

Expatriate Researchers and the Historiography of Calabar, 1650 - 1960: A Reappraisal

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ABSTRACT Among expatriates of note who lived and worked in the ancient city of Calabar were researchers, who recorded events as they occurred or as they were told by the aborigines. Over the years, rather than commending expatriate researchers, most local historians do not only criticize and condemn their researches for Eurocentric prejudices, limitations, generalizations and erroneous judgments but also refer to them as garbage of no historical value. Opposed to this general view, this paper argues that studies by expatriate observers and chroniclers of events in Old Calabar remain invaluable in the reconstruction of the early history of this region of Nigeria. Expatriate researchers of this period (1650 - 1960) did not only contribute in placing Calabar on the World map but also ensured that researchers of pre-literate Calabar society are not frustrated by the lack of records or left entirely at the mercy of oral tradition. The paper concludes that if viewed with a critical eye, researchers and students will find works of expatriate researchers on Calabar indispensable mines of information with which to corroborate and expand existing studies on this cosmopolitan community in which the Efik, the Efut, the Qua and other ethnicities and nationalities lived in relatively peaceful coexistence. The materials used in putting this paper together were drawn from written and non-written sources, which complement and validate each other. The use of oral sources in this study becomes imperative when it is realized that some of the records we made reference to were written by foreigners and such records have limitation, which can be compensated by emic sources. The written sources include published and unpublished materials deposited at the University of Calabar Library, Old Residency Museum Calabar and the Nigerian National Archives.

INTRODUCTION

In Africa, whether in the orate form in the pre-colonial period or after, history has never been a phenomenon detachable from the material realities of the society in which it is produced. As Okon E. Uya notes "history, it must be remembered, has always been a powerful tool in the hands of rulers to legitimize their authority" (Uya 2004). We are often told that the status of a man in the society was determined by his historical knowledge. A man who knew traditions was a walking reference, to be consulted when state occasion demanded it. In many West African states, there were instances where individuals were either rewarded for accuracy in telling historical accounts or punished for failure to do so. This was the case in Calabar where one can still find truly encyclopedic informants, knowledgeable in various aspects of the people's history.

However, the increasing presence of expatriates in Calabar from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-twentieth century made it possible for historical accounts to be rather documented at a time when orality was the norm in other coastal communities of western Africa. Compelled by the tremendous role played by expatriates in stimulating the documentation of the history of

Calabar, we make bold to say that scholarly interest in Calabar was clearly a product of the unbroken contact between the region and expatriates. The people and cultures of Calabar attracted the attention of expatriate explorers, traders, missionaries and colonial administrators whose works have been heavily criticized by local historians. The outburst of intense criticism against expatriate researchers in Calabar has been attributed to the establishment of the University of Calabar in the area. The atmosphere provided for faculty members in the last 35 years brought about a very impressive array of regional histories of Calabar and surrounding areas written by historians indigenous to the areas under examination (Krantz 2005). Perhaps influenced by what Keith Nicklin calls "cultural nationalism", most local historians quote out of context to achieve parochial aims, and at the end, the blame is placed at the corridors of pioneer expatriate researchers.

Being a departure from tradition, this paper argues that expatriate researchers did a noble job in advancing the frontiers of Calabar historiography. For, in many regards, current researches among scholars of Calabar have been significantly influenced by the nature of the documents and evidence left on the shelves by expatriate researchers. Undoubtedly, significant research

breakthrough by indigenous researchers will depend, to a significant extent, on their ability to make good use of documents produced by expatriate researchers of many years ago.

CALABAR

For a proper understanding of our argument in this paper, it is important that one has a clear picture of the area of study. We shall confine our usage of Calabar in this context to the City States, namely, Creek Town, Old Town, and Duke Town. The last includes: Archibong Town, Cobham Town, Henshaw Town and Eyamba Town. Under the present day political arrangement, the area of study is within the confines designated as Calabar Municipal and Calabar South Local Government Areas in Cross River state of Nigeria. Its major inhabitants are the Efik, the Qua and the Efut. There are however other towns and dependencies that have featured prominently in Old Calabar studies. Such towns will only be discussed to the extent that they will illuminate our study.

