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OLD CALABAR MERCHANTS AND THE OFF-SHORE BRITISH COMMUNITY, 1650–1750*

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ABSTRACT. This study examines and analyses the character and dynamics of interactions between Old Calabar merchants and off-shore British slavers as trading partners in the Atlantic economy from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth century. A re-reading of foundational texts and a critical interrogation of oral testimonies in Calabar and its hinterland reveals the great exchanges that took place in the Atlantic world among populations that were radically different in language, culture and physique. The enormous economic and social benefits that Efik middlemen grossed from their collaboration with British slavers take us beyond the stereotypes that the native auxiliaries of the slave trade were merely helpless victims, left with no choice but to play the role assigned to them in the infamous trade. The best way to preserve and honour the memory of the slave trade in Old Calabar is to emphasize the place of local agents.

Introduction

Britain and Old Calabar (now Calabar), a seaport in West Africa situated in the lower reaches of the Cross River and mostly inhabited by the Efik, the Qua and the Efut, have records of historical connections through waterways. The indigenous inhabitants of Old Calabar took advantage of their geographical location on the Calabar River near the estuary of the Cross River and their proximity to the Atlantic Ocean to cultivate important 'Atlantic contacts' which enabled them to completely overshadow their hinterland neighbours in the affairs of south-east Nigeria in the pre-colonial period, especially with the onset of the trade across the Atlantic. I have argued elsewhere that, 'between the middle of the seventeenth and opening years of the twentieth centuries, Calabar may have had greater affinities with Britain than some of her current immediate neighbours' (Imbua 2009:88).

A.J.H. Latham asserted that 'buying and selling between the Europeans and the chieftains of Calabar brought about cultural contacts, ethnic mingling, and exchange of ideas which resulted in political complications, conflict and change' (1973:145). Kannan K. Nair agreed that Old Calabar had over the years maintained uninterrupted contact with the people from the interior in particular and from the fifteenth century the external world in general (1972:xiii). Offshore British merchants provided the enabling

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environment for greater intercourse between Calabar and Britain. The development of the slave trade created the initial economic link that endeared the British to the people of Calabar. More than any other community in the Bight of Biafra, Old Calabar used its links with the British and its access to their capital to move from the margins of the Atlantic economy to a much more important position. Prominent figures in the early history of Old Calabar lifted themselves from relative obscurity into respectability by acting as middlemen in the Calabar trade (Imbua 2009:4). The main commodity in the era of the slave trade came from the interior, while the manufactured goods for which the slaves were exchanged came via the Atlantic. The same dynamics continued after the external slave trade was extinguished in favour of so-called legitimate trade, since the main trade goods – palm produce, ivory and the like – still came from the interior, while the foreign goods for which they were exchanged still came from Europe. The Nigerian historian, Adiele Afigbo, argued that the high profile that the Efik of Old Calabar enjoyed in the affairs of the Bight of Biafra and its hinterland, between the seventeenth century and the end of the nineteenth century was owed to the strategic position the Efik occupied in the transatlantic trade as middlemen between the visiting Europeans and the people of the hinterland (Afigbo 2005:155).

The concept of Old Calabar

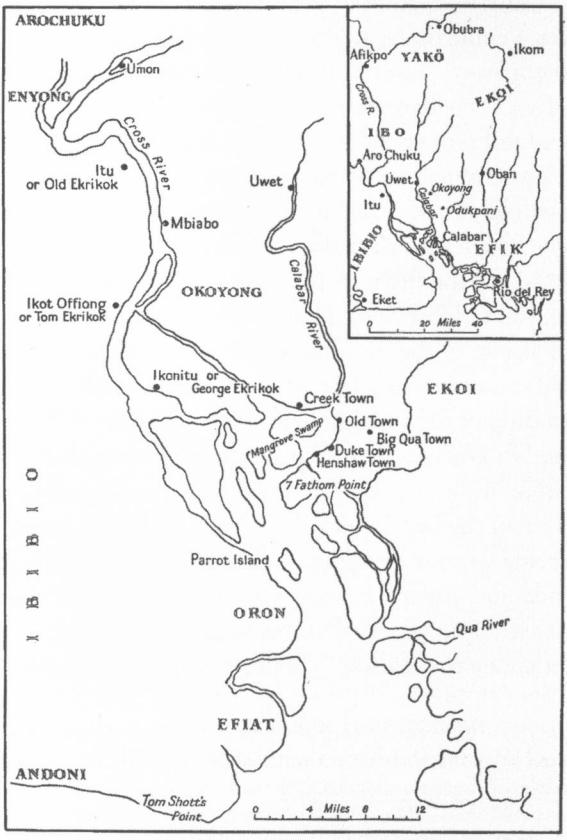
For a proper understanding of some of the issues discussed in this article, it is important that one has a clear picture of the delimitated area of study. From available records, it appears that Old Calabar (later renamed Calabar in 1904) has been used in three different geographical contexts over the years. The earliest usage confined the term to the city states, namely, Creek Town, Old Town and Duke Town, the latter including Archibong Town, Cobham Town, Henshaw Town and Eyamba Town.[1] A second usage of Old Calabar regards it as synonymous with the Efik, the most assertive of the indigenous groups in Calabar between the sixteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries (Uya 1990:195). This usage was already evident at the time of the diarist Antera Duke in the late eighteenth century.[2] Defined in this way, Old Calabar would include all the Efik settlements in the Lower Cross River Basin and exclude the non-Efik people in the re-

1 This is the sense in which Old Calabar is used in Effiong U. Aye's "Old Calabar through the centuries" (1967).

2 Antera Duke (Ntiero Edem Effiom) was a leader and slave merchant in Old Calabar. The importance of his remarkable diary for the years 1785 to 1787 has recently been aptly captured: 'Antera Duke's diary, written in his own hand and for his own use, is a candid account of daily life in an African community during a period of great historical interest. Antera wrote his thoughts at a peak of trade when Efik merchants, over a three year period, sold Europeans 15,000 slaves, 500,000 yams and 100 tons of ivory, palm oil, dyewood, and pepper [...] Antera's voice is that of a major businessman from an important commercial centre in eighteenth-century Atlantic world' (Behrendt, Latham, and Northrup 2010:3–4).

gion. Lastly, following Efik influences through trade, missionary activities and cultural contacts within the lower Cross River region, the concept of Old Calabar came to be extended to include most of the inhabitants of the Lower Cross River Basin, namely the Efik, Efut, Qua, Ibibio, Annang and Oron (Uya 1990:195). In this article, Old Calabar will be used in the second sense, since almost all the local merchants in Old Calabar were of Efik extraction. It was they who made Old Calabar a major centre of the Atlantic slave trade on the West African coast.

