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Where was Gustavus Vassa, also Known as Olaudah Equiano, Born? Revisiting an Old Question

Paul E. Lovejoy

ABSTRACT

Considerable controversy has prevailed over where the person usually known as Olaudah Equiano, but virtually always referred to as Gustavus Vassa in his own time, was born: whether in Africa as he claimed, or in South Carolina, which two documents seem to suggest. Following his own stated preference and virtually all references, he is referred to here as Gustavus Vassa. It is argued that 'Essaka', which he said was his home, is to be identified with Usaka in Abia State, Nigeria. Confirmation comes from the fact that Usaka was the home of the Ariam clan, which was one of four clans in a confederation known as Ikwuano, the other three clans being Oboro, Ibere, and Oloko. Vassa's first name Olaudah is a name found elsewhere in Igboland, meaning 'loud voice', while his second name relates to the confederation where his father appears to have been a senator which Vassa wrote as Equiano. The location of Usaka 40 km west of Arochukwu, 30 km south of Bende, and 25 km from Umuahia, now the capital of Abia State, appears to be in the charming vale to which Vassa alludes in *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*.

KEYWORDS

Olaudah Equiano; Gustavus Vassa; Igbo; South Carolina; autobiography; abolition; Middle Passage

Questions about the authenticity of *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* (London, 1789) pervade the vast scholarly literature about his life, especially among historians and literary specialists. While there are many details of the narrative that require scrutiny and interpretation, perhaps none are as important as the determination of where the author was born, and by extension, the meaning of his name. Serious doubts have been raised about the author's use and misuse of the African name 'Olaudah Equiano' and the location of 'Essaka' where Vassa asserted he was born. It must be remembered that his account of the 'Middle Passage' provided crucial evidence of the barbarity of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and was a fundamental tract of abolitionism. The autobiography refers to both Olaudah Equiano and Gustavus Vassa, neither being a pseudonym nor a *nom de plume* because he used both

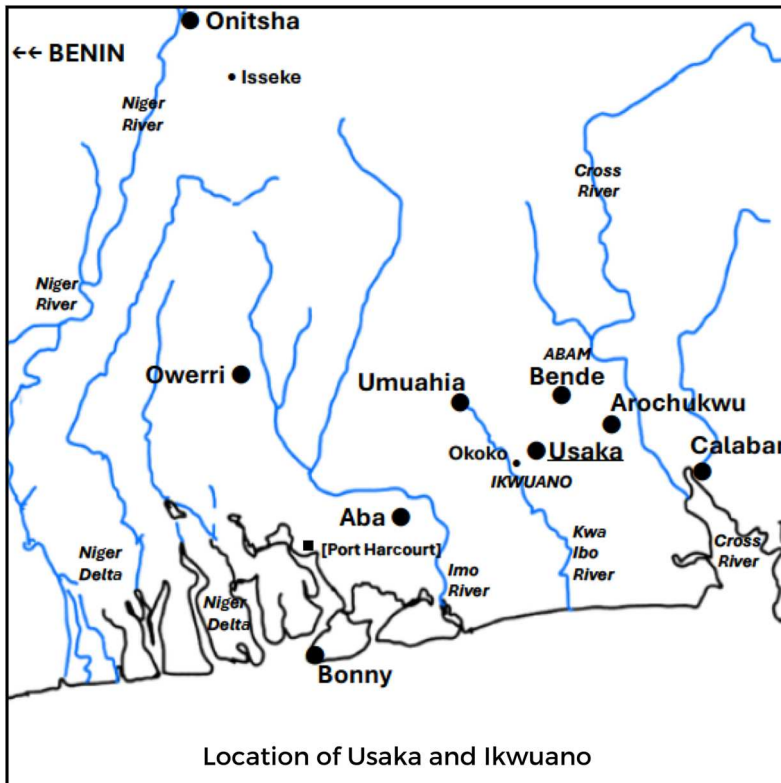
equally and openly in the title of his autobiography. Otherwise, however, he always referred to himself as Gustavus Vassa and shunned reference to the birth name that he claimed. He deliberately published the autobiography to coincide with the Parliamentary hearings in 1789 that ultimately led to British abolition in 1807; hence Vassa's motives are clear. He published through private subscription: this meant that Vassa published the book himself and sold copies to subscribers before the text was printed. Vassa's book passed through nine editions during Vassa's lifetime, all with the same duality in attributed authorship. Yet otherwise, Vassa never referred to himself by the name Equiano, and in the very few circumstances in which he did use the name 'Olaudah Equiano', he always signed off as Gustavus Vassa.

The Africanness of the Equiano name over the Swedish 'Gustavus Vassa' has been asserted in modern scholarship, even though this interpretation conflicts with what Vassa called himself, how he identified his wife and two daughters, and all his surviving legal documents. The promotion of his Africanness through his name is a modern invention which Vassa did not share. Moreover, the misuse of his name today wherein he is usually referred to as 'Equiano' rather than 'Vassa' disguises a further controversy: namely over where Vassa was born, either in Africa or North America. The foremost biographical critic of Vassa's life, Vincent Carretta, has even argued that 'Equiano' was a self-made man who created his own identity and prospered from his involvement in the abolition movement through sales of his autobiography. Hence the question arises as to whether the testimony espoused in the autobiography was authentic or merely a polemic that twisted the truth for political, albeit admirable, intent.¹ This article makes the case that authenticity was settled long ago. Vassa basically told the truth about his childhood, according to his own memory, which he interpreted based on his reading of contemporary accounts of Africa and what he must have heard from other Igbo speakers in the Caribbean and London. As is often the case in remembering events from childhood, later information and informed speculation can strongly influence what is recounted and what is supposed. Interpreting *The Interesting Narrative* highlights these ambiguities.

The confusion over these issues matters because of Vassa's claims to have endured the Middle Passage. Did he experience it or not? It is argued that Vassa was born in West Africa at 'Essaka', where he claimed, rather than being born in South Carolina, which two documents appear to suggest.² Tracing the controversy of Vassa's birthplace must address the reasons why he could not have been born in South Carolina before identifying the location of 'Essaka' in Igboland. That Vassa identified as Igbo, or 'Ebeo', as he wrote in European geographic, archaic form, is not in doubt.

Indeed, the location of Vassa's hometown in Igboland is the central mystery, not whether he was born in South Carolina or West Africa. It is contended here that Vassa's birthplace can be identified with the Igbo town of Usaka in what is

today Abia State, 30 km south of the historic market center of Bende and 40 km west of Arochukwu, the home of the principal slave merchants in the interior of the Bight of Biafra from the middle of the eighteenth century, if not earlier. Usaka is associated with the Ariam clan, one of four lineages that comprise the region known as Ikwuano, the other lineages being Oboro, Ibere, and Oloko. Ikwuano literally means ‘strength in the unity of four brothers’ and is phonetically similar to the name Equiano. In this context, Vassa’s alleged birth name, Oludah Equiano, takes on a specific meaning that indicates he was Oludah of Equiano/Ikwuano.³ Vassa explained the meaning of his first name, Oludah, but not that of his second, Equiano, as suggested here.



Therefore, Vassa’s birthplace, ‘Essaka’, can be identified as Usaka. In turn, this verification means that his account of the Middle Passage and his influence in shaping public opinion in Britain and subsequently in North America was truthful as well as effective. There exists ample testimony to Vassa’s honesty and considerable moral integrity, and while the subsequent ambiguities may seem to have undermined his character, the evidence presented here should reinforce the veracity of his campaign to end the slave trade and his stature as a leading abolitionist.⁴ A.E. Afigbo first raised the question as to:

how much of it [the autobiography] is authentic historical record and how much was imaginative reconstruction or a hotch-potch built up from scraps of information collected from fellow slaves or ex-slaves who came from different sections of Igbo land or even of Africa?⁵

This is a legitimate question but also a challenge for historians.

Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa?

