

King Eyo Honesty Ii And The Modernization Of Old Calabar – South Eastern Nigeria In The Nineteenth Century

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ABSTRACT:

The history of the world up to the twentieth century is replete with great personalities often referred to as modernizers. Notable among such men are Peter the Great of Russia, Otto Von Bismark of Prussia, Menelik of Ethiopia, and Mohamed Ali of Egypt. These men impacted positively on their different societies by either uniting or modernizing the people through the adoption of western civilization. Convinced that western civilization was indeed superior in its military and industrial aspects, King Eyo Honesty II of Old Calabar, in spite of opposition from his council of chiefs, requested for and welcomed the missionaries in the nineteenth century because of his desire for western civilization through western education. At the end Old Calabar society was better off than before. The methodology adopted in this paper is the multi-disciplinary approach of historical writing with emphasis on primary and secondary sources. Evidence so obtained confirms King Eyo Honesty II as indeed a great leader who desired the best for his people and society, opposition to civilization through modernization by his council notwithstanding.

KEY WORDS: EYO HONESTY II, MODERNIZATION, OLD CALABAR, MISSIONARIES

Introduction

The Nigerian coastline on which the Atlantic Ocean break its surf is intersected at its eastern most point by an estuary where two rivers – the Cross and the Calabar empty their waters; at the head of the estuary was situated the trading settlement of Old Calabar amongst the most important and bursting trade emporiums on the coast for nearly three hundred years (Nair, 1972:1). Among the occupants of the city were the Efik people of Creek Town (Obio-Okoro), Old

Town (Obutong), Duke Town (Atakpa) and Henshaw Town (Nsidung).

Efik traditions about themselves seem, for their part, to be divided on the question of their origin – while some claim Ibibio affiliation, others claim Igbo, while yet, others claim non-Ibibio and Igbo origins (Andah, 1988:50). The tradition that recognizes Igbo origin for the Efik postulates that they actually settled at Ututu in Igbo country until they were expelled by the indigenous people for refusing to acknowledge their local god (Andah,

1988:50). While in Igboland, they were referred to as 'Eburutu', i.e. either the corruption of words 'Hebrew and Ututu', or the name of a place called Burutu in the district of the Niger Delta (Andah, 1988:50).

In support of this Igbo origin of the Efik is Afigbo, in his article "Efik Origin and Migrations reconsidered" (Afigbo, 1965:267-280). He maintains that the Efik are Igbo. This claim was made against the earlier expressed views of Leonard, Talbot, Jeffreys, Mylius, Ford and Hutchuson that the Efik are Ibibio (Udo, 1976:154). In his reaction however, Afigbo raised the fact that the only evidence the above writers give in support of their position is that the Efik speak a language which is a dialect of Ibibio. He further maintained that language is not a sure clue to ethnic origin of a people that is why the Onitsha people of Eastern Nigeria with a strong tradition of origin from Edo of Benin, now speak a dialect of Igbo (Afigbo, 1965:267-280).

Another common tradition of origin for the Efik is that which points to the East. Some say they are oriental people who came from Palestine and wandered through Ghana, to Ututu, Ibom and finally settled at Uruan, while some are of the view that they (Efik) originated from Egypt and then migrated through the banks of the Niger to Uruan (Noah, 1980:7). According to Aye, a strong supporter of the Eastern origin, the Efik are different from their immediate neighbours in many respects, but have strong similarities with early oriental people (Aye, 1967:25). These

similarities ranges from mode of dressing, elaborate burial systems of their kings, to the belief in transmigration of the soul, a future life in the land of the dead which is similar to the mourning of the ancient Egyptians (Aye, 1967:26-27).

However, in spite of this claim by Aye, the Ibibio ancestry of the Efik has been popularized by African scholars like Udo and Noah. The latter feels persuaded by numerous evidences to conclude that the Efik are Ibibio by origin; the claim of Palestine or Egypt origin has been described as mere historical romances with no substantial documentary or archaeological evidence (Noah, 1980:8).

In general terms, the origin of the Efik people and their arrival in Calabar constitutes a hard knot that has not been untied uptill this day. But on the question of when they arrived in Calabar, their traditions and those of their neighbours the Qua and Efut, indicate that they arrived before trade with Europe began (Latham, 1978:10). By the sixteenth century the different city states of Creek Town, Old Town and Duke Town had been formed. Those city states were jealous and envious of the other as they developed.