Under present-day political arrangement in Nigeria, the area of study falls within the confines of the Calabar Municipal and Calabar South Local Government Areas in Cross River State. Calabar is geographically located at latitude 04°57' North and longitude 08°20' East. It is situated about 48 kilometres from the estuary where the Calabar River and the Cross River converge before pouring into the Bight of Bonny. To the north are the upper reaches of the Cross River, Oban and Ogoja, while to the west are the lands inhabited by the Ibibio and Igbo peoples. Calabar is bordered on the east by Cameroon and to the south by the estuary of the Cross River (map).



Map of Old Calabar at the Cross River Estuary (Forde 1956:vi)

RATIONALE OF STUDY AND METHODOLOGY

This study is partly based on Christopher Krantz's observation that

> the study of specific areas and time periods in history often takes a cyclical form, whereby, after a period of initial interest and the publishing of so-called foundational texts, certain topics often lay fallow for a number of years until it is judged that a reappraisal is necessary (2005:206).

Krantz observes correctly that Old Calabar history has entered a new cycle of interest and that it is time to offer a reappraisal of the foundational texts, many written over a generation ago (2005:207).

Based on the arguments in some of the foundational texts, unwary historians have painted a negative image of Old Calabar's interaction with European slavers, describing it as parasitism rather than symbiosis. Conversely, promoters of defensive history argue that their ancestors did not play an enabling role in the infamous slave trade. A respected and often quoted scholar of Efik extraction recently argued angrily that 'the Efik of Old Calabar did not sell slaves. People brought unwanted people from the hinterland and the Europeans carried them away'.[3] As this article demonstrates, ancestors on all sides of the Atlantic were involved. The claim that the Efik did not sell slaves or that British slavers used economic and military coercion to intimidate Efik merchants into supplying slaves willy-nilly shows unfaithfulness to the evidence.

Perhaps influenced by the above claim, the Calabar Slave History Museum has been created with glaring missing gaps, which suggest that it is a project of propaganda.[4] Overlooking the Cross River that flows into the Bight of Biafra and that facilitated the exportation of slaves from the region, the Calabar Slave History Museum has fourteen divisions. Each division addresses an aspect of the slave trade, with some emphasis on what being captured, chained and sold meant for the Africans and what the trade meant for the European merchants. The building of the Calabar Slave History Museum has a history of slavery behind it; it is situated in a former slave trading depot, known to many people as 'the point of no return', and its walls are decorated with scenes of numerous slaves chained together. The first section of the interior of the museum is a hall to whose walls are attached metal plaques carrying various inscriptions and images that provide glimpses into the era of the slave trade and slavery. Section two is a cinema hall that presents a pre-Atlantic slavery and slave trading society that was peaceful, altruistic and lived a communal lifestyle. This documentary is entitled "Chains of captivity". Section

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3 Chief Effiong U. Aye of Creek Town said this in 2010 when Claudine Boothe, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Bristol, insisted with vented anger that the Efik of Old Calabar should pay reparations to her hinterland communities and to African-Americans for enabling the slave trade.

4 The Calabar Slave History Museum was established in May 2007 to commemorate the two hundredth anniversary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. It is a specialised museum which tells the story of slavery as witnessed in Old Calabar and its environs.

three has a big boat loaded with black slaves who are systematically arranged in such a way that rebellion is made impossible. In this section, there are also wooden barrels that were used for storing palm oil, one of the items carried on board the ships, as well as wooden boxes, which were reportedly used to carry spices and ivory.

Section four has three interesting features. The first is the pictorial dramatization of slaves who were thrown off the ships for various reasons. The second are adverts that were placed for the sale of slaves. The third and last unit of this section gives the names of slaves who were exported through Calabar port. Section five contains items given in exchange for slaves, most conspicuously spirits. Section six represents an auctioning suite where the slaves were sold to the highest bidder. Section seven represents the branding of slaves acquired from the auctioning room. Section eight comprises images of slaves employed in various occupations in the Americas. Section nine demonstrates the creation of African cultures in the New World. The Ekpe society stands out clearly as one of the primary Calabar institutions during the days of slavery. It should be remembered that it played an important role during the slave trade era. As an effective institution of debt recovery, Ekpe society regulated European shipping, serving as a collective means of imposing sanctions, boycotting specific ships, and protecting the interests of traders in their credit arrangements.

Using a variety of means, section ten reconstructs the resistance to slavery. This is immediately followed by section eleven, which is a re-creation of various kinds of punishment meted out to those who revolted against slavery in the Americas. Sections twelve and thirteen deal directly with the abolitionist movement. In this section, plaques carrying the images of some prominent abolitionists are shown. Section fourteen is used to display books and documentaries dealing with slavery and the slave trade. These materials are sold to visitors.

In the foreword to the "Guide to the Slave History Museum", Yusuf Abdulah Usman, the Director-General of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, asserts that 'the museum exhibition is meant to give an insight into the circumstances of slave trade in Calabar and its environ from the 15th century to the late 19th century and how it moulded the society' (n.d.:ii). The guide states further that 'the Slave History Museum is a unique destination for lovers of history. The artistic impressions in human forms with sound effect bring to life the past, making visitors experience the era of the slave trade in the 21st century [...]' (Adaka n.d.:6).

The Calabar Slave History Museum is famous in Nigeria and has attracted visitors from various walks of life. Less than five years after being commissioned, it has become more popular than slave monuments that have existed for many years.[5] Though appreciated by the public, however, there are problems with the Calabar Slave History

5 Such slave monuments in Nigeria include the Badagry slave monuments, the Mobee Family Slave Trade Museum in Badagry, the slave section of Kasuwa Kurmi in Kano and the Arochukwu underground slave route.

Museum. One conspicuous gap in the exhibitions is the role played by Efik chiefs, kings and other royal personages in the slave trade. Those who built the Museum have not been interested in telling visitors that Old Calabar merchants played an enthusiastic role in the enslaving of their hinterland neighbours.

This article seeks to go beyond the stereotype that Africans were merely helpless victims who had no choice. It aspires to shed some light on the recent calls for the Efik and Aro to pay reparations to societies that were plundered by their ancestors.[6] It is no longer tenable to externalise the slave trade as merely a European enterprise. Being a major departure from earlier attempts to reconstruct an important aspect of Calabar's past, this study aims to stimulate a reappraisal of the place of local auxiliaries in the slave trade.

