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## King Jaja of Opobo: *The Rise of an Igbo Merchant King.*

By Chuka Odike

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### Jaja of Opobo.

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KING JAJA OF OPOBO

# King Jaja of Opobo: The Rise of an Igbo Merchant King.

By Chuka Odike · Ethnohistory · Ozikoro.com

*Introduction King Jaja of Opobo was a powerful 19th-century West African ruler whose life and legacy continue to inspire discussions on resistance, leadership, and economic independence. Born into slavery in Umuduruoha, Amaigbo, present-day Imo State in the Igbo hinterland, Jaja was taken to Bonny, where he rose to prominence within the trading houses. He later...*

01

## Introduction

**K**ing Jaja of Opobo was a powerful 19th-century West African ruler whose life and legacy continue to inspire discussions on resistance, leadership, and economic independence. Born into slavery in Umuduruoha, Amaigbo, present-day Imo State in the Igbo hinterland, Jaja was taken to Bonny, where he rose to prominence within the trading houses. He later founded Opobo, establishing himself as a dominant force in the lucrative palm oil trade. However, his growing power and influence threatened British interests in the Niger Delta, leading to his capture and exile.

without delay to remove alleged obstacles to British trade in Opobo. These instructions made no reference to possible complications arising from Jaja's sovereignty. Johnston had, therefore, a free hand.

Johnston saw his mission to Opobo clearly. The best way to safeguard peace and commerce in the British protectorate was to humiliate or banish Jaja. The British merchants who were 'about

<sup>1</sup> F.O. 84/1693, Richards to Lister, 5 December 1884.

<sup>2</sup> Particularly T. V. Lister, Assistant Under-Secretary, and H. P. Anderson, Head of the African Department and Lister's deputy.

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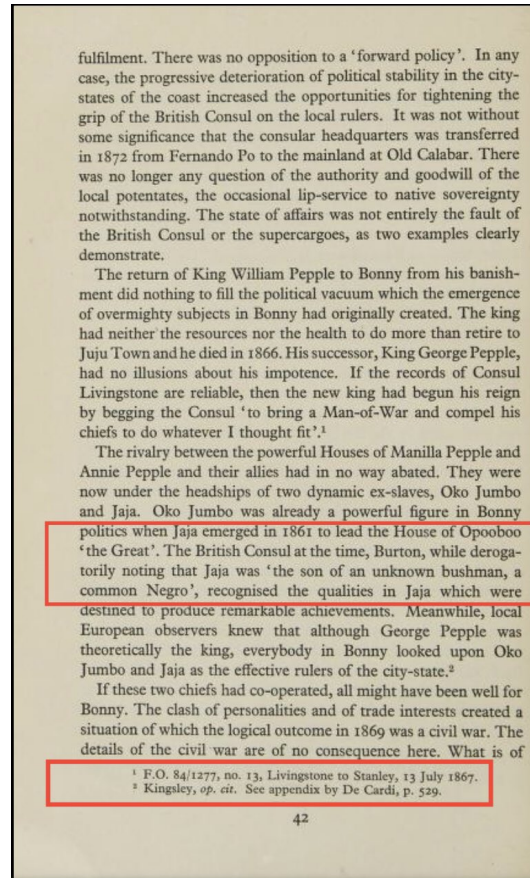
to reap the long-awaited-for and sadly needed profits of their praiseworthy enterprise<sup>1</sup> were being frustrated by the machination of a slave-born upstart. As to the question of Jaja's claim to Ibo and Ibibio areas, Johnston was convinced that Jaja's hold on the people there was exercised through 'juju'. This was therefore no evidence of Jaja's suzerainty. The people in question were independent and were ruled by their own kings. The points mentioned here were all embodied in Johnston's assessment of the problems which confronted him in Opobo. At about the same time, the Acting Consul painted glowing pictures of the prospects of trade in the Opobo hinterland. 'The district of Ohambela is a very large trade centre for the Ibo country. I met people coming from Igara and other places on the Niger, and from Ikorofion on the Cross [Old Calabar] Rivers. The quantity of palm oil brought to the markets of Ohambela is amazing...'<sup>2</sup> Johnston's statement in respect of Igala was mere fantasy. The market of Ohambebe was certainly an impressive one in the palm-oil trade—a trade developed by Jaja. There were Opobo stores there and Jaja's market inspectors, not 'juju'. The Ohambebe people were themselves middlemen who needed and used Jaja's capital to bring in the palm oil from the Ibo country. The allegiance and indebtedness of Ohambebe to Jaja were not expressed in European political terms. Johnston's visit to Ohambebe was for him only a wonderful opportunity to explode the 'myth' of Jaja's rule. He assembled the elders of Ohambebe and explained to them the advantages of direct trade with Europeans. Johnston believed that his explanations were eagerly accepted by his audience. He therefore promised to pay a second visit and sign treaties of protection with the Ohambebe 'rulers'.

Jaja, A slave-born upstart.

