

## King Jaja of Opobo



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Jaja was born in 1821 in Igboland Nigeria, information suggests that his birth name is Mbanaso Okwaraozurumbaa, and at the age of twelve he was sold to the slave trader Chief Allison of the city of Bonny, Nigeria. Jaja's name was changed from his birth name to Jubo Jubogha by Chief Allison. He would be sold again to Chief Madu, the head of the Poubo Annie Pepple Royal House; because he was an imported slave he was regarded as a lower class slave. Jaja was the name the British gave him and it is also the name that would stick with him to longest. The slave systems of Bonny were classified as socio-political institutions where a person can be a slave and work their way to becoming the head of state; this slave system was vastly different from the chattel slave systems of North America. Jaja began working as a peddler on the trade canoes of Chief Madu, he would also show how knowledgeable he was about business and trade. Chief Madu was so impressed that he promoted Jaja from a peddler on the trade canoe to an actual successful tradesman.

Jaja was well versed in politics and trade but at this time he focused more on trading to build a solid financial foundation. With the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 palm oil became the number

one item for trade in the Bonny region. Jaja was able to amass a small fortune for himself that would set him up for his next move. Chief Madu would die and was succeeded by his son Chief Alali who would die in 1863 leaving a \$10,000 debt to Europe and a no leader for the people of Bonny. All of the Chiefs who were eligible to become the head of state of Bonny declined because they did not want to inherit any the debt. Jaja stepped to the plate and became the next head of the Poubou Annie Pepple Royal House in Bonny. Jaja was able to reorganize the finances of his house and clear all debt to Europe within two years; the former slave was able to create wealth within his city-state. He was doing such a wonderful job revitalizing his house that other competing houses decided to merge with his Annie Pepple Royal House. Jaja was also able to extend and increase his houses operations within Bonny and he also decreased the number of European trading contacts. Infighting ensued within the Annie Pepple Royal House, Jaja would leave the house to create his own house which became Opobo; he was now recognized as King Jaja of Opobo. Bonny and Opobo were now two independent houses but Jaja maintained control of the trade and politics in the area. Because of Jaja's control fourteen of the eighteen houses of Bonny became houses of Opobo.

Jaja was able to monopolize the palm oil trade and began trading directly with the city of Liverpool, England; his power and influence was beginning to be seen as a threat by the Europeans. He was quickly offered a "treaty of protection" by his fellow chiefs in return for their complete sovereignty; he denied the treaty and continued his business as usual. With his power increasing steadily over time Jaja was able to directly deny trade in the area until a single British firm paid their dues. The British wanted the cessation of trade to stop by threatening Jaja, but he continued with his plans. Unbeknownst to Jaja and many African people, European countries divided Africa into regions they were going to conquer which was called the "scramble for Africa". The area of Opobo was designated for the British and they were armed with one of the most powerful Navy's in the world. Jaja was asked to meet with the British leadership upon one of their warships, this meeting was a trap for Jaja where he was arrested, tried and convicted of treaty breaking and blacking highways of trade. He was exiled and shipped to live on the island of St. Vincent in the Caribbean for four years. After his time in exile he was on a ship returning to Nigeria but he would die before his return. The death of Jaja would expose the true intentions of the British which were to only monopolize and control the resources in the area. King Jaja was able to turn a life of misfortune to a life of success and abundance despite him being sold into slavery. King Jaja of Opobo, we proudly stand on your shoulders.

J.A. Ward.

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<http://ontheshoulders1.com>

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X6AoqbclJI8>

### References:

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