In order to avoid the charge of excessive dependence on written records, I have interrogated African voices through the large-scale collection and use of oral evidences. Interviews were conducted in Calabar as well as in the communities from which slaves were recruited by the Efik. Those with good knowledge of what happened in the past and who could use their best endeavours to relate the past to the present were consulted. Informants varying in age, occupation, religion and status were interviewed, sometimes individually and at other times in a group. Among those who were interviewed were traditional rulers who are versed in the traditions of the people, elders in the society, leaders of traditional institutions and those who are knowledgeable about the slave trade and slavery. Two means of communication were used for the collection of oral evidence: the tonal changes and pitches in voice were captured by the tape-recorder, while note-taking recorded important comments by informants. Informants shared their knowledge with me enthusiastically because to be identified as an agent or victim of the slave trade is no longer seen as a social stigma to be concealed in Calabar. The cautious use of oral sources in collaboration with written documents is aimed at producing a glimpse of the history of the slave trade in Old Calabar from a new perspective.

The advent of the offshore British community in Calabar

There are many accounts of how Africans in Old Calabar had their first sight of non-black people. Much has been written by scholars of various disciplines and backgrounds on this subject, the majority of whom support the claim that Africans on the Calabar River first saw Europeans in the fifteenth century, when a number of Portuguese and Spanish explorers sailed into view. Some of those often mentioned are Ruy de Sequeira

6 Uya (2010:112). This position is increasingly gaining momentum, which explains why the Efik are beginning to argue that their ancestors were not really active enablers in the slave trade and should therefore not be held responsible for whatever the slave trade did to their hinterland.

in 1472, Fernando in 1472, Windham and Pinteado in 1490, Diego Cam in 1490, Pinteado in 1530 and Alfonso D'Aviero in 1530 (Fuller 1996:2).

While Portuguese and Spanish explorers were only occasionally present in Old Calabar, intercourse with British merchants heralded profound and irreversible economic and socio-cultural transformations in pre-colonial Old Calabar. Most informants in Calabar seem to disregard the arguments in academic circles by ignoring the era of the Portuguese presence in Calabar in their testimonies.[7] Most Calabar informants, including Asuquo Effiong and Edet Archibong, no longer remember what transpired between their ancestors and the Portuguese and Spaniards before the middle of the seventeenth century. Some, however, speak of their forebears' interaction with British traders in the period preceding their onshore commercial activities and settlement as if the events happened yesterday. Viewing the past from the perspective of Calabar informants, Latham suggests that:

> It has been said that the Portuguese were the first Europeans to come to Calabar, but of this there is no proof. The first information about the economy of the Lower Cross River comes from the visit of John Watts, an English sailor who spent several months ashore at Old Calabar in 1668 [...] and as the purpose of the voyage was to buy slaves for Barbados, it is clear that the slave trade had begun. Another ship had been there about a year earlier (Latham 1990:70).

According to Monday Noah, 'the period between 1600 and 1842 forms a separate historical epoch in the lower Cross region. It was the period that witnessed the peak and the decline of the Atlantic slave trade in the area' (1990:93). The online Voyages Database reveals that the slaves taken from Old Calabar before the abolition were mostly conveyed in British ships.[8] Matt D. Childs asserts that 'merchants from Bristol and Liverpool dominated the trade from Old Calabar, and approximately 85 per cent of the 1.2 million slaves exported from the area in the eighteenth century left on English ships' (Childs 2004:5).

Even so, every encounter has its own unique aspects. Historian David Northrup is of the view that most of the inhabitants of sub-Saharan Africa were clearly astounded by their first encounters with Europeans (2009:11). This was the situation in Calabar, where the sight of pale skinned people in unfamiliar clothing arriving on ships of un-

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7 None of the people I interviewed accepted that the Portuguese and Spaniards were in Calabar before the English. While they could mention names of the British in the Calabar trade with admirable accuracy, only Effiong U. Aye knew any names of nationals of other European countries in Calabar before my period of study. It is probable that Aye compiled his list from secondary sources.

8 The Voyages Database constructed by David Eltis, David Richardson, Stephen Behrendt, and their associates contains records of nearly 35,000 separate slaving voyages between 1514 and 1866. It has become an invaluable tool in assessing the scale of migration and continues to be updated online as new documents are discovered (Eltis *et al.* n.d.). This website was produced from the Voyages Database, originally published as the "Trans-Atlantic slave trade: a database on CD-ROM" by Cambridge University Press (Eltis *et al.* 1999).

known design startled the people. Henry Nicholls left us with the following account of his experience in one of the Old Calabar villages on 29 January 1805: 'When I arrived there the people seemed all very much surprised, never having seen a White man before. They examined my hair, opened my shirt breast to look at my skin [...] I was amusing myself at their innocent curiosity' (Anonymous 1964:201).

Informants claim that, for a long time in Calabar, it was common practice for men and women to gather around white men to examine their supposedly 'burnt skin'. After initial scepticism of the intentions of their uninvited visitors from across the ocean, the people of Calabar, especially the Efik merchants, came to the conclusion that their fortunes would improve if they befriended these men, who were perceived as the purveyors of resources and skills (Imbua 2009:89). With this cursory deal started what later developed into a 'monstrous' affair with an unprecedented human traffic in this region of Nigeria. Steadily what started in trickles and was seen by some people as an abomination became a huge profit-making concern.

It is clear from the testimonies of informants that, without the promise and prospect of improved economic fortunes, merchants in Calabar would not have enthusiastically agreed to mediate in the trade between the offshore British traders, who anchored their 'monstrous' ships on the river, and their hinterland communities. The sight of valuable goods in the British ships was an important reason for the evidently hospitable disposition of Calabar merchants towards their British counterparts, who were instructed not to by-pass the Efik by going into the interior (Uya 2001:5). Because of the nature of their business, British merchants never settled permanently in Calabar, but lived on their ships while coming and going. Based on the nature of the trade, British merchants cultivated relations with the local agents. These cordial relationships were moulded through the presentation of 'dashes' (free gifts) and the recognition of indigenous authority. Mohammed S. Bashir's assertion that 'throughout the period of the Atlantic slave trade ports located in what became Nigeria remained under indigenous sovereignty', and that 'the local political authorities usually regulated European trading activities' (2005:451–452), applies with equal force to the situation in the Old Calabar port.

