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## Efik Literary Culture and its Historical Significance, 1900 - 1970

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Efik historiography has relied largely on documentary sources, particularly books written by Europeans like A.J.H. Latham, P.A. Talbot, and K.K. Nair and indigenous scholars like E.U. Aye and E. Akak. Much thought has not been given to the fact that the writing of Efik history can also be carried out through Efik literary sources such as poetry, music and songs, proverbs, plays and prose, among others. This research therefore examines the use of these sources in reconstructing the history of the Efik people. The study has revealed, among other things, that Efik literary sources constitute an invaluable material for the reconstruction of Efik history for through them a historian gains some knowledge of the socio-economic, religious and political view of the Efik society.

Prior to the arrival of the Europeans, in Calabar, the Efik people had long developed a literary culture. Although this literary culture or tradition was unwritten because of the absence of any alphabet, they came in the form of ethnographic data. Jan Vansina defined ethnographic data as "artifacts, customs, or beliefs held by a group which testify to their earlier usage in the past" (Uya 12). Expanding further, Okon Uya noted that ethnographic data include proverbs, music and songs, drums beats, horn blowing, incantations, oaths and so on. (Uya 12-15). It was through these sources that the Efik people expressed themselves. Consequently, this paper examines the use of literary sources in reconstructing the history of the Efik people. Emphasis would be on poetry, music, songs as well as prose.

In his pioneer work, Efiang Aye aptly illustrated the role of an

Efik secret society, Ekpri-Akata, in the development of a literary culture. This came in the form of lyric and epic poetry, known as uto. About the former (lyric), he posited that:

At night, a secret society, Ekpri - Akata, with the use of certain mechanisms to disguise their voices sang or repeated some satirical poetry aimed at holding up people's vices or follies to ridicule or lampooning against certain individuals. There were also songs of lamentation at the death of a dear one (Aye, Old Calabar 189).

Epic poetry, which is more significant to a historian, was also developed orally. Here, the bard recounted the glorious deeds of past kings, warfares, migratory history and other aspects of Efik history in a rhythmic and musical chant. Efik lyric and epic poetry, when recounted, usually express the peoples culture. They are melodious and rhythmic, and unveil not only the literary prowess of the bard, but also his or her knowledge of the people's historic past.

The Efik also express themselves in their social and religious lives through music and songs. There is no gainsaying that music and songs have been an integral part of Efik life from the remote past. Most of these songs were tragic, comic, on important personalities, war, and love, about Efik deities and for entertainment purposes. The historical importance of music and songs can be illustrated in the words of two famous Nigerian historians, Samori Biobaku and Okon Uya. The former noted, "In songs we find more passages of historical value..." (Biobaku 7). The latter gives credence to this assertion by stating "perhaps the most important ethnographic data for historical reconstruction is music and song" Uya (14). From early beginnings, therefore, the Efik began to develop their literary culture. Although these sources were in oral form, they served the purpose of educating one about their past history. The earliest attempt at expressing words in the written form could be traced to the evolution



of the Ekpe cult in Calabar at an unknown date (Aye 1967 188). This came in the form of "Nsibidi", a form of hieroglyphic writing that was secret and known only to the holders of the highest Ekpe titles. In 1812, Eyo Honestly I made the first attempt at recording Efik vocabulary (Aye Learners Dictionary XII). With the arrival of the Church of Scotland Mission in 1846, Revs. Hope Waddell, Hugh Goldie and Edgerley encouraged the translation and publication of several Efik Christian literatures. Similarly, from the first half of the twentieth century, the Efik themselves became involved in the spread of their literature with publications like "Obukpon Obio" (Town Bugle) published in the 1930's by Rev. James Ballantyne, and "Mbuk Nwed Unwana" (The story of the book of light), a monthly Efik paper that was edited by E. N. Amaku in the 1940's (Aye The Efik People 170). In the 1950's, a weekly journal "Obodom Edem Usiaha- Utin" (The Eastern Slit Gong) was edited by Chief Etim Ekpenyong (Aye The Efik People 170). These publications encouraged many Efik sons and daughters who possessed literary qualities to develop and express them through this medium. Some did so in poetry, ballads, proverbs, prose, music and songs.

