Book Review by Gloria Chuku

The Persistence of Slavery: An Economic History of Child Trafficking in Nigeria. By Robin Phylisia Chapdelaine (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2021. xvi plus 238 pp. $26.95).

Ironically, the abolition of the slave trade and the emancipation of the enslaved were among the European justifications for the colonization of Africa. Yet, enslavement and pawning—a practice where children were left with creditors as loan collateral until debtors repaid their loans—persisted if not intensified under new legal, economic, political, and social conditions unleashed by European colonial rule in Africa. In *The Persistence of Slavery*, Chapdelaine presents a nuanced account of the complexity of economic, political, and social changes caused by colonialism that led to the persistence of child enslavement, child trafficking, and other forms of coerced labor in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century southeastern Nigeria, particularly, Igbo society. Relying on colonial, anthropological and missionary records, newspaper articles, interviews of nearly two dozen respondents conducted by research assistants, and other sources, and applying the "social economy of a child" framework, the author impressively demonstrates how children as slaves, pawns, child brides, and traffickers produced wealth for their families, communities and the colonial sate in Nigeria. Chapdelaine argues that child trafficking, child slavery, and child labor persisted in the region beyond the nineteenth-century anti-slavery movement because of their value as wealth generators. She shows that contemporary child trafficking and bondage is a continuation of the centuries of transatlantic and domestic enslavement and pawnship in Africa.

Chapdelaine notes that southeastern Nigerian communities valued children as kin (family) members, protected dependents, and as sources of labor, wealth and social status. Children were valued as children and as wealth. They were also used as collateral in diverse

ways when their parents and guardians suffered insolvency, or were in financial need to meet their socioeconomic interests. Under these conditions, children were exploited and abused depending on their distance away from home, the temperament of the creditors, and the relationship between the creditors and the children's families. The contexts in which women and children occupied dual positions as victims and agents of human trafficking in the first three decades of the twentieth century are lucidly discussed in the book.

Also explored in the book is how kinship-based norms, institutions and "moral code" that guided the interactions of southeastern Nigerian communities and groups and protected pawned children were undermined as demands for free labor increased, which was caused by colonial modernization efforts and palm produce export-based economy. The colonial legal instruments, such as the Native House Rule Ordinance of 1901 that reinforced the conditions of servitude in the region; taxation; Native Court systems; scarcity of British currencies; and the new rules governing coercive labor and moneylending practices placed unbearable financial burden on the people of southeastern Nigeria. They were required to pay taxes, court fees and fines, and other government-imposed fees and those extorted from them by corrupt government agents such as the warrant and paramount chiefs, tax collectors, and court clerks, interpreters and messengers. In order to pay for these fees and charges and avoid imprisonment, taxpayers, litigants and others had to borrow money from the same chiefs, tax collectors and court officials, who had extorted and victimized them. Unable to secure loans in scarce British currencies to pay for taxes and fees, parents and guardians often pawned their children and relatives as collateral.

The author also reveals the gender dynamics in child trafficking, pawning and enslavement that made girls more vulnerable than boys: girls could be camouflaged as daughters or wives by their masters. Pawned and enslaved children also experienced gendered work. While

both boys and girls engaged in trading, boys served as "porters, apprentices, and canoe paddlers [and] girls farmed [and] performed domestic work" (p. 42). Drawing from the works of human rights activists and child advocates, who campaigned against child labor and enslavement in the 1920s-1930s, Chapdelaine elucidates on southeastern Nigerian girls as child brides, slaves, and pawns. She highlights how a daunting challenge it was to distinguish between legal marriages and female slave dealing in communities of southeastern Nigeria where child betrothal was practiced and "bride price" (breadwealth) exchanges required in order to secure a marriage, and when child dealers used false marriage certificates. In addition, colonial ambivalence over marriage and pawning complicated the persistence of slavery in the region.

More broadly and methodologically, the author's reliance on colonial records—fraught with ethnocentrism and misrepresentations, and lacking detailed understanding of the sociocultural history of the people of southeastern Nigeria—have resulted in certain exaggerations and inaccuracies in the book. For example, the author claims that "the British led a military assault, the Aro Campaign of 1902, on the slave-owning elite of northern Igboland" (p. 19). But the Aro military subjugation occurred at Arochukwu in southern Igbo in 1901-1902. Moreover, Chapdelaine's emphasis on the role of the Aro as "chief perpetrators in child dealing," "constant warfare and kidnapping … [targeting] women and children," and who were feared for retribution (pp. 31 & 46) obscures other major slave dealers in southeastern Nigeria and therefore presents a lopsided narrative of the complex networks of multi-ethnic and intra-ethnic agents that contributed to the persistence of slavery in the region. It is undoubtable that a new class of wealthy men emerged as a result of their involvement in human trafficking and the palm produce export economy, and whose wealth secured them enormous political power and social ascendency. However, it is not clear where such men brought to an end the Igbo gerontocratic

tradition by replacing the elders and taking control of the governing councils as the author claims (pp. 33-34). She tends to mix-up the Efik-Ibibio house system with the Igbo political organization.

Similarly, reliance on research assistants as "interview facilitators and interpreters" (p. xiii) missed a valuable opportunity for penetrating follow-up questions to the respondents, and a critical analysis of the interviews alongside other primary and secondary sources that would have helped to affirm or refute certain claims made in the book. For example, citing one respondent, the author states: "Some parents pawned children to European officials in lieu of tax payments," who treated the children "as beasts of burden" and caused their death (p. 123). This is a serious assertion that requires corroboration. In addition, one would have liked to see substantial effort expended on the contextualization of the child and childhood in traditional communities of southeastern Nigeria and under British colonial rule. Who was a child in these two contexts? Does it mean that all the children who were not living with their parents or guardians were either slaves or pawns? What about children who were real apprentices and househelps?

Finally, while Chapdelaine proposes a new dimension to the causes of the famous Women's War of 1929 in southeastern Nigeria and also advances the literature on the war through her emphasis on the loss of women's children to conditions of servitude, and linking child trafficking and pawning to the severe economic conditions and hardship of the time, her argument is less than persuasively presented. There is very little, if any, evidence to support it. Neither the *Aba Commission of Inquiry* nor the interview reports from research assistants affirms the linkage between women's loss of children and the Women's War.

A note of explanation on the Ekpe secret society would have been helpful (pp. 35, 99-100). There are a couple of errors and misspellings such as the Efik (Efike p. 51) and Gloria Chuku (Chuko p. 112) that could have been avoided with thorough editorial work.

The above shortcomings notwithstanding, *The Persistence of Slavery* is an important book that expands the literature on slavery in Africa and the emerging historical scholarship on children in colonial Nigeria.

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