It was the interplay of factors in Old Calabar and Britain that catapulted Old Calabar from the margins of the Atlantic economy to a much more prominent position. Apart from the availability of slaves, an important local factor was the acceptance of British goods in the area. On this, the historian Kalu Ume writes:

> Old Calabar [...] developed high value for European goods – which in effect meant an upward bound of the slave trade in her area of influence. The neighbouring coastal societies also became involved [...]. The influence of the slave mart extended to the ports of the Cross River, which shared in the traffic through acceptance of European goods (Ume 1980:82).

The goods included linen, iron bars, bracelets, glass beads, copper and rum, all of which steadily gained acceptance in Old Calabar, in turn filling the European barracoons with slaves.[9] Ume concludes that 'the situation probably could have been different if the coastal residents had not valued these European goods' (1980:81).

On the British side of the Atlantic there was a change from Britain's slave-trading monopoly to open trade as Parliament passed the Africa Trade Act in 1698, which opened the slave trade to all English citizens (Pettigrew 2007:5). The individual merchants traded faster, beating the company's ships across the Atlantic to the extent that, in the century after 1660, the annual volume of the English slave trade increased from approximately seven thousand to more than forty thousand (Pettigrew 2007:4). This tremendously effected the Calabar trade, as records indicate that 'throughout the peak years of the slave trade a large proportion of the slaves reaching the Americas came from ports in the Bight of Biafra' (Northrup 1978:50), including Old Calabar, where in 1672 the English traders found that slaves and ivory were available 'in great plenty' (quoted in Northrup 1978:53). The establishment of sugar plantations in the West Indies in the mid-seventeenth century greatly added to the volume of the slave trade and occasioned the entry of the Dutch, English and French into the Bight of Biafra on a regular basis. Development in the Atlantic world in the mid-seventeenth century therefore brought about a considerable trade in slaves at Old Calabar on the part of the British.

Besides the above factors, recognition should be given to the attractiveness of the Old Calabar sea port. John Barbot, in comparing Old Calabar to other ports in the Bight of Benin and Biafra, reported that its estuary is 'easy to navigate even for large ships (unlike the Rio Real, which had a treacherous bar at its mouth) and provisions readily available. Above all the inhabitants of the area are good civilized people' (Barbot 1732:383). With these advantages, a large number of men and women were involuntarily taken across the Atlantic to the Americas. Subsequently, the famous port at Old Calabar processed and exported slaves from the Igbo, Ibibio, Ejagham, Cameroons and Benue Valley hinterlands, among other places to the Americas and the Caribbean (Uya 2005a:3). Most merchants in Calabar achieved their vision of prominence and prosperity by benefiting from the Atlantic traffic before they were compelled to give in to the pressure of the abolitionist movement.

Calabar and the slave trade

By 1650 Old Calabar's interaction with offshore British agents bred a group of merchants who had institutionalised themselves as slave dealers. Once the local appetite for the traffic had been whetted, the stage was set for the evolution of a new society, with

[9] Ume (1980:81). A barracoon was a kind of building where slaves were kept on the African coast as they awaited the arrival of the ship that transported them to the Americas.

the modification of indigenous institutions to handle the exigencies of the expanding capitalist system. Most of the slavers in Old Calabar came from Liverpool, London and Bristol.[10] The activities of these merchants made the years between 1660 and 1810 of tremendous economic importance on the coast of Old Calabar and their hinterland, as British trading hulks eclipsed the commercial life of the region.

As plantation agriculture and mineral mines expanded in the Americas, so the interaction between Calabar chieftains and offshore British merchants boomed. Indeed '[t]he emergence of the English from 1650 onwards as the dominant Europeans in the slave trade, particularly in the Bight of Biafra, until the second decade of the nineteenth century when the Spanish and Nantes traders replaced them' (Bashir 2005:449), would not have been achieved without the enthusiastic cooperation of Calabar middlemen and the positive response from their interior districts. Northrup demonstrated that 'as the volume of trade along the Bight of Biafra grew substantially from the middle of the seventeenth century, Bonny and Old Calabar rivalled and then displaced Elem Kalabari as the coast's premier trading posts' (2000:8).

Our knowledge of the number of slaves taken from Old Calabar comes from the works of historians including Barbot (1732), Latham (1973), Noah (1980), Northrup (1978), Ume (1980) and Uya (2001), but none is as informative and revealing as the recent Voyages Database, already mentioned. Available evidence indicates that John Watts, an English sailor, spent several months at Old Calabar in 1668 buying slaves for Barbados (Latham 1990:70). Latham posits further that

> the English are known to have continued trading at Old Calabar in the 1670s and on his voyage to Guinea in 1678/9 Jean Barbot met an English ship which had taken ten months at Calabar to purchase 300 slaves, of which between 125 and 130 had died, together with the captain and 10–12 of the crew. A French manuscript edition of Barbot's subsequent book in the Admiralty library, dated 1683–8 states that the English did their main trade at Old Calabar, taking 5–600 slaves a year, which was more than any other country (Latham 1990:71).

In 1679, John Elliot, captain of the ship Welcome, shipped 210 slaves from Calabar to Barbados. This was followed closely by the shipment of 278 slaves from Calabar to Jamaica by Captain Branfill in 1680 (Uya 2001:4). Latham (1990:71) and Northrup (1978:53) testify to the visit of the ship Dragon to Old Calabar in 1698, purchasing 212 slaves (102 men, 53 women, 43 boys and 14 girls). The Eagle Galley of London obtained a cargo of 400 from Old Calabar in 1704 (Northrup 1978:53). Additional slaving voyages to Old Calabar in the seventeenth century are cited by Latham (1973:17–18). With vari-

[10] They included Ambrose Lace, Edward Forbes, Hugh Crow, James Laroche, James Rogers, John Barbot, John Elliot, John Watts, Thomas Jones, Thomas William Earle, William Davenport, William Gregson and William Whaley (Imbua 2009:98). Those active on the Calabar side included Ambo Robin John, Antera Duke, Duke Abashy, Duke Ephraim, Edem Effiom, Edem Ekpo, Egbo Young Eyamba, Ekpenyong Offiong, Ephraim Robin John, Eyo Nsa, Tommy Henshaw and Willy Honesty (Imbua 2009:98).

ous ships, British merchants provided the bulk of the credit advances that fostered the large expansion of slave shipments from Old Calabar.[11]

It is difficult to use available data to establish a precise and generally acceptable figure for the number of people who became victims of misfortune and adversity in the Atlantic as a result of the profit motives of Calabar and British merchants. Though statistics cannot on their own re-create the repercussions of people leaving Old Calabar on its society and economy, one can nevertheless rely on Bashir's findings in buttressing the significance of Old Calabar in respect of the number of slaves exported from Nigeria. According to him

> [m]ore than 64 per cent of the enslaved people from within the boundaries of Nigeria were shipped out from the eastern parts of the region. Between 1651 and 1725, the dominant slave ports were at Bonny, Old Calabar, and New Calabar. Initially most slaves left from Old Calabar but by 1726, Bonny took over as the leading slave exporting port until it was replaced by Lagos in the closing decades of the transatlantic slave trade (Bashir 2005:451).