As the scholarly edition of Abigail Field Mott's abridged edition, published in 1829, makes clear, interest in Vassa's autobiography continued well into the nineteenth century, highlighting in particular the importance of the text in teaching children of African descent about African origins in North America. As Eric D. Lamore notes, 'clearly, the debate over Equiano's African origins is a complex case involving the politics of witnessing and the ethics of life writing'. Lamore, though, perpetuates one significant error about the identity of the author. The reprinted edition is entitled *Abigail Field Mott's The Life and Adventures of Olaudah Equiano: A Scholarly Edition* (2023).⁶ This is deceptive, because Mott did not title the book in this way, instead referring to *The Life and Adventures of Olaudah Equiano; or, Gustavus Vassa, The African, from an Account written by Himself*. This was the precise title Vassa gave to the autobiography, and Mott, clearly stated in 1825 that her text was 'an abridgement of the Memoirs of Gustavus Vassa, the African'. Her edition referred specifically to 'Gustavus Vassa,' without any mention of 'Olaudah Equiano' with the exception of the book's title, which she obtained verbatim from the original publication. Lamore's republication of Mott's version is therefore tainted by an inaccurate designation that reinforces some of the current misunderstandings about the historical figure who is most often called 'Olaudah Equiano'.

The publication of a Boston edition in 1837 also did not mention the name Olaudah Equiano, except on the title page, otherwise referring to the author as Gustavus Vassa.⁷ Another citation to the autobiography in the Leeds Anti-Slavery Series of 1853 quotes Vassa's account, including his reference to 'Essaka' being in a charming vale. Wilson Armistead, a Quaker abolitionist from Leeds, compiled a series of 82 anti-slavery tracts designed for distribution in the United States as individual items, but also collated into the collection, *Five Hundred Thousand Strokes for Freedom*. Whereas Armistead provides a lengthy quotation from the autobiography, other details that he attributes to Vassa are inaccurate. Nonetheless, Armistead's account, extracted from Vassa's 1794 edition (probably the New York version), only refers to Gustavus Vassa and does not mention the name Olaudah Equiano.⁸ Similarly, in Canada West, the *Voice of the Fugitive* published an extract on 18 June 1851 from 'the narrative of Gustavus Vassa, who was stolen from his native land when a boy and made a slave: but who afterwards became enlightened and wrote a

history of his life, which was published in England'. Again, there is no mention of a birth name in this account.

The debate over what to call this renown author dates to the re-emergence of interest in Vassa's autobiography in the 1960s. A brief excerpt appeared in Thomas Hodgkin's important collection of documents published in *Nigerian Perspectives* in 1960, and subsequently through an abridged version of the text published by Paul Edwards in 1966 and the African portions of the autobiography with annotations by G.I. Jones in Philip D. Curtin's *Africa Remembered* in 1967.⁹ Increasing interest in the autobiography led to the publication of other excerpts and versions, especially after Henry Louis Gates, Jr. drew attention to the main tropes underlying the early literature of African American and by extension African British writing, including Vassa's autobiography.¹⁰ By the late 1980s, his African name had clearly taken hold as the designation of Vassa's identity. Since then numerous books and more than 500 articles have been published that deal directly with the autobiography and the man.¹¹ Countless references to the text and its significance almost always refer to the man as Olaudah Equiano, not Gustavus Vassa.¹² This is curious because the extensive documentation that has survived establishes that Vassa only used the name Olaudah Equiano a few times, notably on the title page of his autobiography, and never without additionally identifying himself as Gustavus Vassa.¹³

Captain Michael Pascal, a merchant in the tobacco trade, named his newly purchased slave boy Gustavus Vassa after leaving Virginia in 1754.¹⁴ At this time, the name resonated among critics of the monarchy and specifically the rule of Prime Minister Robert Walpole, who had banned the performance of plays at the lively London theaters and specifically had outlawed Henry Brooke's play, *Gustavus Vasa, the Deliverer of His Country*. This portrayed King Gustavus Vassa of Sweden as a champion of political freedom for resisting Danish control of the nation and leading his people out of tyranny in the establishment of an independent Swedish state. Although banned by Walpole, the script of the play circulated privately, and reference to King Vassa became recognized as a critique of the current government in Britain. As a boy, Vassa could not have known the political significance of the name and it is unlikely he would have been in a position to refuse to be called 'Vassa', despite what he claimed in his autobiography.

There have been various interpretations of a further issue with Vassa's African name. This is perhaps not surprising, given the complex patterns in Igbo naming practices.¹⁵ Vassa said he was named Olaudah 'which in our language, signifies vicissitude or good fortune also, one favoured, and having a loud voice, and well spoken'. Although O.S. Ogude has argued that 'his first name ... is not immediately recognizably Ibo', it is not usually challenged as being Igbo.¹⁶ Afigbo thought that 'it is impossible to think of any reading of Olaudah which would give it such meaning as 'vicissitude or good fortune' and 'one favoured by God', although Afigbo does not doubt the Igbo identity.

Moreover, Vassa claimed the name meant ‘loud voiced’, which Afigbo suggests could be rendered along the lines of ‘Olu-uda (contracted, Oluda) or Olu-ude (contracted Olude) and not Ola-udah which would mean literally ‘the resonant ring’ or probably more figuratively Ogene (gong)’.¹⁷ This point requires caution since Vassa’s phonetic spelling in 1789 may well be close enough to ‘Olaudah’ to render Olu-uda, Oluda, Olu-ude, or Olude. Ultimately, Innocent Onyema’s interpretation accords most closely with the name Vassa claimed, derived from *olu* (voice) and *udah* (loud).¹⁸

Vassa is usually attributed with a surname, Equiano, a term that he does not explain. Most likely, Ogude is incorrect in his claim that this adopted surname could be an anglicized version of an Igbo name.¹⁹ Edwards thought that it might be *ekwuano*, meaning ‘when they speak others listen’. He also was told *ekweano* meant ‘if they wish I shall stay’.²⁰ Jones suggested that Equiano really was Ekwuno, while Achebe thought it was likely Ekweano, and Afigbo posited Ekwoanya.²¹ Often in the Igbo context, either at birth or shortly thereafter, a variety of names are assigned to a baby, depending upon local ideas of the supernatural, of nature, behavior, and numerous other factors, although any ideas resembling ‘Equiano’ have not been identified. There is a considerable literature on Igbo names, including many found in Cuba, which contains probably the most detailed list of Igbo names in the diaspora. Furthermore, Sigismund Koelle interviewed many people who spoke Igbo in Sierra Leone in the late 1840s and early 1850s.²² The electronically-available ‘Registers of Liberated Africans’ additionally includes a list of approximately 30,000 names that almost certainly refer to Igbo, and within them several names that might suggest a similarity with ‘Equiano’ but probably have no association.²³ A search of these sources reveals both the complexity of Igbo names but also the absence of any name that seems like Vassa’s supposed birth name. Other extensive lists of Igbo names reveal no new information.²⁴ The lacunae call into question methodological techniques that rely on names as an indication of origins. Crowd sourcing as a technique has so far not revealed any name that resembles the most prominent Igbo-speaking person before the twentieth century. Nor has this possible derivation of Vassa’s Igbo name been discussed in the literature that attempts to use names to decipher origins.²⁵