Variouly described as the “Canaan City of Nigeria” (Effiong 1996), “a Nigerian Rome” (Oku 1989), the “New York City of Ibibioland” (Udo 1983), and more recently as “a Cross River Metropolis” (Akoda 2002). Calabar derives her historical fame from her cosmopolitan character, being a cross-road for trade, culture, civilization and administration since the middle of the seventeenth century (Uya 1990). The aborigines of Calabar took advantage of their geographical location on the Calabar River near the estuary of the Cross River and proximity to the Atlantic Ocean to fraternize with the Europeans. The increased presence in Calabar of Expatriates of various walks of life exerted influences that generated and sustained Calabar historiography through the centuries.

We now turn attention to expatriate researchers and the historiography of Calabar. For purposes of clarity and systematic presentation, we shall divide our discussion into three broad time periods, viz. before the missionaries, the missionary period, and the colonial period.

BEFORE THE MISSIONARIES

The chronicle of events in Calabar goes back to the fifteenth century when a number of Portuguese and Spanish explorers visited Calabar.

Those important in this regard include: Ruy de Sequeira (1472), Fernando Po (1472), Windham and Pinteado (1490), Diego Cam (1490), Pinteado (1530) and Alfonso D’Aviero (1530) (Effiong 1996). These people helped to advertise the fortunes and adversities of Calabar internationally when most other Nigerian peoples were yet to enter the realm of international relations.

The trail in Old Calabar studies was however blazed by John Barbot, an English Captain of the *Dragon* who visited Calabar in 1698 (Uya 1990). His *A Collection of Voyages and Travels, Vol. IV: A Description of the Coast of North and South Guinea* stands out as the first comprehensive account of trade and politics in Calabar. Nair’s observation that the many books on Old Calabar during this period should be used “critically since most travelers wrote in lurid colours and dwelt, in an ethnocentric way, on the so-called evil habits; and obnoxious customs” (quoted in Uya 1990) of the Efik should not be glossed over. However, a careful study of Barbot’s work will show an unbiased account of the situation at the time. Barbot was indeed largely objective in his assessment, reportage and analysis of events and institutions. At a time when one would expect highly prejudiced and unbridled condemning statements about Africa, he described Old Calabar as being well furnished with villages and hamlets, and “good civilized people”, and with the greatest share of any European traders on the west coast of Africa (Barbot 1967).

The accounts of these pioneer chroniclers of events in Old Calabar created a desire in most Europeans to visit Old Calabar and from the eighteenth century, there were an increasing number of travel accounts and memoirs in which Calabar received prestigious mention. Among the best known were those of Hugh Crow, James Holman, W. B. Baikie, Capt. J. Adams and Grant (Uya 1990). The records of these chroniclers provide interesting picture of events and developments at Old Calabar that can be set off against that derived from oral tradition. Rather than rejecting them as European biases, these records should be used with caution and in corroboration with other sources.

Of even greater historical significance in the understanding of developments in Old Calabar of the pre-missionary period is the *Records of the African Association*, edited with an intro-

duction by Robin Hallet. As primary sources, these records not only provide useful information on aspects of the history and culture of the people and the major personages of the period but also tell us how each day began, progressed and ended. Perhaps the most useful in this regard are the memoirs of Mr. Henry Nicholls. Mr. Nicholls made himself a great degree master of the Efik language and customs and established a correspondence with some of the leading persons of the area (Hallet 1964). Nicholls left vivid description of various developments in Calabar that can be used in reconstructing aspects of the people's history. For instance, he wrote in 1805 that

the Calabar natives are very well formed, and by no means unpleasant countenances; they shave their heads in different forms, some in angles, some in circles; their temples are raised considerably by repeated cuppings; some tattoo their arms from the shoulder to the wrist... (Hallet 1964).

An assessment of the primary commentaries contained in the records of the African Association will lend credence to L. P. Kirwan's position in the preface to the book that:

Private records such as these, presenting a picture of events and developments which can be set off against that derived from the official archives, are invaluable to the historian (Hallet 1964).