The blossoming of Efik literary culture could be said to have taken place between 1900 and 1970. Women like Adiaha Etim Anwa Anwa (also known as Adiahakpan), Atim Etayong, Okpok Ndem Ndem, Nne Eke Mkpananie, Etim Anwan Etim Nsa were great bardic poets of the era (Aye old Calabar 91). It was usually said, "wherever any traditional Efik plays were to be staged, these bards were summoned to teach their art and organise the plays according to the tradition of the elders" (Aye 1967 191). One of these women, Adiaha Etim Anwa Anwa wrote an Efik poem about the Halley's comet in 1910. The comet that was observed in Calabar that year was described in Adiaha Etim Anwa Anwa's poem, "Akpan Ntaofiong Ekuu Abasi," (Halley's Comet, God's Death Sign) (Adiaha - Akpan, 1910). To the Efik people, the citing of the Halley's comet represented a significant event, particularly an ominous one, usually the death of an important personality. In this poem, the writer mentioned the names of important personalities that were dead as a result of the appearance of the comet. They include King Edward (1910); the Great Duke

Ephraim (1834); John Edward, a preacher in America whose death occurred in 1758 (Asuquo 1). Ukorebi Asuquo mentioned three significant points, noted in the poem. First, Halley's comet was periodic and long in coming, possibly every seventy-six years. Secondly, the appearance of the comet was associated with catastrophe, and thirdly, the comet was believed to have brought death to King Edward in 1910 (Asuquo 1). In 1986 when Ukorebi Asuquo unearthed this poem from family record, he rightly predicted that the comet would be sighted that year (Asuquo 1). Efiog Aye confirmed this prediction and maintained that the late Efik Monarch, Basseyy Eyo Ephraim Adam III, died the year the comet was sighted (1986) (Aye 2002 int). Going by these claims, therefore, it is possible that the Halley's comet would return in 2062. The significance of Adiaha Etim Anwa Anwa's poem lies basically in the fact that a major historical episode was recorded.

From 1920's onwards, there was a general increase in the rise of Efik literature expressed in prose, poetry and plays. Many of these writers, as would be examined shortly wrote in the Efik language. They include E. N. Amaku, E. E. Nkana, E.A. Edyang, Henry Eyo and Elizabeth Archibong amongst others. Others like James Ene Henshaw and E. A. Edyang made additional contribution in English Language. Ekpo Nta Amaku, an indigene of Okpo, Eniong Abatim, is said to have produced the greatest number of volumes in Efik literature. Amaku who began his literary career in 1927 has about fifty-eight works to his credit. His works are varied in their topics and they include prose works such as Edikot Nwed Mbuk volumes one to six (Amaku ufok uto VII) published in 1949. Basically for educating the young readers, Amaku wrote fiction and non-fiction. His non-fiction works serve as a veritable guide for the researcher of Efik history because he highlights on such important historical information like the Efik days of the week, the social and economic activities carried on during these days, as well as their significance to the Efik people. In the subheading, "Mme Usen Efik" (Efik week days) (1) Amaku noted that the Efik people had eight days a week, namely, Akwa Ederi, Akwa Ibibio, Akwa Ikwo, Akwa Offiong, Ekpri Ederi, Ekpri Ibibio, Ekpri Ikwo, and Ekpri Ofiong (1). Similarly, "Mme Udia Efik"

