

Efik Traditional Institutions and Missionary Evangelism in ¹Calabar, 1846 - 1854

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Abstract

The role of European missionaries in the evangelization of Calabar since 1846 has been given tremendous attention in scholarly discourse. Yet, these missionaries did not work in isolation nor did Efik traditional institutions pose as threats to evangelism as is often misunderstood. They (missionaries) depended on the latter in laying the foundation for evangelization in Calabar. Ironically, the same Efik institutions that were used in making inroads to Calabar were threatened by missionary enterprise. The research concludes that, equal credit should be awarded to both European missionaries and Efik traditional institutions (as represented by the Obong, Ndem and Ekpe), for the spread of Christianity in Calabar because the latter were indispensable to European missionary enterprise.

Introduction

The years 1846, 1849 and 1854 were significant in the lives of the Efik people of Calabar*. 1846 marked the arrival of the United Presbyterian Mission into Calabar under the leadership of Rev. Hope Waddell. Among his entourage were Rev. Edgerley and his wife, Andrew Chisolm (a carpenter), Edward Miller, a Negro teacher and an ex-slave boy called George. The mission was to spread Christianity in Calabar, the atmosphere was cordial

and the people of Calabar accorded them a grand reception to show their enthusiasm to receive the word. Based on this, a new relationship was formed between the Efik people and the missionaries in 1846. The other two years mentioned, 1849 and 1854, were years of soured relationship between the former and the latter, hence disrupting the cordial atmosphere that once obtained between them. In 1849, one of the pioneer missionaries, Revd. Edgerley went into the Ekpe Lodge and broke the sacred drum (Nair, 1972: 98), which he perceived as a threat to missionary evangelism. This offence was punishable by death because it posed a serious threat to Ekpe, the highest judicial and executive organ of Calabar. Edgerley, whom Ayandele (1966) described as "most intolerant and tactless" and as having "no spark of sympathy for the religious and cultural susceptibilities"(p.23) of the people, again, violated the sacred place of Anansa, the tutelary deity of the Efik people in 1854. This time, he broke its sacred egg and some images and removed some for personal amusement (Ayandele, 1966, p. 23). This act provoked the Efik people, and about sixty "infuriated fellows brandishing their sticks and cutlasses" (Nair, 1972, p. 99) followed him from the beach to his home. They forced their way into his domain and threatened his life and property. These two instances of misunderstanding between the Efik on the one hand and the missionaries (exemplified by Edgerley) on the other hand, gives a wrong impression that the Efik people and their traditional institutions as represented by Obong, Ekpe and Ndem, were threats to missionary evangelism. In the history of European missionary evangelism in Calabar, scholars seem to applaud the efforts of European missionaries while neglecting the role of traditional institutions, as the foundation stone for the spread of Christianity.

This paper attempts to correct the misrepresentation that Efik traditional institutions were a threat to evangelism; rather it was the other way round. Secondly, it attempts to prove that these institutions aided the spread of Christianity, hence, laid the foundation upon which missionaries built.

The Arrival of European Missionaries in Calabar

The arrival of Rev. Hope Waddell and his party in 1846 to Calabar was preceded by a series of correspondence between the kings of Calabar and the United Presbyterian Mission based in Jamaica. In one of the letters dated 4th December, 1842, King Eyamba of Duke Town desired to have missionaries in his domain to preach the gospel of Christianity (Waddell, 1863, p. 663). Similarly, in another letter written to the Jamaican Presbytery in 1843, King Eyamba and his chiefs agreed to allocate a parcel of land and offer protection to the missionaries when they arrive. King Eyamba and some of his chiefs namely, Henshaw Duke, Ekpo Jack, Adam Duke, Duke Ephraim and Antera Duke amongst others signed this letter. (Mcfarlan, 1957, p. 8). In her work,

Religion in Calabar, Roseline Hackett maintained that the Kings and chiefs of Calabar requested for missionary presence for two reasons. First, the missionaries were the agents of the transfer of knowledge and not the transient traders (Hackett, 1989, p. 58 - 59). Secondly, there was a tendency to perceive power in religious terms. In other words, many believed that the Bible held the key to European technical (and for some cultural) superiority and that the missionaries had the knowledge to unlock its secrets for the Africans (Hackett, 1989, p. 58 - 59). This is aptly captured as follows:

Now we can't sell slaves again, we must have too much man for country, and want something to make work and trade; and if we can get seed for cotton and coffee, we could make trade. Plenty sugar cane live here, and if some man can teach we way for do it, we get plenty sugar too... Mr. Blyth tell me England glad for send man to teach book and teach for understand God all same as Whiteman. If Queen do so, I glad too much (Letter cited in Waddell, 1863, p. 663 - 4).