Originally, Efik people were fishermen but their settlement in Old Calabar coincided with a boom in the slave trade and this brought about wealth which paved the way for internal restructuring in their socio-economic and political spheres of life. An important development in the

political sphere that impacted directly on the people was the emergence of leaders such as the Great Duke Ephraim who rejected the title of 'King' which he taught was rather common and preferred 'Duke', because he thought this more expressive of power than that of king (Aye, 2000:107); and King Eyo Honesty II who more than any other leader before and after, set out to modernize the Old Calabar society by introducing those western ideas and practices he believed would make the people compete favourably with the Europeans.

KING EYO HONESTY II

I. His Rise to Fame and Power

King Eyo Honesty II (Eyo Eyo Nsa) was born in 1788 to Princess Inyang Essien Ekpe and Eyo Honesty I of Creek Town. His father Eyo Honesty (Eyo Honesty I) was a brave man and a wealthy trader but not royal in blood. On his death however, his offspring and descendants created that royal dynasty of Eyo Kings in Creek Town for practically a century from 1853 to 1931 (Aye, 2009:2).

As a child, Eyo Eyo Nsa took advantage of his contact with English traders to learn how to speak and write the English language which was a powerful commercial vehicle of trade in those days. He served as a cabin boy under some English ship captains and through this means had the opportunity of traveling with them on various occasions in their slave ships between Old Calabar, the West Indies and England (Aye,

2009:25). Following the death of his father Eyo Honesty I in 1820 and his Guardian Duke Ephraim in 1834, Eyo Eyo Nsa set out on the path to greatness by participating in the slave trade and when the trade was abolished in the nineteenth century, he waded seriously into the palm oil trade with equal zeal. In his discussion with a European trader he confessed that:

When young I was nobody, for I was poor; and it was long before I set up as a gentleman. I put my mind to my trade and worked; at first a little, and then more. When ships come I trade with their money, and when they go away I trade with my own ... and now pass every man (in wealth) in all Calabar (Aye, 2009:viii).

With his new found wealth, Eyo Eyo Nsa founded his own house, 'Eyo Eyo Nsa House' and in 1835 was crowned the king of Creek Town and became known as Eyo Honesty II while his newly founded house was known as Eyo Honesty the Second House (Waddell, 1970: 312). In business and in governance, Eyo dwelt on his experience as a child under his father and later under his guardian, the Great Duke Ephraim. As observed by Aye:

If his father was quick of temper or easily irritated when wronged, he would learn to be calm and collected, lest he should implicate himself through hasty replies. If his father was blunt of speech and this proved to be the bane of his later life, Eyo would be subtle, tactful and hypocritical in dealing with adversaries to avoid

any awkward consequences ... his two guardians were excellent in business; and where both were concerned, it paid off squarely (Aye, 2009:25).

In Creek Town Eyo appealed to his brothers and half brothers to join him in the crusade for the restoration of their ancestral home and heritage; this he did in such a way as to avoid exciting the envy or hostility of his enemies as it happened to his father. He reconciled all the warring factions of the extended families of his father's House. In reconciling the people, he appealed not only to their common sense and domestic loyalty, but also to their native and traditional sentiments (Aye, 2009:31).

In an age where commercial interest determined the nature of relationship between the Europeans and Africans, King Eyo's handling of the Europeans in Old Calabar has been of interest to many scholars. He kept their friendship and was ready to yield to them up to a point but not beyond. While he did not allow himself to be used as a pliant instrument for European designs, he was able to gain the support of European agents to strengthen himself, materially and morally, in his struggle to establish commercial and political hegemony over a wide area. On the other hand, he knew his limits and did not overstep the bounds of his traditional authority. In 1850, for instance, he put off pressures exerted on him by the missionaries to "blow *Ekpe*" on Old Town that had violated the treaty outlawing human sacrifice. His refusal to carry out the biddings of the missionaries was on grounds that

he could not use his influence to pass laws outside his town because no Calabar king had authority outside his town. Moreover, the law against human sacrifice had not technically been proclaimed in Old Town as such was literally not binding on the Town – the technicality of the matter was considered crucial because the Old Town chief, Old Willie Tom, was absent from the *Ekpe* meeting which sanctioned the law. On that ground, Eyo argued that though the law was morally binding on the chiefs it was legally null and void in Old Town (Nair, 1972:2-9).

Unlike most of his contemporaries, King Eyo Honesty II in 1846 was bold enough to turn down overtures for protection from the French after he had earlier applied to the British for an English flag to be hoisted in Calabar. Even though he accepted an invitation by the French commodore and captain to visit them on board the French vessel but he bluntly refused the offer to hoist a French flag on his canoe arguing:

No, suppose I go in my own boat, I carry English colours, I be English man. ... If you will send for your own boat for me I can go in it and your boat can carry your colours; but my boat always carry English colours (Nair, 1972:2-9).

