

**THE ARO AND THE CONCEPT OF ARO-OKIGBO:
FACTS AND FALACIES OF A HISTRIONIC IGBO
HEGEMONY**

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ABSTRACT

The Aro sub- culture group of the Nigeria no doubt played important role in pre-colonial period as oracular agents woven in slave trade. They were mainly slave merchants whose oracle played the role of a spiritual conduit through which its unsuspecting client were sold into slavery. In other words, this dreaded oracle, *Ibinu-Ukpabi*, also known as the long juju, which is situated at Arochukwu played the dastardly role of sending those who appeared before it but could not pay themselves through for freedom into slavery.

Ironically, during the hey-days of the British colonial activities, the activities of the aro became elevated by the simple omission of historical facts to the status of an Igbo civilization. By this simple act of omission, the Aro soon assumed the status of a superior socio-political cast among the Igbo. This obvious misrepresentation was to lead to a stream of intellectual controversy among Igbo scholars and local political partisans.

This resulting controversy which was originally rooted in C.G. Seligman's hamitic hypothesis, was expounded by a notable colonial anthropologist - - H.F. Mathews and later appropriated by succeeding Igbo scholars of Aro school of thought. It borders on the claim of indigenous pre-colonial imperialism over the rest Igbo group by the Aro.

The present work explores the facts, myths and probabilities of this concept of a racially superior branch of the Igbo culture group as represented by the Nri and Aro. In the process of exploring the evidence, a number of dependent historical and hypothetical question were raised. This is primary query which will most probably strike the mind in the context of primeval Igbo origins and identity? In other words, were the ancestor of the present Aro of original Igbo stock or did they originate from another stock other than the Igbo? What was the nature of their hegemony over the rest of Igbo people if any? What were and still are the fundamental elements of the Aro native customs and culture, vis- vis the main- stream Igbo sub-group? What was the marital power base upon which the said Aro hegemony relied? And above all, from the foregoing questions, is the concept of Aro okgibo a fact of history or an attempt to over-bloat an image that has not just gone out of relevance in the present state of Igbo cultural and historical studies but is presently facing fundamental moral and identity question?

**THE ARO AND THEIR CONCEPT OR ARO- OKIGBO: FACTS
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Reacting to the African colonial predicament, the renowned pan- Africanist J.E Casely-Hayford once stated in 1923:

Before even the British came into relations with our people we were a developed people, having our own institutions having Our ideas of government (Rodney, 1972).

Going by the above statement, there is no gainsaying the fact that black African, and indeed Igboland had well-structured society culturally, economically, politically, religiously, socially and technologically long before the emergency of European colonialism.

Politically, the Igbo no doubt might have lacked large –scale organizations in the structure of kingdom and empires. However their socio-political system operated within the frame work of what could in the present times be described as a democracy and republicanism. In other words, the Igbo system lacked authoritarian and monarchical tendencies common then among a number of indigenous people of Africa. Against these obvious characteristic identity of Black Africa landed the hammer of hamitic hypothesis, a notion that attempted to link every act of civilization in black African to the white-skinned hamitic race from the middle east.

It should be recalled that Professor C.G Seligman had in 1930 released his infamous hamitic hypothesis in his book. Races of Africa, which strongly questioned Black Africa’s ability to both conceptualize and develop novel idea and civilization. This hamitic hypothesis was to later become the racial barometer with which European colonial administrations and researcher used to justify their continued exploitation and domination of black Africa. As Seligman put it:

Apart from relatively late Semitic influence whether Phoenician (Carthaginian and strictly limited, or Arab Muhammedan) and widely diffused the civilizations of Africa are the hamites, its history - the records of these people and of their interaction with the two other African stocks - the negro and the bushman, whether this influence was exerted by highly civilized Egyptians or by such wider pastoralists as are represented at the present day by the Beja and Somali. (Seligman, 1966:61)

The summary of this hypothesis is clear. Black Africa, of which the Igbo form a part, had no credible evidence of self-invention and the accompanying civilization. Every aspect of the Black

Africa's past including the Igbo deemed advanced or sophisticated was the act of external influence, mainly the white-skinned Hamitic race. It was therefore not surprising that succeeding European scholars and colonial researchers adopted the hypothesis in their varying interpretations of the history, culture and civilization of black Africa.