The arrival of Rev. Hope Waddell and his entourage in 1846 to Calabar was followed by a colourful reception in the palace of King Eyamba V of Duke Town. At this reception witnessed by Eyamba's chiefs, the missionaries presented a Bible, which had been sent by friends from Scotland as a gift to the king. They were later allocated the portion of land on an elevated landscape and overlooking the river. The area was known as Mission Hill (Aye, 1967, p. 115).

Accompanied by Consul John Beecroft, the missionaries called next at Old Town where they met with the Chief Willy Tom Robins and were allowed to site a station and a school there. Consequently, the Old Town Presbyterian Church was started in 1846. Formerly located near the present United Cement Company, it was moved to its present site in 1964 when a permanent structure was constructed on Anansa road.

Efik traditional institution: An Aid to Missionary Evangelism

From 1846, missionary work progressed in Calabar. Two months after arrival, their houses had been erected and ready for occupation on a site that was formerly used to dump the corpses of supposed witches and evildoers. It took an Ekpe promulgation to stop the deposition of bodies on that site. To aid the missionaries settle down, Obong (King) Eyamba V "sent a gang of Calabar men, with an Egbo (Ekpe) officer at their head in official dress, to clean the ground "for their houses and put them" in possession (Waddell, 1863, p. 254).

Efik interpreters were employed and the missionaries used the medium to learn the language. A Sunday school commenced, first in one of

king Eyamba's buildings donated to the missionaries for that purpose, but was later shifted to another location. King Eyamba, who requested for missionary presence in Calabar, encouraged evangelism and contributed to the latter's efforts materially, as can be observed through the donation of his building. In Creek Town, King Eyo's compound hosted church services where the king himself usually acted as interpreter during church meetings and services (Aye, 1967, p. 119- 120).

Although the kings and chiefs of Calabar did not share the same ideas in all religious beliefs with the missionaries, they found affinity in some. For instance, Rev. Hope Waddell and King Eyo of Creek Town constantly held debates on their varying religious views. King Eyo defended the custom of libation and sacrifices, which he maintained, were meant to honour God. Yet he accepted the second commandment and was impressed with the seventh commandment concerning marriage (Hackett, 1989, p. 61). He also shared a common ground with the missionaries with regard to certain Hebrew rites and customs like circumcision, 'the Passover' and other customs. However, King Eyo's test of faith and encouragement of missionary evangelism could be largely perceived when he, through Ekpe promulgation, abolished the Calabar Sunday (Ekpe day and a market day) and upheld God's Sunday. As a matter of fact, both kings Eyamba V and Eyo II encouraged their subjects to receive religious instruction. Their enthusiastic attitude towards missionary evangelism resulted in the series of reforms observed in the Calabar society. The traditional form of worship gave way to the European; Sabbath markets were prohibited to pave way for church services; human sacrifices and the killing of twins were halted; and the public trial by the poisonous 'esere' bean amongst other ills were attacked.

The above reveals that Christianity was gaining grounds in Calabar. This spiritual growth and subsequent reforms did not come easy but for the assistance of the Kings of Calabar as shown above, and some prominent Efik men. Some of these men were Mr. Young, a brother to Obong Eyamba V who studied English in England and advanced missionary enterprise through his popular interpreting of the gospel during Sunday services (Aye, 1967, p. 119). Others were Archibong Duke, described as very friendly; Henry Cobham, described as a shrewd and active businessman; Ironbar, a man of considerable wealth and great honesty; Adam Duke, a man of great influence; and Bassey Offiong. The friendly disposition displayed by these Efik men was encouraged by the kingship.

