

NDUÑODE

Calabar Journal of The Humanities

Volume 4, Number 1, January, 2003 ISSN 1117-5621

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Calabar and the Europeans: The Impact of Western Culture on a Pre-Colonial Society

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Between the seventeenth and the twentieth centuries, Calabar gained its reputation as an important trading emporium. Its people (with emphasis on the Efik) were engaged in economic exchange with the Europeans on the coast, first for slaves and later for palm oil and other provisions. This trade was facilitated by the Calabar Sea Port, which acted as a link between the City and the outside world. Many trade goods, human and material, were exported to Europe, and European goods brought into Calabar. Consequently as the Efik people and the European traders and later missionaries interacted with each other, the former began to show much admiration for Western culture and lifestyles (Akoda, 2002: 146). In some cases, there was an assimilation of both the traditional and the Western. It is the fusion of these two cultures that has given rise, today, to an Efik culture that is partly Efik and partly European in origin.

This paper, therefore, aims at highlighting those aspects of traditional Efik lifestyles that were greatly influenced in one way or another by Western culture. Trade with the Europeans between 1600 and 1900 had a great impact on the architectural lifestyles of the people of Calabar. Traditional architecture consisted of mud houses with thatched roofs known as *Ufok Nkanya*. Materials used in constructing them included pieces of timber called *Mboi*, and the branches of raffia palm known as *Okokok* (Amaku, 1973: 13,15). Although the materials used in erecting these traditional houses were old fashioned, the houses were usually cool. we:

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constructed, and well adapted to the climate and state of the country (Waddell, 1863: 325). According to Hope Waddell, these houses were made of a;

quadrangular courtyard, surrounded by ranges of apartments, which all open into it, while one main gate, kept by a porter, opens into the street. No windows exist, except one little peephole in the gable at each end (Waddell, 1863: 325).

As the chiefs and people of Calabar came in contact with the European traders from the seventeenth centuries onwards, they were no longer comfortable with these mud structures, but rather preferred the more modern and fashionable European styled houses (Akoda, 2002; p.147). Accordingly, one scholar noted that this period marked a turning point in the architectural development of the town in that it was in this period that a number of new architectural elements were introduced (Bassey, 1990:126).

In effect, many wealthy traders, as early as 1785 procured two-storey European style wooden or corrugated Iron houses which were manufactured abroad and shipped down to Calabar via its Sea Port (Latham, 1973: 164). Only the affluent in the society could order these kinds of houses since many goods were required for the exchange and importation of these buildings. Wealthy men like Great Duke Ephraim (Efiom Edem), King Eyamba V, John Boco Cobham and Prince Archibong could afford these imported styled houses. Hence, the Great Duke Ephraim who was described by Northrup as "Old Calabar's leading merchant in the early 19th century" (Northrup, 1978: 72), had his house raised on pillars. Duke Ephraim, also known as Efiom Edem became the dominant political figure in Old Calabar from 1814 when he became ruler of old Calabar, and acquired extensive wealth and influence through trade. Accordingly, his house displayed much opulence as it was said to be of considerable size, stocked with numerous clocks, sofas, tables, pictures, beds porcelain and cabinets of European origin (Grant, 1958: 4). Similarly Eyamba V's Iron Palace located at the centre of Duke Town, Calabar, was another illustration of European styled building that was prefabricated in 1843 (Bassey, 1990: 129). John Boco Cobham's two-storey building at Offiong Street was another example of a European styled house found in Calabar especially in the nineteenth century.

It is interesting to note that one major characteristic of the buildings of these wealthy men was that they were constructed largely with corrugated iron and wood. For instance, Prince Archibong's building was walled and roofed with corrugated iron sheets (Bassey, 1990: 130).

Although this European styled architecture showed the difference between the middle/upper classes and the lower classes, this development pointed to the fact that the social life of the Efik (Calabar) people was passing through a phase of development. More importantly, it revealed that much prosperity and cultural advancement was gaining ground, and the ancient city of Calabar was gradually transforming into a modern one.

Recently, with the exception of the Duke Town/Henshaw Town/Old town axis which constituted Old Calabar, European styled houses, made of concrete blocks, can be observed everywhere in Calabar, thereby relegating the traditional styled houses of the Calabar people to the backstage.

