns were in close proximity to kin and patrons. Equally, however, pawnship could serve as a useful device for protecting credit advances only where those taking human hostages were not prohibited by their own laws from taking them away from Africa. After 1807, when Britain outlawed slaving and at the same time sought to expand other trades at Old Calabar, new institutional arrangements, centering on the Ekpe society, evolved to safeguard credit. The story of British trade with Old Calabar provides insights into how the British came to dominate the “odious commerce” in enslaved Africans. More generally, however, it also reveals how, in alliance with local merchants, British merchant-investors were sometimes able to devise, in Douglass North’s words, “an adaptively efficient set of institutions”\textsuperscript{103} that, from the mid-eighteenth century, enabled them to shape the history of some parts of the Atlantic world without either formal colonization or the support of transplanted Britons overseas.