Disputes over Vassa’s Place of Birth

The first challenge to Vassa’s claim to an African birth came from spurious charges in two London newspapers in 1792, cast in the usual satirical fashion that readers at the time were used to as a form of amusement. *The Oracle* and *The Star* both charged that, rather than being born in Africa, Vassa was born into slavery on St. Croix, a Danish colony in the Caribbean. The newspapers assumed their London readers would have interpreted their claim as a ‘humorous’ attack upon Vassa, a widely respected person whose autobiography

was in the vanguard in the fight against slavery. Rather than being a hero like his namesake, King Gustavus Vassa of Sweden, a man who freed his people from the tyrannical rule akin to slavery of the Danes, the newspapers sold the idea that Vassa was, far from being a king, merely a slave of Denmark in the Americas with the Swedish King's name.²⁶ The two newspapers published this scathing insult *after* Denmark passed a law on 16 March 1792 to abolish the slave trade from 1803, while the British Parliament was about to convene in a renewed, but yet again ultimately unsuccessful attempt to do the same.²⁷ Moreover, publication occurred shortly after the tragic assassination of King Gustavus Vassa III, killed at a masked ball in Copenhagen while the other Gustavus Vassa enjoyed his honeymoon in Scotland. Readers of *The Oracle* and *The Star* would have been attuned to the news from Sweden and the newspapers' efforts to vilify both Vassa and the wider movement to abolish the slave trade. Consequently, it is no wonder that the publications infuriated Vassa as revealed in his letter to Thomas Hardy, leader of the radical 'London Corresponding Society', and later charged with treason in May 1794 for plots against King and Parliament.²⁸ Scholars have recognized the spuriousness of the newspapers' fake charges, though they have not necessarily connected together Danish abolition on 16 March 1792 (full text published in *The Times* of London 21 April), the Swedish King's assassination at a masked ball at the Royal Opera House in Stockholm (16 March), Vassa's Scottish honeymoon (Vassa and his bride, married 7 April, reached Scotland on 10 April), London's radical politics, and renewed Parliamentary debate over abolition (motion introduced 22 April) to the fake charges of the London newspapers (first in the *Oracle* on 25 April and then the *Star*, 27 April).²⁹

The confusion over this historic figure's name extends to a determination of where Vassa was born. Was he born in Africa, as Vassa himself claimed, or in South Carolina, as indicated on a baptismal register in St. Margaret's Church, Westminster in 1759, and might be deduced from the muster rolls of the Arctic Expedition of 1773? In the case of the latter, the name entered in the muster was written as Gustavus Weston and may not refer to Vassa at all. Vassa participated in the Arctic expedition as an assistant to Dr. Charles Irving, the lead scientist on an official exploratory venture, and not as a member of the crew. Because of his position, Vassa may not have been listed in the muster roll.³⁰ The skepticism over this identification undermines Carretta's interpretation in particular. Describing Vassa as a 'self-made man' who implicitly shaped his autobiography to sell books and make money, Carretta refused to make a decision about where Vassa was born, leaving the answer to this question unsolved.³¹ Obviously, though, a person cannot be born in two places, let alone an ocean apart. Furthermore, the determination of Vassa's natal home is essential because either he endured the Middle Passage – and hence voiced the terror and suffering of the Atlantic crossing – or Vassa consciously lied to promote a political agenda, however noble his

cause and to further enhance his status as ‘a self-made’ African intellectual and entrepreneur in London. Vassa’s investment, around 1791, in the Plaisterer’s Guild Hall in the City of London almost certainly explains his relative wealth far more than the sale of his autobiography. Any confusion between affluence and authenticity should not impede historical reconstruction.

What Vassa said is clear. He said that he came from a place called ‘Essaka’ which he remembered as being in ‘the most remote and fertile’ province of the Benin Kingdom but at a ‘very considerable’ distance. In fact, this projection had to have been based on what Vassa later read rather than being based on his personal experience or knowledge. Vassa readily admitted that he had heard that there was a connection with Benin, but he had no direct knowledge of the place and he ultimately assumed a relationship on what he subsequently learned. Hence, the reference to Benin should not be given much credence. Too much other detail in the autobiography points to an origin east of the lower Niger River, not to the west and the location of Benin.

As O.S. Ogude has perceptively observed, *The Interesting Narrative* is ‘presented in a popular eighteenth-century literary form: the voyage’. In Ogude’s analysis, much of Vassa’s description of his youth should be considered fictional to conform to the genre.

Equiano’s considerable narrative power ... successfully blended these divergent sources into one imaginative reconstruction of what his African society might have been in the middle of the eighteenth century. There is evidence to show that Equiano was conversant with a wide range of travel literature and that he drew heavily on these often lopsided views of Africa.³²

A more generous interpretation is that Vassa attempted to provide context for what he remembered of his boyhood through reference to what he was able to read about Africa and what he had heard from people with whom he came in contact. To label Vassa’s words as ‘fiction’ suggests a conscious license to embellish the past and even make things up, although there is no obvious intent to fabricate in Vassa’s autobiography, even if he intentionally published his account to coincide with Parliamentary hearings. As extensive existing analysis makes clear, no one in 1789 suggested Vassa fabricated his background, and there is no scholarship that has verified any apparent ‘second hand’ or amanuensis assisting him with the text. Indeed, Vassa himself admitted some of his difficulties with his memory, a point which should qualify Ogude’s insights.

Moreover, there are details in Vassa’s autobiography relating to his youth that could not have been based either on fictional imagination or have been plagiarized from other sources. Vassa may well have remembered the menstrual hut where he stayed with his mother when he was very young. He considered snakes as omens relating to a belief in a personal *chi* underlying Igbo cosmology. Vassa’s claim to have come from ‘Essaka’ could not have been drawn from any contemporary published source, since no such reference exists, and

therefore Vassa either invented the name or made reference to a real place. Moreover, these details would not have been widely known in Igboland, and hence the likelihood that he learned about 'Essaka' from other Igbo speaking people is extremely low. The various clans that dominated Igboland each had their own traditions, variations on cultural practices, and secrets that were important in differentiating the social and political context of Igbo society. Vassa's claims are unlikely to have been fabricated, despite Ogude's warning, because many details correspond with what is known about Usaka's customs and locational politics since the advent of British rule.

Identifying Vassa's 'Essaka' has been challenging. Despite the existence of two documents that might suggest otherwise, Vassa does not appear to have been born in South Carolina. In the birth register for St. Margaret's Church, Carolina is listed as Vassa's birthplace, but there is no reason to assume that he himself claimed that. Vassa's Godparents entered his name, age, and place of birth, and it is not clear that Vassa even knew what had been entered, let alone confirmed what was registered. If Vassa was born in South Carolina, then he would have had to have made up everything he wrote about his childhood. Nor has any author accepting of the South Carolina origin claim attempted to interpret or challenge the details Vassa provided or explain how he later travelled from South Carolina to Virginia.³³ It is unlikely that a healthy, young enslaved man raised in South Carolina would have been sold to a tobacco planter in Virginia. Such men were more likely to purchase young people recently brought from Africa than a 'prime' slave from South Carolina, because a booming economy in the area depended upon an expanding labor supply.³⁴ Moreover, how Vassa obtained his name, if born in South Carolina, also remains unexplained.

Because Jones focused on Vassa's childhood years, his use of the name Olaudah is understandable and accurate.³⁵ Jones also postulated that Vassa was born in the Igbo region to the west of the lower Niger River, but this has long since been questioned. Significantly, no place that sounds like 'Essaka' exists west of the Niger, and hence Vassa's reference to Benin presumably comes largely from his reading of Anthony Benezet's account of Africa, among other possible sources.³⁶ However, Benezet had never been to Africa himself, instead drawing upon contemporary published accounts for his geographical reconstruction tracing the coastal regions of western Africa which inexplicably skips over any description of the interior of the Bight of Biafra. Essentially, Vassa attempted to fill Benezet's gap with his own recollections and reconstruction.³⁷

The Identification of 'Essaka'

Unfortunately, Carretta does not address the possible location of 'Essaka' in his work, although he did speculate on the ship in which the young boy left West