II. Eyo Honesty and the Missionaries

Though a traditionalist, Eyo Honesty II was supportive to the missionaries and their activities in Calabar. In doing this he met with difficulties with some of his chiefs who felt that he should not encourage white people to live in

their country, lest more of them coming would eventually threaten their ownership of it. But the foresighted King tried to convince them that white men's power rested in their knowledge because of their education acquired from youth; that it would be best for them to have a school in their town, and their children taught like whiteman (Aye, 2009:66). But while welcoming the missionaries, he set out to place a check on reckless missionary zeal. He also resisted conversion to Christianity and refused to give up polygamy. His determination to control the nature and pace of change in his community later involved him in a series of crises in his relations with missionaries. From 1851, the missionary records are full of his 'horrific stories', 'cruelties' and 'brutalities' as well as his 'disordered fleshly lusts'. He was caricatured as a 'licensures despot' whose way of life was 'simply abominable'. In July 1855, when he took on more wives, Rev. Waddell, who depended on him for so many things, swore to be independent of him. On 2nd September, 1855, the Reverend had his last public Sabbath meeting in his yard and subsequently refused completely his aid on grounds that:

The deplorable inconsistencies of his own (Eyo's) life and continued impenitence with the divine truths which he was the medium of communicating has long opposed my mind. His aid in this way was valuable as long as it was required. At first the incongruity of his conduct with his teachings was not remarked, indeed not remarkable. It was to be expected. But it is now

remarkable and prejudicial. At first useful his services have become useless or injurious; for he does not himself believe, repent or obey (Nair, 1972:65-66).

In fact, Rev. Waddell wrote of the difficulty of dealing plainly and pointedly with Eyo in conversation: 'so prompt is he in reply, and so fertile in excuses, and so bold in denials and so plausible in yielding' (Nair, 1972:65-66).

It should be noted here that in inviting the missionaries, King Eyo was not so much interested in evangelism but in the white man's knowledge and other material benefits that may come with it. While negotiating the anti-slave trade treaties with Commander Raymond, he pleaded that:

One thing I want for beg your Queen, I have two much man now, I can't sell slaves... But if I can get some cotton and coffee to grow, and man for teach me, and make sugar cane for me country come up proper, and sell for trade side I very glad ... (Nair, 1972:86).

On arrival in Calabar, King Eyo while receiving the missionaries further confided in Rev. Waddell that he was willing to devote some hundred acres of his territory to cotton cultivation if anyone showed him the way to go about it. It is an irony that while the missionaries were concerned with conversion, King Eyo and other Efik noble and freemen were interested in new skills that would be of material benefit to them – Calabar was a trade emporium and what was urgently needed for this economy were men with

the knowledge to keep accounts and records of transactions, to conduct trade negotiations in the language of trade, that is, English. In this case what was needed from the missionaries was not so much their spiritual message as the provision of an education that had relevance and meaning to an intensely commercial community (Nair, 1972:86).

King Eyo's rejection of conversion and baptism in spite of his onerous support to the church was hinged on the egalitarian assumptions of Christianity as a religion. In a society where slave holding was an important aspect of status, and political power to a large extent a function of number of followers, such egalitarian assumption constituted a disruptive force that should not be entertained in Calabar. Although King Eyo threw open his compound to the missionaries, acted as their interpreter, and consented to their social reforms when he thought them warranted and acceptable to his countrymen, encouraged them when they despaired, and listened to their admonitions with patience and understanding that deeply touched their hearts, he never permitted the missionaries to consolidate their position (Nair, 1972:64). Of course, he knew that to turn into a radical reformer and be a pliant instrument in the hands of the missionaries was not only to court the hostility of his older and more conservative followers, but was also to allow them to entrench their social and religious positions – he took a rational attitude toward Christian evangelism and the changes they espoused and accepted only those which he thought were not hasty (Nair,

1972:68). For this reason in all the states of southern Nigeria where Christian missions operated, it was only among the Efik of Old Calabar that the rebelliousness which missionary propaganda was capable of fomenting among slaves was on a relatively small scale (Ayandele, 1966:84).