The fashion life of the Efik people was also transformed through contact with the European world. The original clothing of the Efik people was the loincloth, or *Ofon Isin*, and the blouse or *Ofon Idem*. This attire was not discarded; rather it was adopted for entertainment purposes only. For instance, during ceremonial occasions Efik traditional dancers are richly dressed in this costume complemented with beads and the traditional hair-do. It was the close association with Europeans particularly European missionaries like Mrs Edgerley and Mary Slessor in the nineteenth century, that brought the Efik women in close contact with the long Victorian gowns synonymous with these white ladies (Ita, 8/12/2001, int). Henceforth, these Victorian gowns were adopted as Efik attire and called *Onyonyo* (Akoda, 2002: 149). The use of ties by the men was also adopted and tagged *Okponkpon*, not to mention the wearing of trousers, which were all, imported ideas that were embraced to enrich Efik fashion.

Similarly, European drinks entered some aspects of Efik culture such as the traditional marriage rites where schnapps, gin and other spirits were an indispensable part of the ceremony. Bridal-dowry was fixed at twelve English pounds (£12), and the seeking of marital consent by the grooms family through application letters to the bride's family, became adopted as the preliminary stage of Efik marriage custom before its actual consummation. Furthermore, with the arrival of missionaries to Calabar from 1846, the Holy Bible became identified as one of the most important items in the marriage trunk box or *Ekebe ndo* of the Efik people (Akoda, 2002: 149). The old system whereby women were confined to the fattening room for months or even years, is being gradually relegated to the background and mothers now fill this gap by educating their daughters on the basic matrimonial responsibilities usually learnt in the fattening houses (Adam, 1989: 48).

Modern attitude to polygamy also came under the influence of Western culture. This institution was not only fashionable in Calabar during the pre-colonial era, but was also widely practiced in Nigeria as a whole. Ayandele observed that polygamy was a product of the economic, social

and political circumstances of the indigenous society (Ayandele, 1966: 335) He adduced several reasons why this system was widely practiced. The first was that with many wives, one was sure of a large number of children who in turn would ensure adequate agricultural productivity thereby strengthening the economic base of the family (Ayandele, 1966: p.335). Secondly a large number of children were required to ensure that parents were given flamboyant burial rites, a custom cherished by the society (Ayandele, 1966: p. 335). Thirdly, with more wives, a man's social status in the society was enhanced (Ayandele; 1966: p. 335). Finally, polygamy as Ayandele affirmed was a means of providing husbands with more women (Ayandele; 1966: p. 335). Hence, the advantages offered by this institution were too tempting for the chiefs and monarchs of Calabar to resist. Grant noted that the Great Duke Ephraim had about two hundred wives who resided each in a separate house (Grant, 1958: 5). Similarly, when Eyamba V built his Iron Palace he made provision for his three hundred and twenty wives (Bassey, 1990: 129). With the arrival of Hope Waddell and his small missionary party in 1846, the doctrine of monogamy was constantly being preached. Although it took many years to convince the chiefs and people of Calabar, monogamy finally held sway and the Christian marriage began to replace the traditional.

The anglicization of Efik names was another consequence of the contact between the people of Calabar and the Europeans (Aye, 1967: 87). In order to facilitate the pronunciation of difficult Efik names by the European traders, names like Asibong became Archibong; Efiom was pronounced Ephraim; Orok became Duke; Ekpenyong was called Young; Akabom became Cobham; Ekpo was pronounced as Egbo; and Ntiero became Antera. It is interesting to note that the English version of these Efik names, over the years became more popular and many Efik families have resorted to being called Duke instead of Orok and Cobham instead of Akabom and so on.

The proliferation of European firms in Calabar, especially from the 1860s led to the flow of imported goods into Calabar and its hinterland areas. Firms such as the West Africa Company established themselves in 1864, the United Africa Company in 1879 and the Miller Brothers in 1888. Other firms like John Holt, G. B. Ollivant, P. Z., as well as French companies like C. F. A. O. and S. C. O. A. all made their presence felt in Calabar (Aye, 1994: 102). Thus, European goods were imported on a large scale between the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. Archival sources provided a list of imported merchandise sold in Calabar by these firms on the 7th of September 1914. They included tinned meat (corned beef); milk; cocoa; baking powder; table salt; coffee; matches; and whiskey of all brands (Calprof 5/4/410, 1914, NA/E). Some of these imported foodstuffs not only complemented the

traditional diet of the Calabar people but also added variety to their cuisine. Moreover the importation of cigars, spirits and tobacco in the city led to the adoption of European habits such as smoking by the local populace. Other imported items such as gold finished walking sticks which arrived Calabar and was used to exhibit wealth by the affluent men in the society during the palm oil trade era, became synonymous with the Efik chiefs. Although wealth is no longer measured by the use of gold finished walking sticks, many Efik chiefs have not discarded this fashion.