highlights on the "Types of Efik food" while "Erikim Nkanya" examines the weaving of mats for roofing the traditional Efik houses during the pre-colonial times (13). Besides being credited with eight plays, Amaku showed himself as one of the greatest Efik poets in such non-fiction works like "Obufa Nkanika Ibuot Tower" meaning "The New Tower Clock". This poem refers to the Duke Town tower clock and highlights how it was procured through the initiative of Etubom Ana, the Duke Town church moderator (Amaku ufok uto 30-34). The church clock was obtained between 1932 and 1933 for four hundred pounds. Other works by Amaku include "Kini Kini" (from time to time); and Nwed Enyin Mbom Ima", a collection of about forty long lyrics of eminent Efik men and women of the first century (Aye 1967 192). The philosophical sayings of eminent Efik people are also brought to the fore in another poetry, "Enem Inua lko". By 1938, Ekpo Nta Amaku was widely acclaimed as a promoter of Efik literary culture. That year was a memorable one for the Efik, for Amaku's work, "Abasi Ekpenyong" won first prize in a competition organised by the Instituted of African languages in London (Amaku ufok uto V). This feat was repeated in 1970, when his play, "Inyang Abasi Ndem" won an Oxford University first prize award. Amaku's effort did not go unnoticed by the University of Ibadan. In recognition for his promotion of literature within and outside Nigeria, he was given an Honorary Degree of Doctor of letters in 1972.

E. E. Nkana was an Efik prose writer from Creek Town, whose only work "Mutanda Oyom Namondo (Mutanda Searches for Namondo, 1999) received accolades for its literary excellence and has been staged as a drama several times over within and outside Calabar. This work, though fiction, is historically significant as it exposes the rich culture of the Efik people and highlights their traditional religious cosmology especially with regard to the worship of Ndem, an Efik deity. The role of Ekpe and the use of "Nsibidi" in the dispensation of justice to the people are also highlighted. Interestingly, the play "Mutanda" has been filmed for viewing by the Nigerian film industry, otherwise known as Home Video. Between 1945 and 1948, Henry Eyo produced three plays to enrich Efik literature. These works, 'Ekanem Ebito' (1945); 'Adiaha Edem Ekpo,'

M'ete Nnyin (The Dignity of our fathers); 'Orok Edem Eyen Nke' (1961) and 'Owot Owo Asana ye Owo (1964), (Aye 1967 205) serve to portray the ancient traditions of the Efik people. E. A. Edyang, another playwright, displayed his dramatic and literary genius through his work "Asibong Edem". Aside from exhibiting the Efik religious life, their belief in oaths and the consequences of not keeping strictly to these oaths are also espoused in this literary production. "Sidibe" is another Efik play credited to this writer. These contributions, and others, earned him a first prize award in the Pan – African drama competition organised by an American University in 1962 (Aye 1967 206).

Efik women were also active participants and contributors to the blossoming of Efik literary culture. One of these women was Elizabeth Archibong of Duke family who made her mark as an Efik poetess in the 1940's. Although Mrs. Archibong was not a prose writer, she enriched Efik poetry through the following poetic works: Okoneyo Ndik (The Dreadful Night); Usua (Enemy); Ikike (Ingenuity) Uduak Abasi (God's purpose) and Anie' Ofiok Mkpon (Who knows tomorrow?). In 1963, when Nigeria was made a Republic, she wrote a poem commemorating that event. Mrs. Archibong also composed poems about nature. For instance, her poem about "Akpa Obio Efik" (The Calabar River), (Aye old Calabar 196-197) expresses much about the Efik and their love for their river. The English version of the poem reads as follows:

#### THE EFIK RIVER

The Efik River, the river that saves the soul,  
the gospel among us it brought,  
Queen Victoria sent the gospel. That  
in our town it be planted.

The Efik River, the river that orderly  
arranges. Who will our Ebonko River  
prevent from carrying out its suits at  
the appointed time?

Our River is a river of strength. Its

aquatic inhabitants their pungency display. Two giant lobsters are there kept in the Efik River.

On its hand to the other stretches, Like husband and wife at church wedding; If your passage they disapprove, you're merely fooling. Don't Toy with our River (Aye 1967 196 -197).