Africa. Caretta's subsequent argument raised questions about the authenticity of Vassa's writings and speeches about West Africa, assuming he had been born in South Carolina.³⁸ Jones failed to find a place west of the Niger that might be identified with 'Essaka', but there have been other attempts to locate Vassa's birthplace. The first is Isseke in Ihiala Local Government Council in the present Anambra State, initially suggested by Chinua Achebe.³⁹ Catherine Acholonu pursued Achebe's lead, although her argument that 'Essaka' is to be identified with Isseke has been subjected to extensive criticism of methodology that undermines her interpretation.⁴⁰ Acholonu asserted that Isseke, within the Nri cultural ambit, 40 km south of Onitsha, held the 'embrenche' status that Vassa mentioned, arguing that the term would seem to be analogous to *mgbrichi*, from *ichi hachure*, an *ozo* title for spiritual royalty. It has also been proposed that 'Essaka' might have referred to Nsukka or Isseke in Anambra State, Ashaka in Bendel State, Asaga in Ohofia, or Isaka in Okrika Local Government Area of Rivers State. Afigbo even suggested that Vassa's home was in northern Igbo country.⁴¹ However, the most likely location of 'Essaka' is Usaka in Abia State, whose location was close to the historic market center at Bende and the centre of the slave trade at Arochukwu.⁴² Unlike the other locations, Usaka is in a valley that appears to be the 'charming fruitful vale' that Vassa identified as the location of 'Essaka'.⁴³ Other details, such as the reference to strips of cotton cloth that married women wore around their waist, appear to confirm the identification initially asserted by Onyema in 1991.⁴⁴ Although there is little historical evidence to suggest that the names of places are the same now as in the middle of the eighteenth century, existing evidence strongly suggests that the names in Vassa's day and today were the same. Furthermore, the meaning of the name Vassa used in his African name, Equiano, can be identified with four clans who occupied the area where Usaka is located for generations as first documented in a British colonial map from 1910.⁴⁵ While it is, of course, possible that names have changed, it seems highly unlikely in this case, with probable continuity from at least the middle of the eighteenth century. This association of clans, migration, occupation of land, and strong kinship links conforms with Vassa's description of his home. Hence, there are sufficient similarities between what is known today and what Vassa describes to support the association of 'Essaka' with Usaka.

If Vassa's 'Essaka' is Usaka, as Onyema additionally argues, then various details within Vassa's autobiography have hidden meanings demonstrating that what Vassa reported corresponds to attributes that (in combination) are specific to Usaka and hence not fictitious. First, and most importantly, Usaka was part of an area inhabited by four clans known as Ikwuano, which is now a Local Government Area.⁴⁶ Vassa's unexplained second name, Equiano, is most likely a reference to Ikwuano. The first part of the term, *ikwu*, indicates the close interaction of the clans that comprise the confederation, while *ano*

(four) refers to the clans descended from four brothers named Oboro, Ibere, Ariam-Usaka, and Oloko. Ikwuano elder, Ben Emele, confirmed Onyema's reconstruction, noting that Ikwuano refers to *ikwu* (brethren) and *ano* (four) 'who have been united'.⁴⁷ Ironically, G.I. Jones, who was then District Officer in the colonial regime, conducted a long report on the reorganization of Bende Division in 1940 without reference to Usaka or Ikwuano but noted the other three clans, Oboro, Ibere, and Oloko.⁴⁸ Despite his colonial position and his training as an anthropologist, Jones clearly did not learn any details about the Ikwuano clans when he wrote his lengthy report because it is likely he would have mentioned this in his 1967 annotation of Vassa's boyhood years. Instead, he postulated that Vassa came from west of the Niger.

As reported in the 2006 census, Ikwuano comprises an area of 281 km² with a population of 137,993 in 59 villages and communities, bounded by Ini Local Government Area Council of Akwa Ibom State in the south and Umuahia to the north. Now Ikwuano is known as the 'breadbasket' of Abia State because of its agricultural production which appears to have characterized the area when Vassa was a child. Although palm oil, palm kernels, and yams are its main outputs, the area was the center of cocoa production in the late nineteenth century. Its fertile land straddles the Inyang River, a tributary of the Kwa Ibo River which flows through Akwa Ibom to the sea. Historically, women of Ikwuano, specifically of the Okoko clan, organized the initial resistance against British imposition of taxation on women that subsequently resulted in what is known as the Aba women's uprising of 1929.⁴⁹

According to tradition, the term Ikwuano as a reference to the four clans has existed since the legendary four brothers settled in the area. The four clans lived in harmony, sharing markets, intermarrying, and respecting each other's autonomy. Vassa's enslavement indicates that there was nefarious activity underway that fed the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Already the dominant slave traders to the coast, the Aro allied with the Abam clan north of Bende in terms of protection in trade and enforcement in settling debts. At some point, Ikwuano worked out an arrangement with the Aro that restricted the deprivations of Abam warriors, probably in return for recognition of the shrine at Arochukwu that emerged as a principal arbitrator of disputes and providing protection for the commercial diaspora of the Aro.⁵⁰ It is possible that Vassa's references to his enslavement relate to the Abam and the Aro. This speculation is consistent with the context and location of Vassa's 'Essaka'.

The identification of Vassa's 'Essaka' as Usaka and 'Equiano' as Ikwuano confronts prior pessimism that has crept into the mystery of Vassa's origins. Brycchan Carey, at least, has even claimed that 'the bottom line is that we just don't know' where Vassa was born. In consideration of whether Vassa was born in North America or in Africa, he concluded: 'there is evidence on both sides of the debate. Just about the only thing we can say for certain is that, when he was younger, Equiano told people he was from Carolina, but

when he was older, he told people he was from Africa.⁵¹ Because of the prevalence of this uncertainty, it is necessary to review evidence suggesting that Vassa recounted accurate details of the hinterland of the Bight of Biafra, especially since there is no evidence that Vassa ever claimed he was from Carolina, or that there was any semblance of a cultural setting to verify details of what Vassa says he remembered.

Vassa clearly wrote that he spent a relatively short time in Barbados after leaving Africa in 1753. He was known as 'Michael' before being sent directly to Virginia. There, on a tobacco plantation belonging to a Mr. Campbell, he was called 'Jacob'. Captain Pascal bought Vassa while procuring tobacco at Campbell's plantation. He thought that Vassa, who was fanning his master on a hot summer evening, would be a perfect gift for his cousins in London. Campbell sold Vassa to Pascal, perhaps because he owed him money. Pascal then re-named his chattel as 'Gustavus Vassa', the name Vassa continued to use after he secured his freedom in 1766 and until his death in 1797. It is the name that appears on the tombs of his wife and children as well as his own death registry in Whitefield Tabernacle, now the American Church, on Tottenham Court Road in London. His will also clearly refers to Gustavus Vassa with no mention of Olaudah Equiano.⁵²

As previously noted, at Vassa's baptism, his godparents, not Vassa himself, registered his birthplace as being South Carolina. Indeed, the entry raises questions, as Carretta has observed.⁵³ There are two issues. First, there is no indication that Vassa understood what his godparents entered or that he approved of that they wrote. Both godparents were Captain Pascal's cousins. Why they entered South Carolina as Vassa's place of birth remains unknown. They also knew that Pascal imported tobacco to London from Virginia, not South Carolina, as the latter was not a source of tobacco. Vassa's godfather, Maynard Guerin, handled Pascal's accounts during the Seven Years' War, and presumably earlier, and certainly would have been aware that Pascal had come from Virginia with Vassa.⁵⁴ Rather than being born in South Carolina, Vassa only went there as an adult when working for Robert King of Montserrat.

In contrast to Carey's claim that historians 'don't know' Vassa's birthplace, it is argued here that Vassa was born simply where he said he was born in 'Essaka'/Usaka. This identification is confirmed through Vassa's association with the area of four clans where Usaka is located, which is known as Ikwuano, or as Vassa rendered the name, Equiano. Moreover, such an identification additionally reveals answers to two previously unrecognized dimensions of the controversy over Vassa's identity – first, the controversy over his birthplace and, second, the meaning of his Igbo name which meant 'loud voice', emphasizing Vassa's assertiveness. While Ikwuano was not a surname, it provided his association with the four clans. There is no room for any claim that Vassa was born in South Carolina, a false conclusion based on inadequate and flawed historical analysis.