02

## Early Life and Rise to Power

Jaja was not purchased as a slave but was born into slavery, the son of an enslaved Igbo man. The British documented that they knew his father. As a child, he was taken to Bonny (in present-day Rivers State, Nigeria), a major center of trade in the region. Despite his enslaved status, Jaja demonstrated exceptional intelligence and leadership skills, which allowed him to rise within the ranks of the Anna Pepple House, one of Bonny's most powerful trading houses (Cookey, 1974).



Jaja was an upstart born slave.

By the mid-19th century, Jaja had gained significant influence over trade in Bonny. However, internal conflicts and rivalries led him to break away and establish the independent kingdom of Opobo in 1869. His new city-state became a thriving commercial hub, strategically positioned for the palm oil trade, which was in high demand in Europe due to the industrial revolution.

### 03

## Economic and Political Achievements

As the ruler of Opobo, Jaja controlled much of the palm oil trade in the Niger Delta, outcompeting both local and foreign merchants. His business acumen allowed Opobo to prosper, attracting traders from across the region. Jaja's economic power, however, put him at odds

with his former allies in Bonny and with British colonial traders who sought greater control over West African commerce (Cookey, 1974).

One of Jaja's significant contributions was his commitment to modern education. Recognizing its importance for economic progress, he sponsored the opening of a school in Opobo in 1873, employing a Sierra Leonean teacher, Mr. Gooding. By 1885, the school had 60 students under the instruction of an African American woman, Emma Johnson. Visitors noted that the students' education was on par with that of English children of the same age (Cookey, 1974).

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## Conflict with the British and Exile

Jaja's refusal to allow British merchants unrestricted access to the Opobo trade led to increased tensions. In 1887, He was regarded by the British who want to take control of the palm oil trade as "The notorious Ibo chief of Opobo" The British officials invited him aboard a warship under the pretense of negotiations. Instead, he was arrested and exiled to the Caribbean island of Saint Vincent. Despite international protests and efforts to secure his release, he was kept in exile for four years.

## 10 THE IBO. THEIR HISTORY AND ENVIRONMENT

as they were, our West Indian colonies were lands of happiness compared with the Oil Rivers; and as for the Southern States the slave's lot is paradise when succeeding what he endures on the West Coast of Africa.<sup>1</sup>

We shall see later that one of the commonest objections to the British system of justice at the present time is that prisons are too comfortable to be corrective and that communities have no means of ridding themselves permanently of habitual criminals.

The first Christian mission was started in Bonny by Bishop Crowther in 1864, but this did not prevent the continuance of civil strife, and in 1879 Ellis compared Bonny very unfavourably with other West African towns. It was, he said, indescribably filthy. 'George Pepple is king—but Oko Jumbo is the real power; he has some seven or eight thousand men, all armed with breech-loading rifles—and Jaja about the same. One war between Oko Jumbo and Jaja has just come to an end in which several of Jaja's wives were captured and eaten by the enemy.'

The last King Pepple abdicated in 1882, and Oko Jumbo, the chief power in Bonny, was degraded by the British Consul four years later. In 1877 Jaja, the notorious Ibo Chief of Opobo, was also degraded and deported by Consul (afterwards Sir H. H.) Johnston. This was an event of first-class importance in the history of the Ibo, as it led to the establishment of free trade with the teeming markets of the hinterland. In 1889 the Oil Rivers Protectorate was constituted, and Consular Courts, primarily for British subjects, were established. 'Up to this time each river had been governed by a Court of Equity, composed of the local leading merchants, who decided cases not only in their own community, but also among the natives, backed by a threat of appeal to the Consul and the presence of a gunboat.'<sup>2</sup>

In 1893 the Oil Rivers Protectorate was extended indefinitely into the interior under the name of the Niger Coast Protectorate, which in 1900 became the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria, and in 1914 the Southern Provinces of Nigeria. In 1897 Major Leonard and Mr. F. S. James penetrated as far as Bende, a centre of the slave-trade. They had a hostile reception, and it was not until 1901–2 that Bende, Owerri, Aba, and other important centres of the Ibo peoples were brought under control by the Aro expeditionary force. In 1904 a punitive force of 200 troops had to be sent against the Ibo of Ekkpasia who had murdered a number of traders and attacked the British

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Talbot, *op. cit.*, p. 269.

<sup>2</sup> Talbot, *op. cit.*, vol. i, p. 68.

Jaja, The notorious Ibo Chief of Opobo.

Eventually, the British allowed Jaja to return home, but he died en route in 1891, under suspicious circumstances. His death marked the end of Opobo's independence, as the British soon established direct colonial rule over the region.

## 05

## Legacy

King Jaja remains a symbol of African resilience and economic self-determination. His leadership, business acumen, and resistance to colonial exploitation continue to be studied and celebrated in Nigerian history. Opobo remains a reminder of his vision, and his story is a testament to the ability of African leaders to challenge imperial powers.



Photo: The New York Public Library.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

## Chuka Odiike

I'm a dedicated civil engineer with a passion for infrastructure development and community empowerment. With a strong background in engineering, my work focuses on creating sustainable solutions for urban and rural development projects. Outside of my professional career, I'm deeply interested in Igbo history and culture. I actively explores ways to impact society by using historical lessons to inspire and educate others about the rich cultural heritage of the Igbo people, aiming to bridge tradition and modern development.



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