Among the Igbo of Nigeria, this hypothesis was centered around the Nri, otherwise known as the Umunri, and the Aro sub-groups. This subsequently gave rise among the Igbo to a situation in which the Umunri began to see themselves as the fountain-head of Igbo origins, history, culture and civilization. While the Aro in the same token began to see themselves as a people of superior intelligence over the rest of Igbo sub-groups, giving rise to the concept of *Aro-Okigbo* - the Aro as the source of Igbo strength.

Whether these conceptions would pass the litmus test of historical evidence will be determined by the following sections. However, the present paper is only concerned with Aro of the historical Cross-River Igbo sub-culture.

The Aro no doubt exerted considerable influence on some Igbo communities with whom they came into contact during the pre-colonial era of slave trade. This influence was centered mainly on slave trade in which their long juju oracle, otherwise known as *Ubinu-Ukpabi* played a major role. The said Aro influence was therefore fundamentally commercial in both form and character and since never extended at any time to the point of political domination.

Although pre-colonial Igboland was dotted with other groups with similar commercial activities, such as the Nri as earlier mentioned, the Awka, Nkwere and Abiriba itinerant blacksmiths, as well as such oracular agents as the Umunneoha with their *Igwe ka-Ala* oracle, the Ozuzu people with their *kamalu* oracle, and the Awka with their Agbala oracle, which was co-exported with their blacksmithing trade. Equally significant during this commercial era were the Umudioka *Ichi* insignia scarification agents who were also vast in various acts of artistic trades like wood and ivory carving, as well as teeth-cutting. The Isu legitimate long-distance traders who far pre-dated the Aro in commercial activities continued with their non-human articles even after the abolition of slave trade. Thus it could be right to state that the commercial life of pre-colonial Igboland was not entirely at the mercy of the Aro oracular-commercial agents, as each group not only guarded its area of specialization jealously, but protected its zone of influence against the others' unwarranted intrusion.

The Aro were however able to exert more influence than the others it could appear, merely because of both the inhuman nature of their trading activities and the resulting adverse effects on the overall demographic and socio-political setting of their areas of operation. This was also aided by their practice of establishing commercial out- posts which not only maintained continuous contact with their home-base, but operated within a web of well-coordinated network that saw to the effective manipulation of the assumed invisible spiritual power of their *Ubinu-Ukpabi*. However as time went on, it became obvious that where this oracular exertion failed, the Aro often restored to the use of mercenaries to disrupt unsuspecting Igbo communities, which readily created human commodity for them in form of captives in such wars.

In doing this, the Aro, because they were not habitually war-like people resorted to the Abam/Edda/Ohafia head-hunters as their martial back-up. In fact, although the influence of the Aro as strong slave merchants was generally acknowledged, this was only within the ambit of such commercial activities. Such influence did not in any form therefore translate into any kind of political or religious dominance. It was in fact this situation that gave the colonial policy-makers, who were in quest of designing a unifying political framework for the administration of Igboland in the manner of such established monarchies as Benin, Yoruba and, Hausa-Fulani the impression of a culturally and militarily superior and more civilized Nri and Aro people in difference to the other Igbo groups. In other words, the colonial anthropologists and District Officers employed to carry out investigations into the nature of Igbo political culture vis-à-vis its suitability for indirect rule system, thus already came with a mind-set of where to focus their attention as well as on what their conclusion would be.

The knighted Imperial adventurer Sir H.R Palmer, in propounding his concept of Aro hegemony based on these pre-colonial assumptions, as seen through the spectacle of the infamous hemitic hypothesis wrote thus in his report:

...the only reason why the Igbo are more advanced people, a people of distinctly higher grade than the Ibibio and Ejaw is because, firstly because of the Aro teaching and secondly of a large admixture in certain areas particularly the Abakiliki and Enugu Region of Aro blood (Afigbo:1986,152)

However, the two facts Sir Palmer did not know are, first that the Aro as a group were not only a marginal minority in both Abakiliki and Enugu sub-culture areas, but that the said zones are not enough indices in terms of geographical spread and structure of indigenous Igbo development

for assessing the proper level of Igbo advancement; and secondly, that the said Aro he claimed to be of superior ethnic stock than the rest Igbo sub-culture groups have more Ibibio and Akpa bloods in their veins than that of the Igbo. This makes Palmer's hypothesis even more questionable, being that the question of Aro identity vis-a-vis the depth of their Igbo extraction has remained over time the major point of controversy in the study of Igbo history and culture.