For a historian, the above poem reveals two important points; that this river was the source through which the Efik people received the Christian religion. It would be recalled that in 1846, Messrs Hope Waddell and Edgerley arrived Calabar through the Calabar River as the first Christian missionaries to evangelize the area. Secondly, the river is rich in aquatic inhabitants and therefore very significant to the economic survival of the Efik people. In this poem, the poet describes the beauty of the Calabar River and at the same time draws upon the significance of the River to the Efik people. Hence in the words of E. U. Aye, "The Calabar River is the main instrument of adornment and blessing to the Efik country" (Aye, old Calabar 196).

Apart from the use of prose and poetry, Efik music serves as a useful source in reconstructing Efik history. Efik musicians like Inyang Nta Henshaw, and Peter Effiom have exploited this source. The Canaan Brothers, The Calabar Choral Party and the Black Stars of Ghana highlife bands, all produced various songs in Efik language in the 1970's. In order to illustrate the relevance of Efik music to history, one of such music as produced by Inyang Nta Henshaw would be analysed. Inyang Nta Henshaw, in his lifetime was referred to as "King of Efik Folklore" (Offiong 51). One cannot help but agree that he merited this title for his attempt at promoting Efik highlife music through songs like Ediye Canaan, Ayara Iboto, Anansa Ilang Obutong and Atido Nkanika amongst others. We shall consider and analyse only one of his works Ediye Canaan, literally translated as Beautiful Canaan. By so doing, one is given a broad perspective of the role of music in historical reconstruction. The anglicized version of Ediye Canaan is given below:

### Beautiful Canaan

Oh! My beautiful city, Canaan – O  
There's milk and honey flowing there  
Beautiful Canaan – O

Oh! If you seek for good manners and knowledge, Go to Canaan where they abound

Beautiful Canaan – O Friend, as soon as you get there you won't feel like going back, good women are abundant in the city Young artisans are to be found everywhere.

Oh! my beautiful city, Canaan Oh if you desire good life call in here Beautiful Canaan oh, beautiful Canaan oh! (Offiong 34 – 35).

A lot has been revealed in this poem about Calabar, popularly called Canaan city. Its attributes as a land flowing with milk and honey (first stanza) equated with the Biblical Promised Land, presents to a historian, a city that is economically viable, viable in the sense that its location on a fertile region makes it possible for abundant food crops to thrive. Vegetables, tuber crops as well as fruits can be found all year round. The city's location on the banks of the Calabar River also provides enough seafood for its inhabitants, hence confirming the statement – a land flowing with milk and honey. This first stanza views Calabar from an economic perspective.

In the second stanza, one is confronted with the good moral values and educational attainment of the people as a result of early contact with Europeans largely from the seventeenth century, hence the statement, "if you seek for good manners and knowledge, go to Canaan where they abound". It is important to note that Calabar was one of the first regions in Nigeria to embrace Western European

culture and education. The Presbyterian missionaries arrived Calabar in 1846 and began evangelization. They established schools in the city such as The Duke Town Primary School (1846), and the Hope Waddell Training Institute (1895). These schools produced many Efik trained teachers who assisted the Protectorate government in establishing government - run schools in the interior (Noah 29). Similarly, the presence of missionaries such as Hope Waddell, Hugh Goldie, Mary Slessor and their successors influenced the religious, moral and educational life of the Efik people. Hence, the amiable and high moral standard of the people as portrayed in the second stanza. The third stanza presents the hospitable nature of the Efik people, which makes visitors resent going back to their own areas. In the last stanza, he extols once again the beauty of the city of Calabar and assures visitors of a good and peaceful life in the city. Inyang Nta Henshaw's 'Ediye Canaan' (Beautiful Canaan), on the whole, gives a historian an economic and social perspective of Calabar past and is a major example of how Efik music could aid historical reconstruction. In other words, Efik songs and music, aside being used to entertain, played a significant role in mirroring the past Efik society.

In conclusion, between the years 1900 and 1970, Efik literary culture was at an advanced stage, and expressed in several prose publications, plays, poetry, music, and songs and other forms of ethnographic data. Aside from being used as a means of entertainment, the above sources constitute an invaluable material for the reconstruction of Efik history. Through them, a historian gains some knowledge of the socio-economic, religious and political view of the Efik society.

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