Bashir also argues that a further breakdown of the number of people leaving the 'Nigerian ports' reveals that 'Bonny, Calabar, and Old Calabar accounted for 1,329,100 of the enslaved and that this is 89 per cent of all the people shipped out of the Bight alone between 1651 and 1865' (2005:451).

The slaves leaving the Calabar Port were recruited from various hinterland communities. Based on this, Uya states that 'the prosperity and viability of the Old Calabar Port were totally dependent on her productive hinterland' (2001:6). Uya also argues that many of the raw materials for the boat-building industry for which Calabar became famous came principally from the heavy forests of Umon, Cameroon and Oron. These boats played an extremely important role in the trade of the Cross River region (Uya 2005b:106). Though there is as yet no generally accepted and firm data on the origin of the slaves shipped to the Americas through Calabar port, Northrup reported that among the 150 captives taken aboard an English ship at Old Calabar in 1790, 'fourteen tribes or nations' were represented (2000:8). This finds affirmation in Uya's estimation that

> in the 1820s, 56 per cent of the slaves exported from Calabar were Igbo; 42 per cent were Ibibio; while the others, mainly Ejagham, Cameroons and those from the Benue Valley and beyond, including Igala, Nupe, Kakanda and Hausa made up the remaining 2 per cent (Uya 2001:6).

The ethnic heterogeneity of slave cargoes from Old Calabar was observed by the Church Missionary Society Missionary Sigismund W. Koelle, who collected and classified the

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11 The names of these ships include, but are not limited to, Dalrymple Canterbury, Dragon, Duke of Queen, Duke of York, Eagle Galley, Edgar, Enterprise, Finn, Fortune, Gascoigne, Indian Queen, Jupiter, Lord Venus, Lottery, Maltida, Nancy, Oxford, Peach Tree and Welcome (Imbua 2009:94–95).

languages spoken by liberated Africans resettled in Sierra Leone through the efforts of the British patrols (see also Northrup 2000).

The Efik of Old Calabar exploited the opportunities afforded by their location to fraternise with British traders at Calabar port, and over time they achieved an elevated profile in the slave trade to the detriment of their neighbours. Latham has shown that the Efik 'excluded all other peoples from direct access to the European, establishing and maintaining a position of monopolistic middlemen' (1973:181). In essence, while merchants in Calabar recruited people from their productive hinterlands to sell them overseas, they and their offspring benefited tremendously from such ties with the British merchants. Ugo Nwokeji's assertion that '[t]he King of Old Calabar was a partner with the man-stealers of other countries, while punishing a man stealer with death in his own [country]' is instructive (2010:128).

The Efik did not enslave their own kith and kin. Indeed, Paul Lovejoy and David Richardson maintain that the seizure and shipping of free persons in Calabar to the Americas provoked 'retaliatory seizure of goods or people, and perhaps most unusual, the poisoning of ship captains by Old Calabar traders'. Furthermore, quoting John Ashley Hall, they claim that 'two ship captains from Liverpool were imprisoned and poisoned in 1773' (Lovejoy and Richardson 1999:344). In early 1763, traders from Old Town seized the master of the Dalrymple of Liverpool, held him captive and confiscated some of his goods. Later in 1789, Duke Ephraim informed James Rogers and Sir James Laroche that two of his canoe men, both of whom were 'freemen', had been seized by the captain of their ship, the Jupiter. In cases of the enslavement of freemen of Calabar origin, merchants in Britain assisted in the attempt to make sure that such people were set free. In a letter written by William Earle of Liverpool to Duke Abashy of Old Calabar on 10 February 1761, we read:

> You know very well I love all Calabar; I do not want to wrong. Nor I never did wrong any man one copper & if your two Boys from St. Thomas be living I will get them for you & sent them to you [...] I Remains Duke Abashys Friend (quoted in Lovejoy and Richardson 2001:99).

There was also the sensational case in which two Old Calabar princes returned to their homeland in 1774 after years of enslavement in the Caribbean and a short spell of freedom in England. They had been illegally seized and taken away as slaves on a British ship in the aftermath of the massacre of 1767, in which European slave-traders had actively participated. 'The princes were able to secure their freedom and to return to Old Calabar on the strength of the transatlantic network they had become part of while growing up in the Bight of Biafra'.[12]

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12 Nwokeji (2010:139). The full story of the princes is told in Sparks (2004).

The diary entries by Antera Duke name several sources of slaves.[13] Toyin Falola and Matthew Heaton suggest that the lack of centralised states in the Bight of Biafra meant that slaves tended not to be procured through wars to the extent that they were in the Bight of Benin. In their view, 'enslavement in the Bight of Biafra was much more commonly the result of judicial rulings, orders by oracles, and, above all, kidnapping' (Falola and Heaton 2008:56). By contrast, Latham (1990:70) and Noah (1980:74, 1990:94) have written convincingly that warfare was a major source of slaves in Old Calabar. Noah argues that

> [w]hat has not been generally realized even among most Africanists is that anarchy and inter-tribal wars were not indigenous to the area; rather they were by-products of the European slave trade [...]. The trade in slave was a special type of trade which defied every normal trade ethics [...] slaves could mostly be captured whenever there was warfare, strife and instability.[14]

In his seminal book, "The slave trade and culture in the Bight of Biafra", Nwokeji writes:

> Without question, therefore, warfare was an important source of captives everywhere [...] Parker testified in 1790 that Dick Ebro [of New Town in Old Calabar] organised routine captive raids on unsuspecting communities, in which Parker had participated [...]. Wars remained an important source of captives until the end of the overseas slave trade in the mid-nineteenth century (Nwokeji 2010:126).

Of the two views highlighted above, the latter is better supported by evidence. Informants in Calabar are unanimous that wars were resorted to when the precarious peace between communities broke down.