Be that as it may, the thesis of this paper in all holds tenaciously that the claim of hegemony, whether cultural, social, martial, commercial, political or religious by the Aro as advanced by some writers, is a mere intellectual edifice built on a shifting sandy-soil of historical mirage. It cannot withstand the storms of critical historical facts, and thus, is more of a vain-glorious attempt to veneer the morally haunted past of the Aro as human merchants. But the major consequence of Palmer's adoption of the hermitic hypothesis in his interpretation of the Aro roles in Igbo history, is the creation of the conception of the *Aro-okigbo*, a term which in its strictest cultural and linguistic senses defines the Aro as a superior Igbo specie. In other words, to the Aro, the rest Igbo sub-groups are defined as second-class citizens in terms of intelligence quotient. This presumptive attitude of the Aro in difference to the rest Igbo culture groups has persisted even till date and stands as one of the fundamental inhibitions against a defined ideological focus of the Igbo in resolving the Nigeria nationality question.

If one may ask, who are the Aro in the context of Igbo history, culture and civilization? In other words, what characteristic roles did the Aro play in pre-colonial Igbo history, cultural, political and economical developments, that qualifies them to be branded *Aro-okigbo*? In advancing an answer to the above question, one must first establish the origins of the Aro as a sub-culture group of the Igbo ethnic nationality.

Historically, the original home of the Aro sub-group is the present Arochukwu settlement which is situated within the Cross River basin, or what may be historically defined as the Cross River Igbo group. It was originally an all-Ibibio border settlement at the southeastern-most tip of the Igbo borderland. Oral traditions among the people are in agreement that the town assumed its present character when the Igbo slaves revolted against their Ibibio masters through the help of the war-like Akpa of the upper Cross River basin. This subsequently resulted in the formation of the present character of the settlement constituting the three groups of different ethnic extractions, namely, the original Ibibio settlers, the descendants of ex-Igbo slaves turned masters, and those of their Akpa mercenaries.

G.H Jones (1937:102) puts it straight thus:

The Aro themselves say, and always have said, that their clan originated from a revolt of an Igbo slave or group of slaves who called in Akpa mercenaries from further up the Cross river. The revolt was successful and the Igbo, the Akpa and what remained of the Ibibio amalgamated to found the present clan. Today this consist of 19 villages, 6 of which Claim an Akpa, 5 were descended from Igbo elements who came in later either freely or as captives. The seniority was originally with the Akpa, but almost immediately passed to the ancestor of an Igbo village, a certain Okenachi and from that time the clan appears to have become an Igbo one.

In affirming the above account, the people of Amanagwu village in Arochukwu, in a petition to the District Officer dated September 4, 1945, questioned the traditional right of the Eze-Aro, Chief Oji (Arodivo, 1956) to claim the headship of Arochukwu. In that petition they stated:

It is contented by your humble petitioners, and by
The Ibom-Isis, that the three Aro elements, viz: Ezeagwu,
Okenachi and Ibom Isi are separate, distinct and equal in status.

But it was the Aro-born anthropologist, Professor Felicia Ekejuba that fully confirmed Jones' thesis of Aro origins. According to her (Ekejuba 1972, 13):

Before mid-seventeenth century, the population of the area now known as Arochukwu was made up of groups of varied ancestry know as Losi, Nkalaku, Iwerri, Ohadu. These like their Igbo and Ibibio neighbours were Subsistence farmers and did not travel beyond the boundary. The ethnic composition and economy of these autochthonous groups were changed consider ablyby what is known in Aro historiography as 'Aha Ibibe' (the Ibibio war)... The war resulted from a succession dispute between the autochthones of Arochukwu territory who were medley of unrelated tribes of Igbo and Ibibio groups. While the intermittent clashes lasted between the opposing group, the Akpa, whom the Aro and non-Aro traditions claim had been raiding the Cross river basin invaded the area. They took advantage of their superior arms and their military organization to over-awe the area and scatter most of the original groups. Some of the autochthones surrendered and settled side by side with the invaders with whom they were incorporated politically to constitute the Aro political community.