Without doubt, the records of expatriates of the pre-missionary period contain information with varying degrees of usefulness to the early history and culture of the Old Calabar people, as well as their external interaction. Most of these records contain information on the origins and migrations of the various Calabar ethnic groups, their major occupation, their relationships with the neighbouring groups; aspect of their social, political and cultural organization; and so on. Unless influenced by other considerations, authors and researchers writing in the relatively restful atmosphere of available literatures would not disdain to correlate the information gleaned by men of courage and discernment of several centuries in their historical, sociological and anthropological writings. Accounts taken straight from the lips of a people themselves cannot be quite valueless or totally declared nonsensical. One can only disregard these records at his/her own peril. Such documents only need be read with a very sharp critical mind.

THE MISSIONARY PERIOD

From the arrival of the Scottish missionaries in 1846, scholarly study of Old Calabar became considerably expanded and Calabar increased in fame and importance (Effiong 1996). The Presbyterians including Hope Waddell, Samuel Edgerley and his wife, Andre Chrisholm, Hugh Goldie and William and Mrs. Anderson (Akoda and Imbua 2005) showed great enthusiasm in investigating the people and culture of Old Calabar region. Unlike the earlier explorers and traders, these expatriates spent longer period on shore and lived in more intimate terms with the people with whom they came to share their daily experience. Some of them learnt and spoke Efik and from this vantage point, their descriptions and observations of events and developments in Old Calabar are claimed to be better informed (Uya 1990). Whatever the reason, research on Old Calabar expanded rather than contracted during the missionary era and the availability of missionary accounts enriches modern Calabar historical experience. The missions have constantly affected the Calabar society to the extent that one could hardly study the social, economic, political and educational changes in Calabar without references to them.

Despite the divergent views on the impact of the missionary enterprise on Calabar, all now agree that records, including journals, diaries and memoirs written by the missionaries and their protégés are useful materials in the historical reconstruction of major themes in nineteenth century Calabar society. In such documents, the missionaries recorded their impressions on the traditional institutions. Among the most important of these are Hope Waddell's *Twenty-Nine years in West Indies and Central Africa* and W. J. Ward's *The Story of Primitive Methodism in Southern Nigeria*, the *Anderson Diary*, Goldie's *Memoir of King Eyo VII of Old Calabar* (1894). *The Hope Waddell Journals*, covering the period 1846 – 1856 are indispensable because they provide:

...in a most invaluable manner, a treasure chest of information on the social, political, economic, and other major developments in Old Calabar. Trade rivalries between the city states, attitude towards expansion of missionary influences, the hierarchical structure of Efik society and the place of slavery within it, Ekpe society and other social institutions and their

roles in Old Calabar are minutely, though not always sympathetically, detailed for the period (Uya 1990).

Hope Waddell also wrote *A Vocabulary of the Efik of Old Calabar Language with Prayers and Lesson*, which was published at Edinburgh by Grant and Taylor in 1849 (Akoda and Imbua 2005). Okon Uya has argued correctly that the usefulness of this book in the establishment of Efik as the lingual Franca in the Cross River region cannot be over-estimated (Uya 1990).

While there is no falsity in the claim that some missionary records are very misleading and show the ignorance of their authors of the people and their institutions, it is equally undoubted that such records are a repository of information on Old Calabar society in the nineteenth century. What is important is to argue for a rather careful and cautious use of these sources which were used for much of the ethnographic and anthropological studies of Old Calabar peoples during the Colonial period. The discipline of history evolves as much through the adduction of new evidence, and extant missionary records should be part of this process in Calabar historical reconstruction.

The need to take seriously the missionary records on Old Calabar becomes more imperative when we consider Kalu's argument that Christian historiography:

Refers not simply to history written by Christians, nor to historical studies of the church and theology but to a historiography which itself examines the histories of peoples, societal structures and institutions, ideas, things, mores and patterns of life, according to the sort of insights and values provided by a Christian view of man, society, norms, history, the world and the whole of created reality (Kalu 1996).