A reconsideration of the supposedly fictional aspects in Vassa's *Interesting Narrative* account for some details that could not have been borrowed from contemporary observations or even from other parts of the area where the Igbo language was spoken. Features of Ikwano culture confirm Vassa's description of it, assuming that there has been continuity from the middle of the eighteenth century to what is remembered today. According to Elder Ben Emele:

Ichi facial markings were common in Ikwano and Usaka in the past. Their origin can be traced to our ancestors' belief in a mermaid spirit, which had great power to cause the death of people. The spirit knew whom it was going to destroy almost at birth and would come for him/her when it deemed fit. Since our people did not know who was to be taken by the spirit of destruction, they did *ichi* scarification as a way of disfiguring or deforming the person so as to make him/her undesirable by the spirit which would usually want the best and spotless (mark-less) humans. In those days, our people did not know what we know today, and every sudden death was attributed to a spirit, and they did all sorts of things to preserve life. Facial markings were the most widely used technique of preserving life.⁵⁵

Such individuals usually had the small finger on their left hand cut off, although Vassa does not mention this. Moreover, Vassa's account suggests that *ichi* was intended for those who had seniority and influence without reference to any attempt at avoidance of ill fortune. Instead, Vassa emphasized good fortune without explaining its opposite. Other customs also persist, such as both male and female circumcision, a custom Vassa mentions several times. In an era when circumcision was considered a barbaric practice in England, Vassa's references would have been met with disapproval, potentially undermining his attempt to sell books.⁵⁶ Similarly, Vassa notes how some snakes were revered, correlating well with customs that have persisted since Vassa's youth, at least with respect to pythons.⁵⁷ According to his memory:

We have serpents of different kinds, some of which are esteemed ominous when they appear in our houses, and these we never molest. I remember two of those ominous snakes, each of which was as thick as the calf of a man's leg, and in colour resembling a dolphin in the water, crept at different times into my mother's night-house, where I always lay with her, and coiled themselves into folds, and each time they crowed like a cock. I was desired by some of our wise men to touch these, that I might be interested in the good omens, which I did, for they were quite harmless, and would tamely suffer themselves to be handled; and then they were put into a large open earthen pan, and set on one side of the highway. Some of our snakes, however, were poisonous: one of them crossed the road one day when I was standing on it, and passed between my feet, without offering to touch me, to the great surprise of many who saw it; and these incidents were accounted by the wise men, and likewise by my mother and the rest of the people, as remarkable omens in my favour.⁵⁸

Vassa's rendition of his youth may have some elements of fiction, but if this is the case, he effectively reinforced the idea of his own special fortune and

hence his destiny. Other details are also pertinent, such as Vassa's reference to an 'odoriferous' substance, 'a kind of earth; a small portion of which thrown into the fire diffuses a most powerful odour'.⁵⁹ This refers to *nzu*, which was – and is still – produced in Usaka for local consumption and traded more widely because it is found only in scattered locations.⁶⁰

Interpretation of Vassa's Birth Name

Names contain powerful clues to identity, if analyzed in context, and it is important to consider if Vassa's name was established after birth, imposed under conditions of slavery, or else asserted upon gaining freedom.⁶¹ Overly simplistic attempts to link names with 'origins' without due consideration of context reveal serious methodological problems. Vassa's experience is a case in point. It is possible to demonstrate meaning in Vassa's birthname and his chosen name adopted after gaining his freedom in 1766. His first name, Olaudah, described his character. As a baby, he perhaps cried loudly. Such descriptive naming was common in Igbo naming practices and Vassa certainly appears to suggest as much: 'Our children were named from some event, some circumstance, or fancied foreboding at the time of their birth'. I was named Olaudah, which, in our language, signifies vicissitude, or fortunate also; one favoured, and having a loud voice and well spoken.⁶² Many names, though not Vassa's, contained the word '*chi*', representing a god/deity with which each person was uniquely born. The underlying conviction was destiny. Vassa had no doubts about his mission as he expressed: 'I regard myself as a *particular favourite of Heaven*, and acknowledge the mercies of Providence in every occurrence of my life'.⁶³ Names can reveal a great deal which is clear in the case of Vassa's African name. He was conscious of the significance of his name. Its complexity demonstrates the power of names and qualifies comparatively superficial efforts to determine origins by supposed identifications of names with broad regions that fuse cultural backgrounds. The complications involved in figuring out the significance of Vassa's name(s) demonstrates that very little can be gleaned from names alone, even with some qualifications such as indications of religious affiliation or days of the week.⁶⁴ Efforts to use names to determine origins should further reflect on panegyrics such as those informing Vassa's identity as Olaudah Equiano – an actual name that does not appear in the many long lists of names that are identified as Igbo.⁶⁵ Vassa was a real person who came from a very specific place, revealed in the name he claimed as his birth name.

Vassa's second name, Equiano, like a surname, provides identification with the four clans that comprised Ikwuano. His reference to dancing, occupations, and other details could have easily been taken from what he read or heard but could also have been based on what he knew. Furthermore, the specific reference to Ikwuano/Equiano could not have been improvised. Likewise, Vassa's

description of *ichi* scarification and his father's position as a senator do not seem to derive from any contemporary written sources.⁶⁶ Rather than being borrowed from a published account, for which there existed none at the time, these details suggest that Vassa identified with the broader confederation of clans and not specifically with Usaka, despite it being at the center of one of the clans. This is far more likely explanation than Acholonu's equation of Equiano with 'Ekwealuo', which she translates as 'when-we-mutually-agree-we-go-to-war'.⁶⁷

Moreover, Vassa's identification with a confederation of clans named Ikwuano may explain why he did not discuss the meaning of the term in his autobiography. Perhaps he was simply too young when he was enslaved to understand that both the *ichi* scarification that he was destined to receive, and the severance of the little finger on his left hand, related to the social structure and governance of the four clans of Ikwuano. For all this usage, he chose to call himself Gustavus Vassa and avoided using his Igbo name, with which he appears to have been uncomfortable. Vassa may not have clearly understood that Usaka was one of the four Ikwuano clans, although his birth name seems to indicate that he was Olaudah/Oluudah from Equiano/Ikwuano. Perhaps he chose to be called Vassa because of the Igbo concept of *chi*, with which individuals personally identified. Vassa asserted that he was a 'predestinarian' which accounts for his association with the Huntingdonian Methodist Connexion, a branch of the evangelical revival promoted by Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon, and his fascination with the Calvinist Methodism of George Whitefield (1714–1770).⁶⁸ Predestination and providence parallel the concept of '*chi*' in one of its meanings. Indeed, he attended the Whitefield Tabernacle around the corner from where he wrote *The Interesting Narrative*, and where he was buried in 1797. He believed in fate and that his own experiences and his mission were predetermined. This not only set the course of life but also underlay his character. Vassa has been accused of quoting misguided European observations of societies on the coast that included fanciful projections into the interior where Europeans had never travelled.⁶⁹ He certainly tried to learn about Africa from what he read, but he also knew that he was a 'particular favourite of Heaven,' whose mission was to free his people – Ethiopian, Libyan, Eboe, African – from slavery. The symbolic significance conveyed by the snakes gyrating on their path through his legs as a young boy may have been fictitious or imagined but the significance was prophetic.

Notes

1. On the identity debate, see Paul E. Lovejoy, 'Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa – What's in a Name?' *Atlantic Studies* 9, no. 2 (2012): 165–84. Also see Vincent Carretta, 'Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa? New Light on an Eighteenth-Century Question of Identity', *Slavery and Abolition* 20, no. 3 (1999): 96–105; Carretta, *Equiano, the*