It is therefore indicative that the Aro originally were not of full Igbo ancestry, being an admixture of Ibibio, Akpa and Igbo ethnic groups. However, in spite of the diversified nature of

their origins, the Aro are now classified as Igbo, even when two of the original founding groups—the Akpa and Ibibio were non-Igbo. But it however remains to note that because of the obvious non-Igbo identity of the Aro, the more than any other Igbo sub-culture group bordering Ibibio tertiary exhibit very strong affinity with the Ibibio culture group. For instance, all the five top grades of their secret titled-society bear grades with unqualified resemblance to those of the Ibibio culture group. These include, *Ekong, Iquot, Obom, Ekpe and Akang* (Arodiv, 1927).

Arochukwu, it would therefore appear, when defined in historical and cultural terms, is characterized by interweaving Ibibio, Akpa and Igbo elements, in which the Igbo appear to dominate linguistically, the Ibibio exhibiting considerable presence in ethno-cultural aspects, while the mercenary character of the Akpa instilled on them the recurring mentality of dependence on mercenary activities. In other words, Arochukwu is built on a world of three distinct peoples—the Ibibio, Akpa and Igbo. Thus, apart from the fact that the people are commonly bilingual, speaking Ibibio and Igbo with remarkable fluency, their ideas, thoughts and general aspirations have always run contrary to the fundamental ideological basis of Igbo identity.

However, before going further to enumerate instances of obvious Aro display of contra-Igbo attitudes, it will be better to first take a look at the origin and character of the said Aro hegemony over the Igbo during the pre-colonial period. Evidence abound supporting the claim that the foundation of Arochukwu and the subsequent establishment of satellite Aro settlements in some parts of Igboland occurred during the late 17th century AD. A recent Aro-sponsored website (Wikipedia 2008:1) puts the date at 1690, thus supporting the earlier periodization by Professor Ekejuba: In describing the character of Aro influence, Ekejuba (1972:14) went further to state:

The Aro confederacy (1690-1902) was a slave trading political union orchestrated by the Igbo sub-group, the Aro people, centered in Arochukwu in present day southeastern Nigerian. Their influence and presence was (sic) distributed across Eastern Nigerian into parts of present day Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea. The Arochukwu kingdom was an economical, political and a (sic) oracular center as it was home of the powerful long juju oracle, the Aro king Eze Aro, and highest priest.

The Aro influence or hegemony whichever applies, was therefore based on slave-trading economy. The Aro primacy in the inhuman trade in Igboland could be understandable. Its foundation being the consequence of a revolt of erstwhile slave against their erstwhile slaving

masters the Ibibio, a sort of economic *coup d'état* that metamorphosed into a political union, the inhabitants were bound to appropriate the roles of their previous masters. Moreover, lying astride two distinct culture groups with fluidity of identity, and advantageously situated on the Enyong River, a major tributary to the Cross River, their opportunity to act as middlemen to their Efik/Ibibio kinsmen was therefore not difficult.

On the extent and dimension of this influence, Ekejuba (1972, 14) wrote:

By the end of eighteenth century the traffic had reached its peak following the establishment of many other trade settlements and opening up of other trade routes through which commercial, cultural and religious contact were established and maintained. During this peak period the influence of the Aro had spread to the great extent that political stability and the order necessary for successful trade were maintained with the aid of specialist warrior groups whom the Aro deployed to flow of trade. The organization of the Ibinu-Ukpabi oracle had been perfected and its own quota of slaves recruited through its agents.

Although Ekejuba fell short of mentioning the identity of those warriors claimed have been deployed by the Aro against the Igbo communities that attempted to obstruct their trade, the fact remains however that the Aro as a group lacked the warrior instinct and prowess which were then the source of power for the risky business of slave trade. But as Jones (1937:103) rightly put it.

They were also fortunate in having as neighbours war- like cannibals whose tribal sport was head-hunting, who also were prepared to jeopardize their amateur status by following Aro guides and raiding more densely populated and less war like areas if suitably paid for it.