THE COLONIAL PERIOD

Colonial rule remains an important episode in the long and eventful interaction of Old Calabar with expatriates. One significant thing to reiterate is that Calabar was in each case chosen as the Headquarters of the successive administrations which emerged from the administrative and political changes between 1885 and 1906. It also continued to be the headquarters of the Eastern Province until the amalgamation of 1914 when, under the new provincial set up, it yet provided the name for the new province. One ma-

ajor result of the British Government's declaration of the Oil Rivers Protectorate in 1885 "was the increase in the volume of official documentation of Old Calabar, especially those now classed as the Calabar Provincial Papers (Calp-rof), the Foreign Office Records (F.O. series), and the Colonial Office File (C. O. series). These records, taken together, deal mainly with the administrative history of Old Calabar, commenting on problems of administration, finances, disposition of personnel, the native court systems and their operations" (Uya 1990).

Of particular relevance to Old Calabar studies are Intelligence, Assessment and Annual Reports written by colonial administrators and deposited at the Enugu branch of the Nigeria National Archives. As a matter of fact, these reports provide useful information to our understanding of pre-colonial and colonial Old Calabar society. Among the most important are E. N. Mylin's *Efik Clan, Calabar Province* (1932); E. C. Alderton, *Efik Clan, Calabar Province* (1933), E. C. Alderton *Report on the Qua Clan* (n.d), R. K. Floyer, *Itu Intelligence Report the Oku, Mbiabo and Ayadehe Clans, Enyong Division* (1932) and Sealy-King (1931). As a policy, each report attempts a historical survey of the origins and migrations of the groups, their major occupation, and their relationships with neighbouring groups; aspects of social, political and cultural organization; proposals for reorganization and so on. These reports provide significant windows into the world of Old Calabar peoples during this period. Most of these reports, which the Secretary of Southern Provinces claimed were "products of much patient and thorough investigation", are not without flaws since they were meant to achieve administrative convenience rather than historical accuracy (Uya 1990).

However, it would be understandable that these reports contained limitations if we subject them without bias to the sledgehammer of historical criticism. We are dealing with a period when it could not have been a very easy matter to extract accurate information from informants who were suspicious and wondered as to what uses the testimony would be put (Imbua 2006). In such uncertainty, distortions were to be expected. It takes quite a bit of time for even an indigenous fieldworker to be accepted and to develop relations of mutual esteem with a community and its informants. In all probability, informants could have distorted information given

to foreigners that were offensively interfering with their sovereignty. A recent source asserts that most of the misleading assertions were narratives from the people themselves (Imbua 2009). The important thing is that despite their obvious weaknesses, these reports contributed to the development of Calabar historiography and to their compilers, we owe a debt of gratitude only too little realized or expressed.

Scholarly interest of the colonial period is better expressed in the efforts of European administrators and amateur anthropologists in the ethnographic investigations of the peoples of the region. Those outstanding in this group include: J. B. Walker's *Note on the Politics, Religion and Commerce of Old Calabar* (1877), P. A. Talbot's *In the Shadow of the Bush* (1912), *Life in Southern Nigeria* (1923), *Peoples of Southern Nigeria, Vols. I – IV* (1926); Elphinstone Dayrell's *Folk Stories From Southern Nigeria, West Africa* (1810), Charles Partridge's *Cross River Natives* (1905), M. D. W. Jeffreys' *Old Calabar and Notes on Ibibio Language* (1935), G. I. Jones' *The Trading States of the Oil Rivers* (1945), D. C. Simmons' *Holman's Voyage to Old Calabar* (1959).

These studies were products of extensive fieldwork among the people concerned. These impersonal accounts in which the people told their own tale by means of legends, rituals and everyday happenings (Talbot 1912), analyzed and described some of the basic cultural and political institutions of the Cross River peoples such as traditional religion, age-group association, folklore, traditional arts, and crafts, sculpture, marriage and family organizations, Ekpe and other secret societies and associations, as well as the linguistic peculiarities and relations of the languages spoken in the region.