Sometimes, those found committing adultery were sold into slavery, either by the family which had been wronged or by members of their own family desiring to avoid future embarrassment (Uya 2010:115). People who were often quarrelsome, disobedient children or those who did not conform, suspected witches, chronic debtors and thieves were generally victims. The other class of victims included persons who were considered abnormal, including girls who started menstruating before reaching an age which the community considered 'proper', children whose upper teeth appeared before their lower ones, or those children who walked or talked rather prematurely (Noah 1980:75). The presence of this class of persons was considered productive of misfortune for the community because these 'abnormalities' were portentous of anger from the deities (Harris 1942:42). The sources of slaves kept expanding in response to the demands of the Atlantic system. On this, Ume claims that 'the slavocrats at the coasts who had been

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13 Cf. Adiele Afigbo (1971), Aye (2000), Toyin Falola and Matthew Heaton (2008), Latham (1973), Lovejoy and Richardson (1999), Noah (1980), Northrup (1978), Ukorebi (1978:30–33), Umeh (1980) and Uya (2001) who, among other scholars, have taken Duke's records further.

14 Noah (1990:94). See also Uya (2006:14–17).

advanced supercargoes would struggle through thick and thin to meet their quotas' (1980:91). Nwokeji sums it up as follows:

> The interaction of politics, economic practices, and legal and belief systems in African societies suggests that ideas of law and order would have been central in enslavement. Sale into Atlantic slavery was widely deemed an extreme form of punishment in Atlantic Africa, and so was – at least in theory – reserved for those who committed serious offences or who challenged the existing political and social order (Nwokeji 2010:132).

In many instances, justice was perverted to meet the need for labour in the New World. For instance, on 9 August 1786, the Old Calabar chiefs put one gentleman from neighbouring Bakasi on board a slaver on the apparently baseless suspicion that he had killed their ruler, Duke Ephraim, presumably by witchcraft.[15]

On rare occasions, the European dealers tried another technique called 'panyaring' (or 'boating'), whereby Africans were enslaved when they were offered a passage from port to port by Europeans. *Panyaring* was a term used by European slave-traders in the Bight of Biafra to describe the seizure of persons, often to recoup debts from their Biafra suppliers. The people who were *panyared* were free coastal citizens who in some instances overpowered the slave-trading crew and held them for ransom (Ume 1980:87). Ume concludes that, despite the cordial relationship that had existed between the coastal chiefs and the European dealers, the majority of the coastal population developed a mistrust of European traders because of their involvement in *panyaring*. The historian Elizabeth Donnan portrayed the possible dangers of *panyaring*, particularly when it was organised without local support (1965:84). A Dr Curie, who was known for boating ventures, wrote in 1788 that it was rife with many dangers and that Europeans who pursued it often fell victims to the Africans whom they tried to hoodwink into slavery (Mackenzie 1941:123).

In addition, Calabar and British merchants sometimes acquired slaves through robbery and slave-catching expeditions. Thomas Clarkson's essay on the abolition of the slave trade, which detailed the wanton ills that attended the acquisition of slaves by robbery, has revealing information on what happened in Duke Town in Old Calabar in the 1770s:

> I had two opportunities of seeing how slaves were procured in the River of Old Calabar. I resided with the king of New Town for four months, and he allowed me to go up the river with him to trade for slaves. I went with him twice within that time. In the first expedition, there was a fleet consisting of from ten to twelve canoes, which were properly manned and armed [...]. In the day time we called at the villages as we passed, and purchased our slaves fairly; but in the night we made several excursions to the bank of the river. The canoes were usually left with an armed force: The rest, when landed, broke into villages, and, rushing

15 Duke (1956). This incident is reconstructed by Nwokeji (2010:136).

> into the huts of the inhabitants, seized men, women and children promiscuously. We obtained about fifty Negroes in this manner, in our first expedition.[16]

Coinciding with this information are the accounts of various English seamen included in the enquiry into the slave trade made by a British House of Commons Committee covering the years 1763 to 1778. Isaac Parker of the Latham spent several months in Calabar in 1765 and went on a slave-catching expedition whilst there with an Efik Chief (Latham 1990:73, Noah 1990:95). On the first expedition they paddled up the river until they came to a village, hid in the bush until night, then seized everyone they could see. At another village they took 45 slaves. About a fortnight later they made a similar expedition.[17]

The Aro of Arochukwu played an extremely important role in the capture of slaves in Old Calabar. Moving out from their hometown of Arochukwu near the Cross River, the Aro traded and settled throughout the Bight of Biafra, buying and selling slaves. Scholars who have examined the Aro factor in the recruitment of slaves in the Bight of Biafra hinterland are in agreement that most of the slaves sold in Old Calabar and Bonny were recruited by the Aro from the hinterland.[18] Described by Northrup as 'the God-Men of the Slave Trade' (1978:114), the Aro were believed to have control over the activities of everyone in the hinterland and were able to obtain great numbers of slaves through a variety of ways. Some people in the hinterland sold some of their family members to the Aro out of greed for money and guns. Unredeemed children pledged as settlement for debt were also sold. Some important personages in the hinterland sold some of their victims to acquire the resources to buy higher grades in the Ekpo, Ekpe and Idiong societies. Children left unattended at play were kidnapped by the Aro (Uya 2010:117–118).

In recounting the manner in which slaves were acquired by Rev. Hope Waddell, King Eyo II of Creek Town admitted that people sold as slaves were obtained in various objectionable ways:

> They came from different countries and were sold for different reasons – some as prisoners of war, some for debt, some for breaking their country's laws and some by great men who hated them. The king of a town sells whom he dislikes or fears, his wives and children are sold by his successors in return (Waddell 1863:429).

The major goods and currencies for which slaves were exchanged in Old Calabar included beads, belts, clothes, Manillas copper brass wristlets, copper rods, copper wires, cowries, fabricated wooden and cast-iron houses, fancy clocks, gin, guns, imported salt,

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16 Quoted in Northrup (1978:66). See also Noah (1990:95) and Ume (1980:93–94).

17 Latham (1990:73). See the same account in Noah (1990:95).

18 The work of reconstructing the Aro trade in slaves in the Bight of Biafra owes much to Afigbo (1971), Dike and Ekejiuba (1980), Northrup (1978) and Nwokeji (2010). This is not an exhaustive list.

iron bars, iron money, knives, locks, mirrors, paintings, pewter basins, powder, rum and other spirits, swords and tankards (Uya 2010:121). Some of these goods and currencies have become important items in the Old Residency Museum and the Slave History Museum in Calabar. Commenting on these imports, Uya asserts that 'among these, the Cumber Beach bell imported by King Effiwat in 1799; [and] Great Duke's chair presented by Sir John Tobin in 1826 and still in the custody of the family, and King Eyamba's iron palace, have become prized antiquities' (2001:12).