G.I Jones was no doubt referring to the Ohafia, Abrirba, Item, Edda, Abam and related groups, whose culture of initiation to adulthood required the cutting of human heads. Although many people have attempted to ascribe to these people to Aro mercenaries, it does not appear to be so. It is obvious that the practice of head-hunting among the Igbo in general long predated Aro engagement in slave trade. In fact, the Aro merely seized the opportunity of their proximity to these groups to engage them as security insurance agents. In effect therefore, these people were the de facto power behind the Aro ability to expand with little molestation.

The other source of Aro influence, the *Ibinu Ukpabi* oracle (long juju) was situated in Arochukwu, and formed part of the oracular-complex of Igboland. The others include, as

mentioned previously, the *Agbala* of Awka, *Kamalu* of Ozuzu, and *Igwe-ka-Ala* of Umunnoha. The long Juju of Arochukwu acted principally as a conduit for abducting unsuspecting free Igbo citizens into slavery under the cover of an unbiased adjudicator.

Operating in the manner of present-day advance-free fraud, popularly called 419, the Aro people living in Arochukwu tactfully colluded with their kinsmen living among the other Igbo sub-groups in the name of settling disputes, to kidnap innocent people and extort enormous wealth from them. But in reality, the so called powers ascribed to *Ubinu- Ukpabi*, a generic Akpa deity referred by the Ibibio as *Ibiri-Tam*, was a farce, and most Igbo sub-groups who were equally learned in the act of oracular trade strongly resisted the Aro machination in this regard. Hence the frequent use of their head-hunting neighbours to attack such communities as a means of securing safe-passage for their human traffic.

On the limit of aro influence, Jones (1937:103) once again wrote:

The Efiks controlled the trade of the lower Cross River and Akunakuna the rest; the Aro monopoly extended only to the hinterland, and did not cover even the whole of this, for the area of the onitsha-Awka , Isu and Oru sub-tribes, many of whom were also traders, lay outside it. Aro trade therefore, did not reach the Niger, but centered only on the Cross River.

The present writer agrees with Jones on the extent of Aro influence and thus sees as total vainglorious fabrication the claim that Aro influence extended to the Niger Delta States and even Equatorial Guinea and Cameroon, as claimed by Professor Ekejuba.

But it remains to properly define the historical roles of the Aro in the context of Igbo history, cultural development and civilization. From every angle any one attempts to look at it, the roles of the Aro in the body of Igbo history, were antithesis to the positive development of pre-colonial Igbo society. A people that still take pride as the descendants of the notorious inhuman slave traders can only but be defined as unrepentant agents of retrogression in moral terms.

The loss encountered by Black Africa in general and, the Igbo in particular in this infamous trade remains monumental. The number of Africans carted away to Europe and the Americans could not easily be estimated. What started with the abduction of ten Africans in 1442 A D on the Coast of Guinea was by between 1733 and 1766 AD to become a colossal human traffic of about 92,000 innocent Africans annually; with the British taking the lead with 60,000, the French 23,000,

while the other European nations notably the Portuguese, Spaniards and the Dutch shared from the rest (Bandinel 1963, 63).

The above statistics presented by James Bandinel although frightening in relation to the estimated population of Black Africa at those periods, yet it stands debatable when viewed in the context of the tortuous process of making a free citizen of Black Africa a slave in Europe and the Americas. A better picture of the true situation of the period seems to have been painted by the African-American historian John Hope Franklin. As he rightly puts it: (Franklin 1967, 57).

When one considers that numbers must have been killed while resisting the middle passage and the millions that were successfully brought to the Americas, the aggregate approaches staggering proportions. These figures: five, ten, or fifteen million, are themselves a testimonial to the fabulous profits that must have been made by those who prosecuted it, to the tremendous demand being made by new world settlers for labours.

Well painted. If one may say concerning the picture of the Trans- Atlantic experience. But then, what about the hinterland passage, the one perpetrated by the likes of the Aro slave traders? Can one rightly qualify in terms of cost, the extent of destruction of the lives and property of the Igbo of the time, as well as the mental agony that was inflicted on the Igbo personality in the course of the raids, capture and transportation of slaves to the Atlantic coast?

When therefore it is remembered that the Aro were responsible for these dastardly acts, then one may be tempted to describe Aro influence as evil, their hegemony and the concept of *Aro-Okigbo* a fabulous misrepresentation of Aro identity, roles and character in the body of Igbo history, culture and civilization. In fact Professor Ekejuba's claim that the so-called Aro slaving activities gave Igboland a considerable measure of political stability was not just out of point but untenable in the context of the nature and character of slave trade. The Aro therefore have nothing glorious to celebrate about their past in the context of their origins, roles and character in the overall development of Igbo culture, economy, religion, socio-political institutions, and identity.

