Dis:connected archiving in the Slave History Museum of Nigeria

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Slavery was one of the most horrendous events in African history. The notorious trade in slaves reached the Nigerian shores in the 15th century, with able-bodied Nigerian men and women being sold as slaves and shipped overseas to work on American plantations and in factories. Between 1690 and 1807, the English slave traders shipped 1,069,100 victims from the Bight of Benin and the Bight of Biafra (Nigeria), amounting to 41.4% of the total of 2,579,500 from all of Africa.[1] As a tourism and archiving project commemorating this gruesome trade, the Cross River State government of Nigeria established the Slave History Museum in Calabar in 2007 to creatively recall the experience of the trade.

Here I will guide readers down memory lane using the Slave History Museum in Nigeria as an active repository of memory and experience. The museum's use of multimedia, visual arts and technology in preserving experience are innovative media for education and communication as well as a form of social responsibility. The Slave History Museum is an instrument for preserving a people's history, albeit in a more active form.

Still, the museum is partisan in its presentation of the facts, exaggerating the role of Europeans while downplaying the contributions of some Africans and others to the persistence of the slave trade. The roles played by African chiefs and other agents must be frankly reconstructed. I conclude by recommending

1 Philip D. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969).

Fig. 01
The Slave History Museum in Calabar (Photo: Madara Effiong)

how the Slave History Museum could better achieve its archival function.

The slave trade in Calabar

The Calabar people, originally known as the Efiks, occupy the basin of the lower Cross River, extending to the Bakassi Peninsula. Most agree that the Efik people are of Igbo or Ibibio origin, though Aye suspects Semitic roots.[2] Portuguese merchants arrived at the Calabar (Efik) River in 1472, and it is generally assumed that they named the site *Calabar*, derived from the Portuguese words, *Cala Barra* (the river is silent).[3] The port of Old Calabar was well known to early European travellers, traders and explorers of the 15th and 16th centuries, and it played a prominent role in the slave trade, as most Nigerian slaves were procured and transported out of Africa hence. The slave trade in Calabar lasted for 201 years (1662 -1863).

2 Efiong U. Aye, *The Efik People* (Calabar: Association for the Promotion of the Efik Language, 2000), 58.
3 Aye, *The Efik People*, 58.

The Slave History Museum in Calabar

Among several sites commemorating the slave trade in Nigeria, the Slave History Museum is unique, not least because of its location on the actual site of a 15th-century slave-trading depot on Marina Beach. The Slave History Museum was established in 2007 and officially opened on 17 March 2011.

The museum was conceived to present the history of the slave trade more realistically than in mere historical texts. Beyond just a historical record, it is an artistic and creative repository of information. It dramatises people's experiences during the slave trade by simulating the experience visually. The museum uses multimedia creatively to archive the inhuman act of trading in slaves. It is a museum-in-action that appeals to the imagination as well as the emotions.

The reception

The reception area already imparts anticipation of the drama about to unfold. There are images and artistic impressions of Europeans who participated in the trade. The most striking feature

Fig. 02
The museum depicting slaves as human freight (Photo: Madara Effiong)

Fig. 03
The replica slave transport boat in the museum (Photo: Madara Effiong)

is the display of a replica of a large engine boat with a cross-section of slaves arranged so that their heads emerge from the lower deck of the boat while others have their legs juxtaposed. The sight resembles cadavers arranged in an anatomy laboratory.

The interior

From the reception, a door opens into the interior of the museum. It is a dark tunnel, an alley of horror. Unsettling sounds come from unseen speakers. Moving from one gallery to another recalls the Roman Catholic 'Stations of the Cross'; each station depicting a graphic scene of what Jesus Christ endured en route to his crucifixion. Inside the museum are a series of galleries that sequentially narrate the slaves' experiences.

The first gallery on the left reveals two European traders with guns, parading three slaves shackled together, and another European supervising six slaves sitting on the ground. An atmosphere of transaction and bargaining is palpable. The scene displays the slaves for sale, with items of exchange visible on the spot. Recorded sounds of weeping, sobbing, moaning and screaming create a cacophony of suffering.

Many of the galleries display relics of slavery: the manilla and cowrie shells used as currencies, empty schnapps bottles labelled *AFRICAN*, chains, shackles, ceramic jars, Dane guns, swords and copper wires. Female slaves were bought for 28-37 copper rods, depending on size, age and strength, while men were bought for 38-48 copper rods. While some galleries exhibit slaves at auction, others show slaves working on cotton plantations.

Of particular interest is the display on a large canvas of the Akpabuyo slave route and the Esuk Mba Slave Market, which was a slave trading centre in Old Calabar between the 15th and 19th centuries. Here enslaved individuals from the hinterlands were gathered, sold and transported to coastal ports for export. It was strategically located along the Cross River, allowing for easy transportation of captives by canoe or land routes to major slave depots. Even today, Esuk Mba retains the legacy of trade by barter.

Other galleries displayed Calabar chiefs, who were themselves slave merchants, and King Eyo Honesty II, hardly equalled in the field; the Gagged Man; the display of the Ekpe Masquerade, a symbol of a complicit native authority that was used to intimidate slaves into surrendering to the slave masters; escaping slaves chased by white masters with dogs; and recaptured slaves tortured by flogging, stalking, severing toes, and hanging before other slaves.