- African: Biography of a Self Made Man* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005); Lovejoy, 'Autobiography and Memory: Gustavus Vassa, Alias Olaudah Equiano, the African', *Slavery and Abolition* 27, no. 3 (2006): 317–47; and debate in *Historically Speaking* 7, no. 3 (2006), 'Olaudah Equiano, The South Carolinian? A Forum', including Carretta, 'Does Equiano Still Matter?'; Lovejoy, 'Construction of Identity: Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa?'; Trevor Burnard, 'Goodbye, Equiano, the African'; Jon Sensbach, 'Beyond Equiano'; and Carretta, 'Response to Lovejoy, Burnard, and Sensbach'. The controversy was further discussed in Cathy N. Davidson, 'Olaudah Equiano, Written by Himself, *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 40, no. 1–2 (2006–2007): 18–51; Carretta, 'Response to Paul Lovejoy's 'Autobiography and Memory: Gustavus Vassa, Alias Olaudah Equiano, the African'', *Slavery and Abolition* 28, no. 1 (2007): 115–19; Lovejoy, 'Issues of Motivation – Vassa/Equiano and Carretta's Critique of the Evidence', *Slavery and Abolition* 28, no. 1 (2007): 121–25; and Brychan Carey, 'Olaudah Equiano: African or American?', *1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries In the Early Modern Era* 17 (2008): 229–46. The issue is discussed in Chima J. Korieh, 'Introduction: Mapping the Igbo-Atlantic Connection', in *Olaudah Equiano and the Igbo World: History, Society and Atlantic Diaspora Connections*, ed. Korieh (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2009), 1–20; Douglas Chambers, "'Almost an Englishman": Carretta's Equiano', *H-Net Reviews in the Humanities and Social Sciences* (2007), pp.6, online at <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13855>. Also see Brychan Carey's website, <https://www.brychancarey.com/equiano/index.htm> (accessed May 14, 2024), in the section, 'Where Was Equiano Born? (And Why Does It Matter?)', but compare with Lovejoy's *Equiano's World: Gustavus Vassa and the Abolition of the British Slave Trade*, www.equianosworld.org (accessed May 14, 2024). Interestingly, John Bugg raises important questions that challenge a South Carolina birth but continues to use Vassa's alleged birthname without explanation; see 'The Other Interesting Narrative; Olaudah Equiano's Public Book Tour', *PMLA* 121, no. 5 (2006): 1424–42.
2. The Baptismal record and the Arctic Expedition register are reproduced on www.equianosworld.org (accessed September 9, 2024). Also see Carretta, *Equiano, the African*, xiv.
 3. I wish to thank Elder Ben Emele, who clarified this identification in an interview with David Imbua, 27 June 2024. According to Emele's testimony, 'The four clans see themselves as brothers, and as such they maintain a cordial relationship among themselves. In fact, there has been no case of a communal clash among them. They interact in various ways including, but not limited to marriage, trade, festivals, etc.'
 4. Trevor Burnard's initial reaction to the possibility that Vassa was born in South Carolina was to bid 'Goodbye, Equiano, the African'. Despite the dubious claim to a South Carolina birth, Burnard was led 'to question whether Vassa is a reliable witness in other areas and which, by casting doubt upon his truthfulness, should also lead us to be more suspicious of his character and less effusive about his "genius";' *Historically Speaking* 7, no. 3 (2006). Compare the testimony of Thomas Digges in a letter written on 25 December 1791 referring to Vassa's integrity, alluding to his 'irreproachable character' and 'a principal instrument in bringing about the motion for the repeal of the Slave-Act'; as cited in Vincent Carretta, 'A New Letter by Gustavus Vassa/Olaudah Equiano?' *Early American Literature* 39, no. 2 (2004): 358–59.
 5. Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand*, 147.
 6. Eric D. Lamore, *Abigail Field Mott's The Life and Adventures of Olaudah Equiano: A Scholarly Edition* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2023). The quotation is from p. xviii.

7. The reprint was published two volumes in one as *The Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African, written by himself* by Isaac Knapp in 1837, the header throughout the edition being ‘The Life of Gustavus Vassa’.
8. Leeds Anti-Slavery Series. No. 70, ‘Intellect and Capabilities of the Negro Race’, *Five Hundred Thousand Strokes for Freedom. A Series of Anti-Slavery Tracts* (London, 1853).
9. Thomas Hodgkin, *Nigerian Perspectives: An Historical Anthology* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 155–66. For a discussion of ‘re-emergence’ of Vassa’s autobiography, see A.E. Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand (Studies in Igbo History and Culture)* (Ibadan: University Press Ltd., 1981), 145–46.
10. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed., *The Classic Slave Narratives: The Life of Olaudah Equiano* (New York: Penguin/Mentor Books, 1987); and Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). Gates traced the origins of African American literature to a legacy of signification that begins with the metaphorical use of the ‘Talking Book’ as designating the modes and consequences of sight as well as referring to the literal practice of looking.
11. See www.equianosworld.org for a bibliography.
12. See, for example, Angelo Costanzo, *Surprising Narrative: Olaudah Equiano and the Beginnings of Black Autobiography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1987); James Walvin, *An African’s Life: The Life and Times of Olaudah Equiano, 1745–1797* (London: Cassell, 1998); and the website of the Equiano Society, <https://equiano.uk/> (accessed May 30, 2024). For a bibliography that focuses on Vassa, see www.equianosworld.org (accessed May 14, 2024). There are many more passing references in the literature, which demonstrates the considerable interest in the man, his autobiography and his time.
13. Karlee Anne Sapoznik assembled virtually all letters, newspaper accounts and other documents in *The Letters and Other Writings of Gustavus Vassa (Olaudah Equiano, the African): Documenting Abolition of the Slave Trade* (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2013).
14. Carretta, *Equiano, the African*, 41–43.
15. David Eltis et al., ‘The Origins and Destinations of Captives from the Bight of Biafra, 1807–1843: New Evidence from the Identification of African Names and Languages’, *Slavery and Abolition* (2024). Among the many problems with this analysis, the map is particularly misleading and unexplained. While many individuals were enslaved for political reasons, the map and the ethnic designations contain no reference to political boundaries, even though these are reasonably well known.
16. Ogude, ‘Facts into Fiction’, 31.
17. Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand*, 153.
18. Innocent Onyema, *Hail Usaka: Olaudah Equiano’s Igbo Village* (Owerri, Nigeria: Ihem Davis Press, 1991), 19. Onyema relied on field work for another project that led to interviews that he conducted about Vassa, especially with Chief D.E. Elogu, the Ezeoha 1 of Ariam Usaka. I have confirmed details through interviews with Elder Ben Awale from Usaka, most recently on 27 August 2024. Elder Ben Awale is the son of Chief Oleka Emele, who died on 1 December 1976 allegedly at the age of 105 years. I wish to thank David Imbua for his assistance in arranging interviews with Elder Awale.
19. Ogude, ‘Facts into Fiction’, 31.
20. See Edwards, ‘Introduction’, *Equiano’s Travels*, xi.
21. Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand*, 154; Jones, ‘Olaudah Equiano of the Niger Ibo’, 61; and Chinua Achebe, ‘Handicaps of Writing in a Second Language’, *Spear Magazine* (Nigeria), August 1964.