Information on the prices of slaves during the period under study is scanty. The only record available was kept by John Barbot, who quoted the price of a male slave at between 38 and 48 coppers in 1698, while the price of a female slave fluctuated between 28 and 38 coppers (Barbot 1732:303). By 1767, the price of 'a slave was approximately 100 cowries' (Noah 1980:77). The value of the cowrie fluctuated through the centuries depending on how difficult it was to obtain. In the eighteenth century, traders paid 5,000 to 6,000 cowries for one eighth ounce of gold (Noah 1980:80). Noah writes further that

> in the nineteenth-century, a bag of cowries which weighed between four and six hundredweight fetched five Maria Theresa dollars, which was equal to four shillings and six pence in British currency, while a Head of 2,000 cowries was equal to six pence (British) (Noah 1980:80).

Beyond the buying and selling of slaves

Interaction between Old Calabar and offshore British merchants from 1650 to 1750 involved more than the commoditisation of people. Their intercourse generated currents that had sweeping implications for the social, economic and political history of Old Calabar. The economic links with Britain had a significant impact on the social relationships, which were inseparable from the smooth conduct of trade. Lovejoy and Richardson (1999) explore how the British merchant investors interacted with local agents in Old Calabar to work out mutually advantageous conditions for trade and social life. Christopher Brown argued that 'British traders placed a priority on cultivating peaceful relations with local merchants and sovereigns in the hope of keeping commerce open and on favourable terms' (2006:304). Likewise, in a letter to a Liverpool merchant, dated 23 July 1783, Ekpenyong Offiong 'wished that England should no longer be involved in war because she needed peace to prosper her trade with him' (Aye 2000:141).

Relations between residents of Old Calabar and merchants from Britain enhanced the process of using the English language in Calabar. Uya has written that 'the Efik took advantage of their early contact with the Europeans to acquire skills in the speaking and writing of English and accounting which stood them extremely well in the expanding European trade' (2001:6). John Adams visited Old Calabar in 1789, when people in Calabar were already proficient in English. He observed that '[t]he natives [of

Old Calabar] write English, an art first acquired by some traders' sons, who had visited England, and which they had the sagacity to retain up to the present period'.[19] Lovejoy and Richardson found 'signs that the leading traders in Old Calabar were literate and relatively fluent in English (Pidgin version) as early as the 1750s' (1999:341). The twelve letters written by Old Calabar merchants in the eighteenth century and published by Lovejoy and Richardson in 2001 bear testimony to the fact that writing and reading had become popular among the people of Calabar at a time when orality was the norm in the coastal communities of western Africa. The authors cite several sources which indicate that the English traders encouraged the pursuit of literacy by the trading elite at Old Calabar and offered financial and boarding support for their education in England. It is thus hardly surprising that the most extensive surviving text from pre-colonial Africa with great insight into the organisation of the slave trade in the eighteenth century is Antera Duke's diary, which has already been mentioned.

'In the Bight of Biafra', Nwokeji maintains, 'Old Calabar merchants were in personal contact with correspondents in Europe by the 1770s at the latest' (2010:193). Knowledge of English helped Calabar merchants record their daily experiences on paper. They communicated across the sea through letters that could prove invaluable evidence in British judicial proceedings.[20] Thus, on 20 March 1783, Otto Ephraim asked Ambrose Lace of Liverpool to 'send me some writing papers and 1 Bureaus to Buy' (Lovejoy and Richardson 1999; letter 13).

At the same time that merchants in Calabar were plucking people from other families for sale, they and their offspring were benefiting from their ties with British merchants. One way through which this was achieved was by sending their children to Britain for an education.[21] For example, in 1767, Ambrose Lace took young Ephraim to Liverpool for schooling at his own expense. Ephraim spent two years before returning to Old Calabar with great potential. Archibald Dalzel informed the African Association that 'there is rarely a period that there are not at Liverpool, Calabar Negroes sent there expressly to learn English' (Hallet 1964:195). As I have argued elsewhere, 'the education of prominent youths in trading families was suggested, encouraged and financed by British traders, who hoped that by doing so they would establish personal ties and gain an advantage in the protection of their investment' (Imbua 2009:30). Northrup found that 'long before the establishment of Old Calabar's first mission school in 1846, such European-educated scholars had been tutoring the children of elite families in spoken and written English' (Northrup 2009:67–68). Indeed, Ekei E. Oku asserts that

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19 Adams (1822:40). See also Adams (1966:144).

20 For example, in 1773 a letter dated 16 June 1769, from Ephraim Robin John to Thomas Jones of Bristol, was submitted in a British court as evidence of violence on the African coast (Lovejoy and Richardson 1999:342).

21 Cf. Brown (2006), Lovejoy and Richardson (1999), Northrup (2009), Uya (2001).

> [i]t is now well known that Old Calabar had schools perhaps before the 17th century. There is today, an ancient writing school slate in the form of a folio which dates back to the 17th century and belonged to EBRERO NOWAN (Ukorebi Neneng of Ikoneto) who was the King EBRERO IN BARBOT's list of 1698 (Oku 1989:12).

When Hope Waddell and his team arrived at Calabar, they were surprised to find that King Eyo of Creek Town and his son were already literate in English and well versed in reading, writing and arithmetic. Waddell realised that neither the teacher nor the carpenter he brought along with him could match the competence of the royal couple in the three R's (Akoda 2002:198–199).

Some merchants in Liverpool, Bristol and London left records of the warm receptions they had in Calabar. In his diary, Duke referred to the house of Captain Potter's 'mother' and 'father' in Enyong Creek, Old Calabar (Duke 1956:39). When Potter welcomed Duke to his 'father's house, he killed a goat in accordance with local custom' (Duke 1956:39, 64). Greater generosity was done to Henry Nicholls. He mentioned various kings of Old Calabar, including Duke Ephraim, Egbo Young Eyamba and Eyo Honesty, among others, who 'received me very friendly and with the greatest warmth [...] When I departed he presented me with a goat as a mark of his friendly disposition towards me' (Hallet 1964:199–200).