Ekpe, the highest judicial and executive authority in Calabar, should also be credited for being the pillar by which the church gained acceptance in Calabar. It was Ekpe promulgation that was used in drafting men to cut down

the mangrove trees and assemble its logs at the site where the Mission House was to be erected (Waddell, 1863, p. 254). Ekpe was used to assemble the people for religious instruction. Its laws ended the usual Calabar Sunday market, which was interfering with God's day (Waddell, 1863, p. 438). Indeed, the role of Ekpe in laying the foundation for missionary evangelism can be illustrated in the popular Efik saying that "Ekpe Ikpaha, Abasi Ikpaha, Koro ekedade Ekpe ebop iko Abasi" literally translated to mean "Ekpe will not die; God will not die, because it was Ekpe that was used in planting the word of God".

The traditional institutions in Calabar did not discourage the spread of Christianity, but rather provided a very fertile ground for missionary growth and expansion. With this support, the missionaries made some attempts at conversion and baptism of the new converts, among them, the first Efik convert, native teacher and Reverend Minister by name, Essien Essien Ukpabio. He became a member of the Lord's vineyard on the 16th of October, 1853 when he received baptism. Ukpabio's sister, Sarah, followed likewise. She was baptised on the first Sunday in the month of November. Another convert, Mary Taylor Anderson received baptism on the 30th of October, 1853 (Aye, 1967, p.122). In Old Town, a youth, Edung Ikang also known as Joseph Edgerley was registered in the growing list of converts and baptised. Church wedding was greatly encouraged among converts, and to this effect, David King, grandson of Great Duke Ephraim and one Abasiekong were joined in holy matrimony on the 22nd of February, 1854.

From a handful of faithfuls, the church community grew into a fairly large group. The 100 to 150 people attending Sabbath meetings in 1849 gradually rose to 400 in 1871, excluding the 150 Sunday school pupils. The ability to translate the Holy Bible into the Efik language further gave impetus to missionary evangelism. Hope Waddell, with the assistance of Mr. Young, were the first people to attempt to reduce the Efik language into writing. By 1868, the Efik Holy Bible was completed and published. This researcher submits that the contribution of Mr. Young in the translation, editing, and final publication of the Efik Holy Bible cannot be over-emphasised. Rev Hugh Goldie also published other literary works such as the Efik Hymn book, catechism, and dictionary and grammar books.

The Impact of Missionary Evangelism on Efik Traditional Institutions

Scholars have expressed different opinions about the impact of missionary activities on West Africa in general and Nigeria in particular. While Mary Kingsley, Edmund Morel and Edward Blyden have drawn attention largely to the disruptive impact of missionary arrival, (Ayandele, 1966) Ayandele, in a

balance of opinion has maintained that although missionaries upset and disintegrated the Nigerian society, yet their positive impact outweighed the negative. He mentioned the awakening of nationalist movements in Nigeria, the foundation of modern health care facilities and most of all the advent of Western education (Ayandele, 1966) as their greatest impact on the society. To Ayandele, the missionary was necessarily a revolutionary on a grand scale.

Missionary presence in Calabar had far-reaching impact on the lives of the people, as well as the city of Calabar. Through the instrumentality of the Calabar Kings, particularly Eyamba V of Duke Town and Eyo II of Creek Town, the European missionaries succeeded in carrying out some reforms. Concerning these reforms, however, Ayandele noted that some of them actually destroyed the religious and social basis of the indigenous society. This observation is merited to some extent because some reforms, no doubt, upset the traditional institutions found in the society particularly among the Efik people. It is of utmost importance therefore, to highlight some aspects of the society that were affected by these reforms.