22. See Jesús Guanche, *Africanía y etnicidad en Cuba* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 2011); and Sigismund Wilhelm Koelle, *Polyglotta Africana, or a Comparative Vocabulary of Nearly Three Hundred Words and Phrases, in more than one Hundred Distinct African Languages* (London: Church Missionary House, 1854).
23. I wish to thank Henry B. Lovejoy, whose analysis of Igbo names in the registers of Liberated Africans, along with other African names, is to be compared with the names recorded in *Voyages*. Among the Liberated Africans from the Bight of Biafra whose names bear some resemblance to Olaudah Equiano are No. 6086, Equasano, a male, in 1814, No. 16452, a person named Equa on the Candelaria, No. 17706, another person with a similar name, Equah, from Douala, and finally, No. 16363, Equa, a male said to be a Yakö speaker, who embarked from Bonny in 1821. www.liberatedafricans.org (accessed May 14, 2024).
24. H. A. Wieschhoff, 'The Social Significance of Names among the Ibo of Nigeria', *American Anthropologist* 43 (1941): 212–22; P. E. H. Hair, 'Black African Slaves at Valencia, 1482–1516', *History in Africa* 7 (1980): 119–39; Ihechukwu Madubuike, *Structure and Meaning in Igbo Names* (Buffalo: Council on International Studies, State University of New York at Buffalo, 1974); Ebo Ubahkwe, *Igbo Names: Their Structure and Meaning* (London: Daystar Press, 1981); Ubahakwe, 'Culture Content of Igbo Personal Names', in *Igbo Language and Culture*, Vol. 2, ed. F.C. Ogbalu and E.N. Emenanjo (Ibadan: University Press, 1982), 27–39; Chukwuma Azuonye, 'Igbo Names in the Nominal Roll of Amelié, An Early 19th Century Slave Ship from Martinique: Reconstructions, Interpretations and Inferences', *Africana Studies Faculty Publication Series* 8 (1990), https://scholarworks.umb.edu/africana_faculty_pubs/8?utm_source=scholarworks.umb.edu%2Faficana_faculty_pubs%2F8&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages (accessed May 14, 2024); Madubuike, *A Handbook of African Names* (2d rev. ed.: Colorado Springs: Three Continents Press, 1994); Also see African Names Database, www.slavevoyages.org/tast/resources/slave.faces (accessed May 14, 2024). Similarly, the listings in Douglas Chambers, ed., *Enslaved Igbo and Ibibio in America: Runaway Slaves and Historical Descriptions* (Enugu: Jemezie Associates, 2013) and Chambers, 'African Runaway Slaves in the Anglo-American Atlantic World' (unpublished ms., 2016) contain no clues to the name Olaudah Equiano.
25. Richard Anderson et al., 'Using African Names to Identify the Origins of Captives in the Transatlantic Slave Trade: Crowd-Sourcing and the Registers of Liberated Africans, 1808–1862', *History in Africa* 40, no. 1 (2013): 165–91. Also see SlaveVoyages.org.
26. Known as Gustavus Eriksson before his coronation, King Gustavus I was the son of Erik Johansson, Swedish senator and nationalist, who was killed in the massacre at Stockholm in 1520, under the orders of King Christian II of Denmark. Gustavus was imprisoned but escaped to lead the peasants of Dalarna to victory over the Danes, being elected Protector of Sweden in 1521 and king in 1523, ending the Kalmar Union that King Christian II of Denmark was attempting to enforce. See Michael Roberts, *Gustavus Adolphus: A History of Sweden, 1611–1632* (London: Longmans, Green, 1953), 58.
27. For the Danish decree, see Erik Göbel, 'The Danish Edict of 16th March 1792 to Abolish the Slave Trade', in *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, ed. Jeremy Black, vol. 4 (Aldershot: Routledge, 2006), 1–13.
28. For the letter to Thomas Hardy, see Carretta, *Equiano, the African*, 330.
29. See Göbel, 'The Danish Edict' 252, 259; Ernst Ekman, 'Sweden, the Slave Trade and Slavery 1784–1847,' *Outre-Mers. Revue d'histoire* 62 (1975): 221–31; John Bugg, 'The Other Interesting Narrative: Olaudah Equiano's Public Book Tour', *PMLA* 121, no. 5

- (2006): 1434; Carretta, *Equiano, the African*, 327, 329, 347–48, 350–56; *The Oracle*, 25 April 1792 and *The Star*, 27 April 1792. The assassination of King Gustav III inspired the subsequent opera by Giuseppe Verde, “Un ballo in maschera,” composed in 1859.
30. John Constantine Phipps, *A Voyage towards the North Pole* (London: Bowyer and Nicols, 1774), 27–28, 141–44, 205–221; and A Journal of Proceedings of His Majesty’s Sloop Carcass, on a Voyage of Discovery towards the North Pole, commencing 3^d June 1773 Ending the 13th of September following, ADM 55/12, The National Archives.
 31. Carretta does not refer to Onyema’s discussion of Vassa’s home village, published in 1991, fourteen years before his own *Equiano the African* (2005). Catherine Acholonu also overlooks Onyema’s discovery in her assertion that Isseke is to be identified as Vassa’s ‘Essaka’; see Acholonu, ‘Home of Olaudah’, 5–16; Acholonu, *The Igbo Roots of Olaudah Equiano* (Owerri: AFA Publications, 1989); and ‘Igbo Origins of Olaudah Equiano’, 100. While Gloria Chuku (‘Olaudah Equiano and Igbo Intellectual Tradition’) refers to Onyema’s interpretation, she favors Acholonu’s arguments. Otherwise, Onyema’s work is virtually ignored in the scholarly literature, although verified here.
 32. S.E. Ogude, ‘Facts into Fiction: Equiano’s Narrative Reconsidered’, *Research in African Literatures* 13, no. 1 (1982): 31.
 33. Carretta, *Equiano, the African*, 19, 106, 108–9. Also see, for example, Burnard, ‘Goodbye, Equiano, the African’; Carey, ‘Where Was Equiano Born?’.
 34. I wish to thank Peter Wood for confirming that it would have been unlikely that a healthy young slave in South Carolina would have been sold to Virginia during this period; see *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: Knopf, 1974).
 35. See Edwards, ‘Introduction’, to *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, facsimile edition (London: Dawson of Pall Mall, 1969), lxxiv for his interpretation of the meaning of ‘Olaudah’. Igbo west of the River Niger region generally are known as Anioma; see Don C. Ohadike, *Anioma: A Social History of the Western Igbo People* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1994).
 36. Anthony Benezet, *Some Historical Account of Guinea, Its Situation, Produce, and the General Disposition of Its Inhabitants* (London: W. Owen, 1772). Also see Jonathan D. Sassi, ‘Africans in the Quaker Image: Anthony Benezet, African Travel Narratives, and Revolutionary-Era Anti-Slavery’, in *Bringing the World to Early Modern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 95–130.
 37. Jones’ interpretation is further undermined because of the absence of *ichi* scarification practices in the Anioma Igbo communities west of the Niger. For the absence of *ichi* marks in Anioma, ca.1911-1914, see the Northcote W. Thomas photographic archive on Paul Basu, [Re:] Entanglements: Nigeria / Sierra Leone / Re-engaging with Colonial Archives in Decolonial Times [2024], online at <https://re-entanglements.net/>. Photo archive: Photography, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/reentanglements/albums/>. For context, see Paul Basu, ‘N. W. Thomas and Colonial Anthropology in British West Africa: Reappraising a Cautionary Tale’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (N.S.) 22 (2015): 84–107. I wish to thank Douglas Chambers for this confirmation.
 38. Carretta cites Paul Edwards’ ‘Introduction’. to *The Life of Olaudah Equiano. Or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1969), xviii.
 39. Jones, ‘Olaudah Equiano’, 61–3; Chinua Achebe, ‘Work and Play in Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*,’ in *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays*, ed. Achebe (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 32–33. Achebe’s paper was originally given as the first Equiano Memorial Lecture at the University of Ibadan on 15th July 1977.

40. Catherine Obianju Acholonu, 'The Home of Olaudah Equiano – a Linguistic and Anthropological Search', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 22 (1987): 5–16; Acholonu, *The Igbo Roots of Olaudah Equiano* (Owerri: AFA Publications, 1989); and 'The Igbo Origins of Olaudah Equiano: The Facts and the Fallacies', *MBARI: The International Journal of Igbo Studies* 1, no. 1 (2008): 100. For problems associated with Acholonu's interpretation, see Paul Edwards' review in *Research in African Literatures* 21, no. 2 (1990): 124–8; and Christopher Fyfe's review in *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 23, no. 4 (1990): 744–5. According to O.S. Ogude, Acholonu 'has demonstrated clearly how useful sources of historical material like the oral tradition can be abused bent on "discovering" certain "facts" without much regard for intellectual objectivity'. See Ogede's review, 'The Igbo Roots of Olaudah Equiano', *Africa* 61, no. 1 (1991): 140.
41. Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand*, 154.
42. According to Gloria Chuku, 'Olaudah Equiano and the Foundation of Igbo Intellectual Tradition', in *The Igbo Intellectual Tradition; Creative Conflict in African and African Diasporic Thought*, ed. Chuku (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 60, fn 21. Ogude made this suggestion at an international conference on Olaudah Equiano in 2003, but to the best of my knowledge did not follow up on this insight nor refer to Onyema's earlier work.
43. For an aerial view of the Usaka landscape, I refer to <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=835611173905673> (accessed May 14, 2024). Perhaps this portrays what Vassa meant when he wrote to the 'Honourable and Worldly Members of the British Senate' that he hoped that 'Providence [would] ... enable me to return to my estate in Elese, in Africa', *The Morning Chronicle, and London Advertiser*, 20 June 1788, although the reference to Elese or Elefe, since 's' and 'f' were written alike, is not explained.
44. According to Vassa, *Autobiography*, 32, a woman 'ties round her waist a cotton string of the thickness of a goosequill, which none but married women are permitted to wear'. Also see Onyema, *Hail Usaka*, 27. The local cloth was also used by men to cover seating where it was possible to sleep, according to Ben Emele, interviewed 28 August 2024.
45. The earliest reference to Ikwuano that I have found is a map titled 'The Central & Eastern Provinces of Southern Nigeria 1910', compiled under the authority of Walter Egerton, Governor and Commander-in-Chief. W.H. Beverley, the Intelligence Officer for Southern Nigeria, created the map based on surveys conducted by Capt. Woodroffe, Capt. Moir, Lieut. King, Lieut. Hearson, E.P. Cotton, as well as officers from the Southern Nigeria Marine. Additionally, sketches by officers of the Southern Nigeria Regiment and Political Officers overseeing various districts contributed to its details. The final map was drawn and engraved at Stanford's Geographical Establishment. See www.raremaps.com/gallery/detail/96351/nigeria-the-central-eastern-provinces-of-southern-ni-stanford-geographical-establishment (accessed August 29, 2024).
46. See Chiedozie Ifeanyichukwu Atuonwu, 'Origin, Migration and Settlement in Pre-Colonial Old Bende Division of Southeastern Nigeria', ResearchGate 2021, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/356191302_ORIGIN_MIGRATION_AND_SETTLEMENT_IN_PRE-COLONIAL_OLD_BENDE_DIVISION_OF_SOUTHEASTERN_NIGERA (accessed May 14, 2024); Atuonwu, 'Bende-Kwuano Relations: From an Historical Appraisal', *Humanus Discourse* 3, no. 3 (2023), <http://humanusdiscourse.website2.me> (accessed May 14, 2024); Atuonwu, 'British Conquest and Establishment of Communities in Old Bende Division of Southeastern