III. His Influence Outside Creek Town

In the eighteenth century, Old Calabar consisted of four trading towns or republics namely: Creek Town, Henshaw Town, Duke Town and Old Town. Each of these Towns had an independent ruler who catered for her peculiar affairs, Waddell, a Scottish Missionary observed that "the towns of Calabar are, in fact, a number of small republics each with its own chief and council united only by *Egbo* fraternity (Umeh, 1980:28). *Egbo* fraternity, i.e. *Ekpe*, was a sort of freemasonry and secret cult that originally united the aristocratic classes in all the Efik settlements. It came to replace the original '*Ndem*' cult which was the original integrating force until it lost its effectiveness during the slave trade (Latham, 1978:35).

In all the towns of Calabar, i.e. outside his base Creek Town, King Eyo Honesty's reputation and influence was beyond any question. For instance, even though he had no jurisdiction over Duke Town, he was often invited by Duke Town chiefs and others to interpose in any crisis that occurred there – in 1852 when Duke Town was reduced to a state of anarchy following the death

of Archibong I and the abdication of Young, it was Eyo who restored peace and order. As noted by Rev. Anderson, “King Eyo must have performed his part of the business with great skill and prudence, for had he not done so, his presence in Duke Town would have increased rather than hushed the storm” (Latham, 1978:35).

The opening of Old Calabar for foreign trade witnessed a number of changes that could not immediately be explained by the Efik. Consequently the people came to attribute changes or events, they did not favour in their society, to the supernatural powers of persons they disliked. Such persons were accused of witchcraft (freemason); in fact, ordeals were visited not only upon slaves but also upon freemen suspected of having resorted to witchcraft for political, economic or social reasons (Nair, 1972:52). In Old Calabar, trial by ordeal involved ‘chopping of nut’; this was a process where a poisonous bean – the Calabar beans or *esere* – was administered to those suspected of witchcraft. The vomiting of it without death signified innocence, but where the accused persons died, it was believed that they were guilty.

This method of dictating guilt was barbaric in that the magic potion, prepared to a certain formula, was certain to cause agony in whoever it was administered to. It was also possible for the person who administered it to the accused to determine whether the latter survived or died by the mode of administration (Nair, 1972:52). This practice was strongly condemned by the

missionaries and though held in high esteem by the people as a means of dictating guilt, it was later forbidden in the society by King Eyo Honesty II. He repeatedly assured the people that once they believed in Christ Jesus, no witchcraft or ‘freemason’ would harm them and also never would they have ‘freemason’ against any man (Aye, 2009:78, 79, 106).

In general terms, King Eyo Honesty II’s modernization of the Old Calabar society benefited the freemen, the slaves and the oppressed. He came up with laws that checked inhumation at the deaths of men of rank. He also fought against the killing of twins and twin mothers, twenty four years before the arrival of Mary Slessor in 1876 to champion the cause of twins and their mothers (Aye, 2009:125).

King Eyo was highly respected by his people. He owned most of the slaves in Creek Town and a large number of the gentlemen in the town depended on him. Outside Creek Town, a large number of Duke Town chiefs and people also were under heavy obligation to him. In the trade of the area, by 1852 the European supercargoes paid two-thirds of the total comeys paid to Calabar to King Eyo Honesty II, while the remaining one third was paid to the King of Duke town – comeys were levied at the rate of twenty coppers per registered ton of vessel. In fact, King Eyo Honesty II took advantage of the rising oil demands in Europe to exploit that trade fully, and to consolidate his position with his wealth and rising political profile came the rumour that he

was asserting his right to the supreme authority in the whole of Calabar to become the 'Edidem'. When informed that the chiefs and some of the supercargoes were offended by that ambition, especially the supercargoes who felt that a united Calabar under a single ruler would negatively affect their trade, he replied:

Why so? I take no more than God has given me. He make me King, when he make me pass them all in riches and power ... I don't make myself king for country, God make me (Aye, 2009:110).

Summary and Conclusion

Old Calabar made up of a number of independent city states witnessed significant changes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries owing to European presence in the area. These changes were due to the internal restructuring of economic, social and political relationships. Politically, it brought about the kingship institution with the rise and fall of many kings amongst them, King Eyo Honesty II admired and loved by missionaries and traders because of the many qualities he possessed. He spoke English intelligibly; neither smoked nor drank, and was honest and progressive in his outlook. Because of his love for western civilization, he invited and received the missionaries because he firmly believed that the route to western civilization was through western education. He upheld those traditions that were not barbaric but condemned those he felt were barbaric and obnoxious such as trial by ordeal, killing of twins and twin mothers.

Even though he believed highly on the European missionaries, allowed the use of his courtyard for service and even opted to serve as the interpreter, but owing to the revolutionary nature of the missionary preaching, he refused to be converted into Christianity. In the end he showed most remarkably that it was possible to 'modernize' without becoming either 'westernized' or 'Christianized'.

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