The *Resistance and Punishment* gallery paints a graphic picture of the ordeals endured by stubborn slaves. Masters marked their property by branding slaves with hot knives or irons. The most striking gallery displays the breaking of shackles by a female slave with raised fists exclaiming 'Freedom!' The final gallery depicts the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, with images of the abolitionists Granville Sharp, Lord Mansfield, Thomas Clarkson, John Wesley, Olaudah Equiano, Samuel Ajayi Crowther, Manoel Nasciment De Santi Silva and a host of other liberated slaves.

Dis:connected creative archiving

In the Slave History Museum, the roles played by local African chiefs and their agents during the period are understated. The displays highlight only the roles played by the Europeans. If slavery is defined as the condition in which individuals are owned by others who control where they live and how they work,[4] then slavery existed in Africa before the arrival of the Europeans, who are often regarded as the inventors of the trade. Nwanze advises, 'We must set the records straight: slavery, was not an invention of the West. It predates all written records as some free people were

4 Evelyn Iheoma Osuagwu, 'Gains and Pains of Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: The 'Antecedental' Root of Nigeria's Underdevelopment', *Akwanshi: Journal of National Museum* 2, no. 2 (2019): 4.

engaged as domestic slaves in Nigeria. On the African continent itself, slavery predated the arrival of Europeans by centuries, and it still continues until this day' (ChetaNwanze). Nwanze further explains that Africans, particularly the chiefs, were willing to enslave their fellow Africans. Even some free men would willingly surrender themselves to a rich nobleman to escape famine and for security. Waddell, a prominent missionary in Calabar once reported: 'Free men may become slaves in several ways deemed legitimate. First, by selling themselves, either in times of famine, or for protection, or to better their circumstances; as a rich head-slave may be better off than a poor despised freeman'.[5]

Minor inconveniences such as mosquito bites discouraged Europeans from venturing into the hinterland, so they needed collaborators. These collaborators were local raiders who hunted and kidnapped their fellow Africans and sold them as slaves. Ideally, the museum's narrative should begin when Africans sold and enslaved their own people even before the arrival of the Europeans. In fact, the first gallery in the museum should have displayed domestic slaves in the households of African chiefs to show the chronological development of slavery from the domestic to the international stage. Unfortunately, the absence of this phase creates a disconnect.

One of the galleries, sandwiched between the European slave merchants, displays an Efik Chief, Eyo Willy Honesty II, a prominent slave dealer. The museum is conspicuously silent on other leading Efik slave dealers and the middlemen whose names are recorded in many history books, such as Antera Duke, Eyo Nsa, Edem Effiom, Duke Ephraim, Duke Abashy, Ambo Robin John, Ekpenyong Offiong, Eyamba V, Edem Ekpo and King Ephraim Henshaw, to mention but a few. The museum is filled with images of Europeans who took part in the trade, with a very subdued representation of black people who actively participated. The exhibitions in the museum would be more comprehensive if one or two galleries were dedicated to exposing the Efik chiefs and other middlemen who took part in the trade.

Aye asserts that the slave trade, which is now considered a horrible and illegitimate business, was once a legitimate and lucrative enterprise, approved by European churches, African rulers and global ethics.[6] Throughout the centuries it operated, many European monarchs and some parliamentarians welcomed it, as it brought wealth to the dealers and benefitted Europe and America. The absence of the two prominent religions involved in the slave trade is another disconnecting feature in the museum. Interestingly, the Old Residency Museum displays the endorsement of slavery by exhibiting some biblical verses – Ephesians 6:5,

5 Quoted in Efiong U. Aye, *King Eyo Honesty II* (Calabar: Glad Tidings Press, 2009), 43.
6 Aye, *King Eyo Honesty II*.

Titus 2:9 and 1 Peter 2:18-20 – that support slavery, emphasising servitude and obedience to masters.

Where are the local slave markets in the narrative of the Slave History Museum? Esuk Mba Slave Market was an important hub of the slave trade, yet it and other markets are absent in the museum.

The archivists should have considered purging the emotions of visitors before they leave the museum. As with a classical Greek tragedy, there should be, at the end of the viewing, an intentional purgation of emotions before visitors exit the labyrinth of horror. Perhaps this explains the sudden display of Nigeria's classical artworks – Nok, monoliths, terracotta, Igbo-Ukwu bronze, Benin bronze and the soapstone art of Esie – immediately following the abolitionist exhibition in the museum. If this was not the intention, then these classical artworks are misplaced or represent another disconnect, as they have no relationship whatsoever with the slave trade.

Conclusion

The Slave History Museum in Calabar is an invaluable national asset, serving as a source of information, presentation and preservation of African perspectives on a tragic historical and cultural experience. The museum's existence, at the very least, addresses the gap created by the removal of history from the school curriculum. Through this museum, African children encounter the realities of slavery in a form that goes beyond textbook accounts.

However, the disconnected areas in the museum's presentations should be addressed. For a more accurate, convincing and balanced portrayal of the slavery experience, visitors should immediately recognise that African chiefs played pivotal roles in the trade. Their involvement should not be downplayed. Finally, the history of the slave trade and slavery, including Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome, should serve as a deterrent to the current generation of Africans against engaging in kidnapping and modern-day slavery.

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