In Calabar society, missionary evangelism first appealed largely to the servile population and women. These groups were the oppressed and the downtrodden. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Christian teachings of equality and fairness to all men was a basic attraction to the faith. The Calabar nobles on the other hand were apprehensive of such sermons because, according to Noah, it was to them a call for rebellion, given the fact that there was a large servile population in the city-states of Calabar (Noah, 1980). Their fears were confirmed because, masking under the cloak of Christianity, slaves began to disobey their masters, and missionaries aided insubordination to Efik laws that were repugnant to them. They did this by making the Mission House an abode for recalcitrant people, both slaves and women. For example, Ayandele stated that:

The missionaries claimed that the Mission House constituted a sanctuary and that any Efik who broke tribal laws which were repugnant to the missionaries and who sought sanctuary with the missionaries became automatically absolved from their tribal obligations (Ayandele, 1966, p. 24 - 25).

The above meant that Ekpe, as the law making organ and government of Calabar, despite its role in the planting of Christianity, now had its position threatened. This is because more and more people came under the tutelage of the Mission House and thwarted the powers of Ekpe. This situation became worse in the 1850's when slaves, seizing the opportunity caused by missionary presence and traders, banded themselves in a blood covenant. In 1851, they had a clash with Ekpe and threatened to destroy the town if their imprisoned

members were not released ((Dike, 1956, p. 157). They went a step further by ensuring the execution of one Ekpo Eyo, nephew to Eyo III, an Ekpe executioner "who had in various ways made himself particularly obnoxious to the slave population" (Aye, 1994, p.83). This insubordination, threat and final blow to the Ekpe institution were the outcome of missionary activities in Calabar.

Again, the foundation of Efik society was shaken when Rev. Edgerley entered and disrupted the Anansa shrine at Obutong, one of the basic existentialities of the Efik people. To understand the implications of Edgerley's act, it must be stressed that the Ekpe, Obong and Ndem were to the Efik people a trinity, which their lives revolved around. The Obong represented the kingship which all must be subjected to; the Ekpe represented the law governing the Calabar people, and the highest judicial organ in the community; and Ndem represented the traditional religion of the people of Calabar. By desecrating the Anansa shrine, therefore, the powers of Ndem were greatly challenged.

The Obongship was another aspect of Efik institution that was greatly affected by the coming of the missionaries. In this regard, missionaries, together with their counterparts European traders, began to assume the position of kingmakers and influenced the election of Efik kings. There were attempts by Efik kings to take advantage of missionary presence to curry favour, thereby leading to rivalries between these kings, which posed as a threat to the society. For instance, the rivalry between Kings Eyo II of Creek Town and Eyamba V of Duke Town was fuelled by missionary presence, so much that Rev. Hope Waddell aptly stated that: "The jealousy and rivalry of the two Kings of Calabar may be product of good to the Mission, but it will also be product of great difficulty to those who conduct it" (*Hope Waddell Magazine* 1, 11th May, 1846).

Some aspects of the Efik traditional religion lost their importance because of growing missionary evangelistic fervour. The symbol of the Efik deity, Ekpenyong, was one of such institutions that lost its traditional ritual importance. Furthermore, the office of Oku Ndem (priests/priestesses of the Efik tutelary deity) had already become extinct from the mid-nineteenth century partly due to missionary evangelism (Nair, 1972, p. 279). The logical consequence of this was that the traditional institutions that aided missionary evangelism and were hitherto revered became mere shadows of their former selves.

Conclusion

In sum, it is significant to note that the European missionaries that arrived Calabar from 1846 did not operate in isolation from the society. They obtained and utilised the assistance of Efik traditional institutions as represented by the Obong, Ekpe and Ndem, as well as the local populace. These laid the foundation for their successful missionary enterprise. As the profile of missionary evangelism soared higher, those of the traditional institutions dwindled largely as a result of the threat coming from this same enterprise they sought to promote. Be that as it may, when the names of Hope Waddell, Hugh Goldie, Mary Slessor, Rev. Edgerley are mentioned in the history of Calabar missionary evangelism, let it be remembered that without the assistance of Kings Eyamba V of Duke Town, King Eyo II of Creek town, Archibong Duke, Henny Cobham, Bassey Offiong, Adam Duke, Ironbar and Mr. Young, their (missionary) attempt at spreading the gospel of Christendom would have been in vain. These 'black Efik missionaries' and their institutions, laid the foundation upon which the European missionaries built.

Note

1. For the purpose of this research, Calabar here refers to the old Duke Town, Creek Town and Old Town (Obutong).

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