Commercial relations generated other kinds of mutual associations that brought the parties involved closer than one would ever have thought. For instance, captains regularly attended dinner parties given by Calabar merchants. The captains reciprocated by hosting Old Calabar merchants on board their ships (Duke 1956:41–42, 52, 63). Duke asserts further that they went on fishing trips together (1956:37). On such occasions they used terms and expressions of endearment and familiarity in consolidating peaceful commercial interactions. Indeed, in Duke's assessment Calabar's interactions with offshore British merchant-investors were 'humane, cordial and normal' (Ukorebi 1978:51). With some rendering by the historian Asuquo Ukorebi, Duke's entry on 13 December 1785 presents the following picture:

> The social interaction of Efik gentlemen with slave ship captains was cordial, formal and generally civilized and they always had Christmas, New Year Eve, and New Year parties together by arranging dinners for all in one of the Efik gentlemen's houses or in the Captain's ship (Ukorebi 1978:51).

King Eyo II said to a French commodore in 1847 that 'English and we be friend long long long time, before my father and grandfather live' (Waddell 1863:352). This bold and proud confession by an Old Calabar king can only be understood in historical perspective and attributed to the ubiquity of English slave-ship sailors in Old Calabar.

Compelled by the evidence of cooperation between Old Calabar and British merchants, Brown asserts that 'long-standing personal relationships between merchants in Bristol and Liverpool and the Ekpe of Old Calabar facilitated the expansion of the Brit-

ish slave trade in the Bight of Biafra in the late eighteenth century' (2006:304). Again, Brown reminds us that 'the Ekpe traders sent their children to Liverpool to reside temporarily with British merchants so that they could build and strengthen connections with prominent families in the trade'.[22]

It is also interesting to note that several offshore British merchants became members of Ekpe society and were entitled to the corresponding rights and privileges. Such expatriates could appeal to the fraternity to recover debts due to them from indigenous traders. They were also free from Ekpe restrictions and could move about freely to oversee their business even on such days when the Grand Ekpe was on display, when non-Ekpe were compelled to be indoors.[23] Besides, as members of Ekpe society, they stood the best chance of avoiding a possible embargo, which the Ekpe might impose on any trader (Noah 1980:68). Indeed, Ekpe sometimes ordered Efik traders to 'settle' disputes with exporters or to replace pawns who had absconded from European ships (Lovejoy and Richardson 2011:29). It is on record that Captain Burrell of the ship Haywood of Liverpool held the rank of Nyamkpe or Grand Ekpe and that Harry Hartye of Liverpool bought Ekpe titles from King Eyamba VIII up to the rank of Nyamkpe (Hart 1964:167). Hart writes that Hartye was granted all the rights, claims and immunities which membership vested in him as well as in other members 'except the Chief Officer of Ekpe of Old Calabar', and he was bound not to reveal 'any of the secrets which are now [disclosed] to him to those who have no connection with the Old Calabar Ekpe' (Hart 1904:167). In addition, J.H. White, George Watt and Capt. J.B. Walker were all members of the Ekpe fraternity in the nineteenth century (Aye 2000:75).

One should recall that Ekpe society was used as an instrument of government. Its indigenous members sat in council to settle disputes among persons in Calabar including the recovery of debt and the protection of individual property. Ekpe society did not respect persons, and breakers of its laws were punished, irrespective of who was involved (Bassey 2001:34). Effiong Bassey asserts that membership of the Ekpe fraternity was much sought after and that people were willing to pay for it with blood (Bassey 2001:33). Its advantages were so compelling that many European traders purchased its membership. But the white merchants did not have authority in local matters except for trading interests (cf. Miller 2009:134–135).

The offshore British community also played a big role in the architectural landscape of Old Calabar. One of my enthusiastic informants, Asuquo Effiong, argued that Calabar intercourse with Britain in the post-Columbian era brought new materials, technology and skills for construction purposes. The wealthy Calabar chiefs displayed their economic and socio-political positions by replacing their 'mud-plastered, palm

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22 Brown (2006:304). Matt Childs vehemently supports this claim (2004:5).

23 Described by Effiong Bassey as the Jupiter of Ekpe (2001:66), Grand Ekpe was the Nyamkpe grade of the Ekpe fraternity. When members of Grand Ekpe were on display, non-members were stopped from moving about freely. The pioneer missionaries in Old Calabar hated it and had it stopped. It is now a forgotten tradition.

thatched and poorly ventilated houses' with 'prefabricated wood and iron houses (Nwaka 1990:64), and the brick and cement structures' (Braide and Ekpo 1990:137). Indeed, British-made 'frame houses' became important as luxury imports, symbols of wealth and evidence of social prestige in Old Calabar. One of the prefabricated houses, belonging to Egbo Young, which dates back to 1785, was called 'Liverpool Hall'. The African Association explorer Henry Nichols, who resided in Duke Ephraim's house at Duke Town, remarked that the principal traders' houses were built of wood, brought out by the different captains from Liverpool. Duke Ephraim's house, which Captain Grant described as 'finished and ornamented in a manner which in Africa is considered complex, sumptuous and extraordinary', was brought by Captain Patrick Fairweather in 1785 (Braide and Ekpo 1990:143). Braide and Ekpo assert that prefabricated houses 'were ordered through the British trading ships and paid for in slaves or palm oil' (1990:144).

Conclusion

In this historical meditation, I have attempted to reconstruct the character of interaction between Old Calabar merchants and the off-shore British community as trading partners in the Atlantic world from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth century. I have demonstrated how the exposure of Calabar to Britain via the Atlantic Ocean made Calabar a busy centre of the Atlantic slave trade on the west coast of Africa. It is clear from my analysis that merchants residing in Bristol, Liverpool and London provided the bulk of credit advances that fostered the large expansion in slave shipments from Old Calabar to the Americas. The slave trade, which was carried out in Calabar on mutually agreed terms, promoted friendly interactions and proved lucrative for both Calabar and British merchants. It was part of the cooperation that underpinned the slave trade business that Old Calabar merchants entrusted their children to their British counterparts at a time when travel outside Africa by blacks could potentially result in their enslavement. Whenever there were cases of the enslavement of 'freemen', merchants in Britain often assisted in the attempt to set them free. I also noted that several off-shore British merchants became members of the Old Calabar Ekpe society and were entitled to the corresponding rights and privileges. The point has also been made that it was the need to bring the distant memories of the slave trade and slavery in Calabar to a larger audience that has culminated in the establishment of the Calabar Slave History Museum. I have argued here that one conspicuous limitation of the Museum is the role played by local agents in the trade. This needs to be emphasized if a holistic picture of the slave trade and slavery in Old Calabar is to be obtained.

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