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47. Interview with Ben Emele by David Imbua, Calabar, October 14, 2014.
 48. EP 17460 Report on the Re-organisation of Village and Village Group Councils, Bende Division, Owerri Province by Mr. G. I. Jones District Officer, 1940. Jones’s later annotation of portions of the autobiography in Curtin’s anthology in 1967 does not refer to his work in Bende Division. I wish to thank Uzoamaka Nwachukwu for tracking down the Jones report on Bende Division in the Nigerian National Archives at Enugu.
 49. Ohaeri Nnaemeka Ndubuwa and Asukwo Edet Oko, ‘Ikwuano Women in 1929 Women’s Protest: A Recipe from Women War in Ancient Israel (Judges 4:4–24)’, *Unizik Journal of Arts and Humanities* 22, no. 2 (2021): 164–87 <https://doi.org/10.4314/ujah.v22i2.7>. For the 1929 revolt, see P. Chike Dike, ed., *The Women’s Revolt of 1929* (Lagos: Nelag & Co., 1995); and Toyin Falola and Adam Paddock, eds., *The Women’s War of 1929: A History of Anti-Colonial Resistance in Eastern Nigeria* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2011).
 50. For a discussion of Aro commercial activities, see A. E. Afigbo, ‘The Aro of Southeastern Nigeria: A Socio-historical Analysis of Legends of Their Origin’, *African Notes* 6 (1971): 31–46; Felicia Ifeoma Ekejiuba, ‘The Aro System of Trade in the Nineteenth Century’, *Ikenga* 1 (Jan. 1972): 11–26;1 and (July 1972): 10–21. J.N. Oriji, ‘The Slave Trade, Warfare and Aro Expansion in the Igbo Hinterland’, *Transafrican Journal of History* 16 (1987): 151–66.
 51. See Carey’s comments in <https://www.brycchancarey.com/equiano/index.htm> (accessed May 14, 2024). Other scholars have also expressed the opinion that the issue can never be decided; see *New World Encyclopedia*, https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Olaudah_Equiano (accessed September 13, 2024); Ovidiu Matiu, ‘Oludah Equiano’s Biography: Fact or/and Fiction’, *East-West Cultural Passage* 2 (2023): 52–9.
 52. For Vassa’s will, which does not refer to Oludah Equiano but to Gustavus Vassa, see Prerogative Court of Canterbury PROB 10 3372. Various documents, including the Baptismal Register, marriage certificate, will and codicil, and tombstones of his wife and two daughters, are reproduced on www.equianosworld.org (accessed May 14, 2024). For his burial location, see Mike Pentelow, ‘Slave Campaigner’ Burial Place Found in Tottenham Court Road’ <https://equiano.uk/articles/slave-campaigners-burial-place-found-in-tottenham-court-road/> (accessed September 10, 2024). Also see Carretta, *Equiano, the African*, xvi, 149.
 53. Also discussed in Carretta, *Equiano, the African*, xiv–xvii.
 54. For the Guerin family, see Catherine Chater, ‘The Guerin Family: A Footnote in Black British History’, *Huguenot Society Journal* 32 (2019): 26–35. I wish to thank Dr. Chater for sharing her insights.
 55. Interview with Ben Emele conducted by David Imbua, Calabar, 26 October 2023.
 56. Circumcision of females ceased to be practiced after the imposition of colonialism, according to Ben Emele, interview 27 June 2024.
 57. *Ibid.*
 58. Vassa, *Interesting Narrative*, 43.
 59. *Ibid.*, 35.
 60. Onyema, *Hail Usaka*, 22.
 61. For a consideration of agency in the adoption of names after attaining freedom, see Lovejoy, ‘Resistance to Commodification: The Question of Naming’, *Slavery and Abolition*, forthcoming 2025.

62. Vassa, *Interesting Narrative*, 41.
63. *Ibid.*, 31.
64. Various attempts have been made to use names as a means of establishing origins but have not addressed the issue of Vassa's name, which it would seem obvious to include. For the lacunae in reference to Olaudah Equiano, see in particular David Eltis, Philip Misevich, G. Ugo Nwokeji and Adenike Ogunkoya, 'The Origins and Destinations of Captives from the Bight of Biafra, 1807–1843: New Evidence from the Identification of African Names and Languages', *Slavery and Abolition* (2024). Also see Nwokeji and Eltis, 'The Roots of the African Diaspora: Methodological Considerations in the Analysis of Names in the Liberated African Registers of Sierra Leone and Havana', *History in Africa* 29 (2002): 365–79. Although these publications focus on the nineteenth century, the methodological issues are the same. In my opinion, names alone reveal very little unless related to specific places, political entities, cultural distinctions, and the language in which information is recorded that are ignored in the above studies.
65. See especially Eltis et al., 'Origins of Captives from the Bight of Biafra', which fails to discuss Vassa's Igbo name or the implications of what Vassa claimed was his birth name for using names as the basis of determining origins.
66. The earliest European reference to *ichi* marks is John Adams, *Remarks on The Country Extending from Cape Palmas to the River Congo: Including Observations on the Manners and Customs of the Inhabitants* (London: Hurst, Robinson and Company, 1822), based on his experience in 1786–1800; and Hugh Crow, *Memoirs of the Late Captain Crow of Liverpool: The Life and Times of a Slave Trade Captain* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown and Green, 1830), with a date of 1801. Both sources were published after Vassa died but attest to a cultural feature that clearly dates to the eighteenth century, if not earlier still. Chambers has documented 'Breechee [mbreechi] Eboe' ('Eboe with the Breechee cut') among runaway slaves in Jamaica in the 1770s, so Vassa may have seen such markings there. For historical photos [1911–1913] see Basu online photo archive, the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford. I wish to thank Douglas Chambers for drawing my attention to the selection of glass-plate photos in the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford.
67. Acholonu, 'Igbo Origins of Olaudah Equiano', 100.
68. For discussion of Huntingdonianism, see Faith Cook, *Selina, Countess of Huntingdon: Her pivotal role in the 18th Century Evangelical Awakening* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2002) and George Whitefield, see Frank Lambert, "'Pedlar in Divinity": George Whitefield and the Great Awakening, 1737–1745', *Journal of American History* 77, no. 3 (1990): 812–37.
69. For suggestions that Vassa's description of the interior being derived from unsubstantiated European visions of the African interior, see, for example, Ogude, 'Facts into Fiction', 32–33; Carretta; *Equiano, the African*, 7, 98, 116, 239.

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