Studies by expatriate researchers of the colonial period have not only been criticized for Eurocentric prejudices, limitations and generalizations but also for erroneous judgments. Most of the works are largely concerned with the larger societies and, therefore, remain mere reference materials to our area of study. Again, there are noticeable distortions. On this, A. J. A. Esen has commented with his own level of exaggeration that

.....much of the literature on the Ibibio peoples (including the Efik) has been produced in the past by European colonialists, traders, missionaries and other birds of passage who, from sheer excitement about a new country and

a strange people, decided to dabble in realms beyond their depth of competence (quoted in Uya 1990).

As we are probably aware, the kind of scholarship produced was meant to satisfy European fancies and prejudices regarding the innate inferiority of the Negro world, in an attempt to justify the "civilizing mission" rather than to achieve scholarly objectivity. One can, therefore, not judge colonial historiography by objective standards. To do so is to be unrealistic and to ignore the very basis of colonialism, which is the interest of the colonial powers. This notwithstanding, these amateur or non-professional historians who lacked the tact of the craft did not outright describe the people as barbaric and uncivilized. In his *In the Shadow of the Bush*, Talbot described the people of the Cross River region as a

mentally intelligent race... There are an eloquent people and there are very few who cannot at a moment's notice, discuss fluently on any topic of which they are conversant, or defend themselves ably enough on every occasion (Talbot 1912).

In a recent assessment of *In the Shadow of the Bush*, Pius Basse wrote without mincing words that:

Talbot's book is immortal because as an indigene of Oban, brought up among my people and very interested and curious about our customs and way of life, "I have found no fault" with his work (Basse 1999).

Researchers of this period were conscious of their own limitations and they humbly expressed them. In the foreword to his book, *In the Shadow of the Bush*, Talbot who was aware of his shortcomings confessed that "To wait the coming of an abler pen was inadvisable, since habits and customs... showed signs of becoming things of the past..." (Talbot 1912). In *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria*, Talbot insisted that "the grouping in the present volume is therefore purely provisional. It will be extremely interesting to find, for example, whether some of the sub-groups at present included in the Yoruba, Igbo and Ibibio groups are not really quite different peoples" (Talbot 1969). Even Jeffreys whose works are heavily criticized because of his Efik phobia freely admitted his limitations: "I aimed that generalizations at producing a framework, a first approximation as it were, in preference to working out in detail any one clan, or carrying through any in-

tensified work" (quoted in Uya 1984).

Rather than condemning expatriate researchers as garbage of no historical value, we should blame local historians who in spite of the availability of new sources and interpretations, have tended to ignore stated cautions and limitations and quote out of context to achieve parochial aims. Local histories (most of whose historical works are defensive in nature) have their own distortions, inaccuracies and misinterpretations. Without the works of colonial administrators, researchers on the Cross River region in the post colonial period would have been frustrated or left at the mercy of oral tradition. There is no doubt that a combination of oral and written sources leaves us with a picture that better approximate what really happened than complete dependence on one. Both oral and written sources are messages from the past to the present and are vital in this study. We end this analysis in Uya's assertion that despite their limitations;

It cannot be denied that the pioneer studies of these anthropologists of the colonial period have provided very useful sources for reconstructing the history and culture of the peoples of Calabar. The fact that recent indigenous scholars of the region have tended to reject some of their conclusions should not diminish the significance of their contributions (Uya 1990).

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have tried to argue that works of expatriate researchers on Calabar remain indispensable mines of information with which to corroborate and expand existing studies on this Nigerian cosmopolitan community. Between 1650 and 1960, Calabar history was written by interested expatriate amateurs who nevertheless made contributions consistent with political realities, philosophical assumptions and methodological approaches of the times. Scholarship, we must remember, despite claims of objectivity and disinterestedness is a strategic device in uncovering and preserving information (be it civilization or barbarism), and local historians in Calabar must see the works of expatriates as use-ful ma-

terials in an attempt to capture a historical picture of Calabar that best approximates reality. Both the unyielding expert and the man with minimum education will read the works of expatriate researchers on Calabar with profit and delight.

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