In the course of commercial contact between the chiefs and people of Calabar, and the European traders, it became important that some form of language communication should emerge to facilitate trade. This was because the European traders could not speak the local language. In a bid to meet their complementary demands therefore, and to benefit from the trade, a kind of "jargon was developed based on European language but modeled on the Efik tongue" (Aye, 2000: 13). It could more or less be described as pidgin language. This was the consequence of commercial contacts between the two groups.

The Efik people who had earlier traded first with the Portuguese and the Spaniards briefly obtained the word "palaver" from the two groups. This word was used very frequently on the coast to connote a dispute or problem as the case may be, and was obtained from the Portuguese word "Palavra" or Spanish "Palabra" meaning debate, discussion or conference (Forde, 1956: 67). In other cases, it could mean an amicable discussion or conference between two or more parties, for instance, between the King or chiefs of Calabar and European ship captains or supercargoes. This could be held either on board the ship or in the King's palace. Another word that was adopted in the course of commercial contact was the Spanish word "saber" meaning "to know". Hence, "me no saby" meant "I do not know" (Aye, 2000: 136).

From 1713 onward after the signing of the Asiento Treaty, the British monopolized the trade on the coast, and henceforth, British ship captains and traders, began to arrive more frequently, laying the foundation for the adoption of some form of pidgin English as a means of communication (Aye, 2000: 137). Consequently, the word "chop" which meant, "to cut in pieces" in English, came to mean "to eat" or "food". The word "chopping doctor" was understood among European and African traders to mean Traditional Oath Taking. In 1785, when Antera Duke was received at Eniong during a trading voyage, and was given about "12 Calabash chop" (Asuquo, 1978: 40) he meant that he was entertained with twelve bowls of food. With the development of Pidgin English, some Efik chiefs began to

reduce it to written form. Hence a series of letters were written in Pidgin English by the kings and chiefs of Old Calabar to England through ship captains. Men like Antera Duke who lived in the eighteenth century also made use of Pidgin English to keep records of the daily social and economic activities of his time. It is to him that we owe much of what we know about the social and economic life of the people of Calabar, particularly in the eighteenth century. Hence, the Pidgin English, which developed early in the eighteenth century, is now widely spoken and understood among the non-educated in the Calabar society.

Before 1879, the coronation ceremony of a newly elected Efik monarch was performed in a traditional manner, and was usually referred to as "*Uyara Ntinya*". This event was sacred and only open to members of the King's council, the religious priests and priestesses (of Efik deity), and a few royal dignitaries (Adam III, 1982: 21-21). It was usually held at the ancient shrine of the Efik tutelary deity, the *Ndem Efik Iboku*. This shrine was also known as *Efe Asabo* or shrine of the cobra (Adam III, 1982: 21-21). Hence, the king elect, wearing the *Ikpaya*, a white woven raffia robe, was escorted, barefoot in a procession at midnight to this ancient shrine where he was secretly consecrated in a sacred enclave (Adam, 1982: 21-22). By 1897, however, this ceremony became influenced by the European presence in Calabar. That year, Archibong III was elected King, and the Europeans in Calabar introduced the "Westminster style" of coronation for the first time. Although the traditional rites were fully observed, King Archibong agreed to be publicly crowned in the Duke Town Church. To commemorate the event therefore, Queen Victoria of England, through her consul presented King Archibong with the accoutrement of a royal robe, vestments, scepter an orb, a crown, a gilded throne and a copy of the Holy Bible (Adam III, 1982: 21-22). This "Westminster" style of coronation has been observed by successive Efik monarchies. Although some critics have regarded this new system as being the "trappings of colonialism", but this writer agrees with E. U. Aye that it has been incorporated in Efik royal tradition to enrich the history of Efik royal tradition and kingship (Aye, 200; 180).

In conclusion, the Calabar people, notably the Efik, were among the earliest coastal groups that came in contact with the Europeans from the seventeenth century. This contact came by way of trade and later missionary enterprise. Subsequently the interaction led to the assimilation of some aspects of Western culture by the Efik people, producing, today, an enriched Efik culture that is a blend of both Efik and European.

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