



Looking for Interpreter Zero: (11) The Guinea Coast Interpreters—Part 2

Britain was the major slave-trading nation on the Guinea Coast by the 18th century, but historical accounts are distorted by the paucity of African sources.

Christine ADAMS.

Published: March 11, 2016 Last updated: March 18, 2016

For the better understanding of this I must observe that these linguists are Natives and Freemen of the country whom we hire on account of their speaking good English, during the time we remain trading on the Coast; and they are likewise Brokers between us and the Black Merchants." [\[1\]](#)

The Portuguese slave-trade laid the foundations for what was to come, as did the Iberian conquests in the Americas. Had it not been for the need for labour in the New World to supplement reluctant and scarce native peoples, the sixteenth-century trade would not have expanded to the trans-Atlantic displacement of millions of Africans. As it was, when the Dutch, French and English took over from the Portuguese in the seventeenth century they had every incentive to follow their example, and as the British presence in the Americas expanded so did their interest in the trade.

That is why Olaudah Equiano's story holds such interest. His account of being kidnapped in 1756 and taken to the coast to be sold to a slaver travelling to Barbados gives us a sense of context and perspective. During some six months of travel from his village (in what is now Nigeria), Equiano was sold to a number of different masters. While missing his home and the sister who had also been taken, Equiano could make some sense of his environment. Kidnapping and slavery were known to him: he himself had prevented some children in his village being seized. What he knew about, however, was slavery as practised in West Africa. When he found himself on the coast, where language and customs were unfamiliar, he was suddenly part of the European slave trade on the Upper Guinea coast around the Niger delta. The experience, he wrote:

"... filled me with astonishment, which was soon converted into terror when I was carried on board. I was immediately handled and tossed up to see if I were sound by some of the crew; and I was now persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me." [\[2\]](#)

For a time, the fact that he was to be taken away to work for white men seemed reassuring as he had been convinced that they were going to eat him. Cannibalism was much feared by blacks and whites at this time, as Captain William Snelgrave noted. His interpreter – or linguist – had to reassure the captives on his ship: *"... For these poor People are generally under terrible Apprehension upon their being bought by white Men, many being afraid that we design to eat them ..."* [\[3\]](#)

Snelgrave's account of his Guinea Coast slave-trading acknowledges his dependence on interpreters at various stages. In 1727, off the coast of what is now Benin, he had to sail on to Jakin as the slaving port of Whydah (Ouidah) had been destroyed by the forces of the King of Dahomey, who sent him an invitation through a messenger called Buttenoe.

"This black Messenger ... spoke very good English, having learnt it when a boy in the English factory at Whidah: He belonged to Mr Lambe, and was with him at the time he was taken Prisoner by the King of Ardra. They both fell into the King of Dahomè's Power ...where he learnt the Country Language; and in this respect I had as capable an Interpreter as I could desire." [4]

Buttenoe was able to guide Snelgrave and his party as to the proper etiquette when meeting the King in April of that year as well as assisting at their protracted palavers over slaves.

We have Buttenoe's name – thanks to Snelgrave – because he was attached to the court. There were many interpreters available to European slavers. *"Some of these African interpreters became so professional they had 'books' or letters of recommendation, that they presented to ships captains."* [5] They interpreted when the slavers bought their cargo from local merchants; they also worked for them on board their ships before they set sail. It could take some time to load up with a full cargo and the ships were exposed to the risks of disease, piracy or mutinies by crew or captives.

Some accounts show that the prisoners were in a state of distress: Captain Alexander Falconbridge reports that one woman, ill with dysentery, refused food. *"Being asked by the interpreter what she wanted, she replied nothing but to die – and she did die."* [6] On the *Brookes* in 1783, Captain Thomas Trotter asked his interpreter (who was, unusually, a woman) to find out why the slaves were howling, and *"she discovered it to be owing to their having dreamt they were in their own country, and finding themselves when awake in the hold of a slave ship."* [7] Many of those being held prisoner on board protested and rebelled. Some 55 mutinies are described in detail in the literature and there is passing reference to over 100 more. When Snelgrave's captives invited his linguist to join them in cutting the ship's cables so it would be driven to shore, he informed on them. In 1758, Captain Joseph Harrison's interpreter reported to his vessels owners that *"The negroes rose up on us after we left St Thomas's [Sao Tomé]; they killed my linguister whom I got at Benin, and we then secured them without further loss."* [8]

Ottobah Cugoana, like Equiano a slave who came to be freed, describes another failed mutiny:

"... a plan was concerted... that we might burn and blow up the ship, and to perish all together in the flames; but we were betrayed by one of our countrywomen, who slept with some of the men on the ship, for it was common for the filthy sailors to take the African women ..." [9]

In another instance of co-option, a few slaves were made overseers with minor powers and a cat-o'-nine-tails to keep order below decks and listen out for any plotting.

The English accounts of the slave trade hint at the web of exchanges these intermediaries were involved in, without recognising the brutal logistics of the vicious triangle that brought the Africans textiles, beads, liquor, guns and ammunition in exchange for slaves who, if they survived the Middle Passage, were sold in the Americas for sugar, tobacco and cotton that was then shipped to Europe. These journeys went on for some fifty years after Parliament adopted the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in 1807.

Read [Part 1 here](#).

[1] Snelgrave, W. (1971). *A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea and the Slave Trade*. Frank Cass & Co Ltd. London. p 172.

[2] *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, Written by Himself. Project Gutenberg ebook. Chapter 2.

[3] Snelgrave, p162.

[4] Ibid, pp 23-4.

[5] Fayer, J. M. "African Interpreters in the Atlantic Slave Trade". In *Anthropological Linguistics*, Vol 45 No 3, pp 281-295; p284.

[6] Falconbridge, A. *An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa*. London, 1788. p 229.

[7] Mannix, D.P. with Cowley, M. (1962). *A History of the Atlantic Slave Trade 1518-1865*. Longmans, London. p116.

[8] Ibid, p 133.

[9] Cugoano, O. (1969). In *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery*, Edwards, P., Editor. Dawsons, London. p 10.

Recommended citation format:

Christine ADAMS. "Looking for Interpreter Zero: (11) The Guinea Coast Interpreters–Part 2". *aiic.net*. March 11, 2016. Accessed February 21, 2020. <<https://aiic.net/p/7559>>.