CONCLUSION

One very important position of the present paper, given the false claims of primacy by the Aro over and above the rest Igbo sub-culture groups, is that there is a strong need at this time to carry out a massive re-engineering of the reconstruction process of the Igbo past. This re-engineering must be centered on the true facts of history guided by historical evidence, and not on untenable fabrications guided by either clannish or sub-cultural sentiment. As pope Leo *XIII* put it:

It is the first law of history that it dares say nothing which is false nor fear to utter anything that is true, in order that there may be suspicion either of partiality or hostility (Garagham 1946:43).

Otherwise one does not seem to understand why, over the years the Aro should continue to showcase historical fallacies and untenable claims of primacy among the Igbo, by show-casing bloated ego of a non-existent historical heritage. If one may ask, beyond their roles as slave merchants, and of course the oracular but mischievous roles of their *Ibinu Ukpabi*, what other influence was associated with their past to warrant the title of *Aro-okigbo*? Militarily, the Aro confrontation with the invading British Colonial army clearly lacked the marked intrepidity of the average Igbo sub-group. Asiegbu (1984:260) was clear on this when he wrote:

Farmed for their shrewdness and diplomacy, the Aros militarily had disappointed the promises and expectations of effective armed resistance in the final encounter with the British in 1901-1902 much to the great surprise of even the invaders themselves. But across the Niger to the west, a group of other Igbo community in the Asaba hinterland was to surprise the British invaders by organizing perhaps one of the longest and stiffest anti-British campaigns in Igboland between about 1896 and 1911.

The question arising thereof from the above comparative picture is which among the two groups – the Aro or the West-Niger Igbo is better qualified to go by the title: *Okigbo*? Posing a moral question to Aro activities, one finds it ridiculous that at a period when descendants of major European slave merchants and nations are showing remorse for the atrocities of the slave trade and slavery against Black Africa, the descendants of one the African agents of the same evil trade would be celebrating their forefathers' escapades in the evil trade. Thus bearing this in mind, one is apt to assert that the concept of *Aro-okigbo* is merely rooted in a historical experience that is morally corrupt and bankrupt, economically destructive, politically void, and mentally debilitating. It is like celebrating the triumph of the evil of slave trade and slavery over the Igbo people.

It is based on this that one finds it difficult to understand the moral and pan-Igbo basis of the term: *Aro-okigbo* when applied in the sense that the Aro do today, bearing in mind that for the many centuries of transatlantic slave trade, Africa in general and Igboland in particular lost millions of resourceful men, women and children. And what were the major consequences of this? It institutionalized centuries of underdevelopment in socio-economic, cultural, religious, political and even intellectual spheres of Black Africa .

On the whole, one could but only state that it is unfortunate that a sub-group that claims to be truly Igbo, whose ancestors participated in this gruesome episode could pride themselves as

Aro-Okigbo, thereby extolling the negative virtues of their fore-fathers in bringing about untold desolation of Igbo society of the time, through enslavements, unwarranted killings and dislocation of the socio-political, economic and demographic settings which arose from frequent armed raids. The inability to locate Olaudah Equiano's home town of Ekassa today in Igboland is a hard-testimony of the extent of the negative roles played by the Aro.

It therefore follows that whatever atrocities the Europeans might have committed by engaging on the Atlantic slave trade, the Aro has a major share. consequently, one can effectively state that whenever the issue of reparation to black Africa in respect of the slave trade is mentioned, such people as the Aro should be included in the burden sharing, being themselves the primary interior agents of the inhuman trade in Igboland.

In concluding this paper, one is apt to state categorically that the concept of Aro hegemony or *Aro-Okigbo* does not have a place of honour worthy of mention in the body of Igbo history, culture and civilization. Aro influence was in the main negative in morals, destructive in economic, political and social terms, and above all repugnant to true pan-Igbo personality and aspirations. In effect, what is required of the Igbo sub-culture groups presently concerning the past dehumanizing roles of Aro slave traders is to initiate the process of demanding for reparations from the present Aro-descendants.

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