THE TORONTO CONFERENCE OF MAY 2009

THEME:-FINDING THE AFRICAN VOICE: TALES OF ENSLAVEMENT AND SLAVERY IN AFRICA

PAPER TITLE:-Narratives of Slave-Master Relations from Cameroon 1750-1950

E.S.D. Fomin

Abstract: In the trans-Atlantic slave trade Cameroon fed the region called the Bight of Biafra with many slaves. The region came under the influence of the trade by the close of the fifteenth century and was in the forefront of it from 1750 to 1850. The internal slavery that it engendered varied according to the cultural values of the different societies. Masters in the centralized polities acquired and used slaves as a way of increasing their family members while their counterparts in the non-centralized societies maintained them outside the family unit, thus perpetrating long slave lineages. This paper has explored narratives from some societies in Cameroon and exploited them to show how the African voice on enslavement and slavery can be discerned from the interactions between masters and slaves. It is shown in the work that from folktales and colonial court records in Cameroon, a study of slave-master relations could increase the understanding of slavery in any given society. In both centralized and non-centralized polities in Cameroon, masters interacted variously with their slaves but slave-master social relations seemed to have been more cordial in the former than the latter polities.

Introduction

The Bight of Biafra was one of the major regions\(^1\) of slave trade along the Atlantic coast of Africa but the slave business that took place in its hinterlands was not and has not been well documented, especially the transactions which the African slavers carried out in the interior of the region. The voice of the many African participants in enslavement and slavery in Africa has been little heard. Many Africans were involved in different ways in this shameful history. Some were raiders and traders, others slave owners and masters

---

\(^1\) For the purpose of analysing the trade, S.D. Behrendt, David Eltis and David Richardson have divided the Atlantic coast of Africa into regions as follows-Senegambia, Sierra Leone, Gold Coast, Bight of Benin, Bight of Biafra and West-Central Africa.
and the greatest bulk were the victims who were either sold across the Atlantic or enslaved back in Africa. The accounts of these persons are yet to be fully exploited for this history.

Indeed their side of the story on the slave trade that took place in this region and the slavery that it introduced in many societies therein are largely non-written. The voices of these actors can be recaptured from different forms of orature-folktales, dirges and songs, and evidence from colonial court records. In this paper I have exploited such forms of narratives as folktales and oral evidence recorded from slavers and their victims in the British colonial courts in the then British Southern Cameroons.

Cameroon coast occupies a big portion of the Bight of Biafra which extends from the east of the Niger Delta to Cape Lopez. The key slave ports from the sub-region included New Calabar, Bonny, Calabar (Old Calabar), Bimbia, Cameroons, and Gabon. These coastal commercial spheres had extensive hinterlands from where slavers procured the slaves they sold to the Europeans along the coast. The hinterland spheres extended as far afield as to the Adamawa region in the cases of the Calabar Bimbia and the Cameroons coasts. And because of the difficult topography of this region, especially the interior of the Cameroon coastline, slaves were taken to the coast through many tortuous routes that passed through many traditional states and societies. The routes included numerous foot paths and a number of rivers. The rivers here, though not of great navigable lengths, were useful in the linkage between the immediate interior and the coast. The main ones include

---


3 The court records on the abolition of slave dealing and slavery in the area are found in the National Archives at Buea

4 S.D. Behrendt et al, “The Bight in Comparative Perspective: the Economics of Long-Term Trends in Population Displacement from West and Central Africa to the Americas before 1850”------------------------


Sketch map of Cameroon showing cultural and slave trade areas

KEY
- Forest Zone
- Cameroon Grassfields
- Sahel Region
- River: a) Campo b) Nyon c) Sanaga d) Wouri e) Mungo f) Ndian g) Cross River
- Slave trade routes
Nyong, Sanaga, Wouri, Mungo, Ndian and the Cross River from east to west (see map on page 3).

The coastal area and its immediate interior were inhabited by societies built largely on homogenous kinship that encouraged hiving off of kinship units rather than centralizing. Their kinship groups were governed more often than not by elected leaders or leaders of traditional associations. The peoples of many of the societies in the immediate hinterlands of the Atlantic coast of the Bight of Biafra demonstrate even today a wonderful sense of egalitarianism in citizenship which precludes any indigenous servitude previous to the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Thus slave narratives in these societies about the relations between masters and slaves are characterized by the depiction of the slaves as outsiders, their length of servitude not withstanding and consequently many conflicts of various types between masters and slaves.

As in the narrative below from Ebeagwa, an upper Banyang village, some of the best remembered accounts of slave-master relations in the area were often characterized by conflicts. Such conflicts in Banyang country were usually about economic matters like the one below and disagreements over social and cult issues. The Banyang did not appear however to have treated their slaves harshly but they stubbornly refused to deconstruct the identity of their slaves and integrate them into the corporate life of the Banyang society. The issues that marked the slave-master relations in Banyang country had to do more often than not with their societal norms that kept the slaves at the margin of the society.

---

7 Ute, 2006, passim
8 Fomin & Ngoh, 1998, p11
9 Ibid
10 Ibid
On the contrary, in the far hinterlands of this coast, which we prefer to call the Cameroon Grassfields, the traditional states were heterogeneously created, and were usually ruled by powerful monarchs. The sense of honor and the use of titles and ranks characterized the setup and governing of such traditional states in this sub-region of the Bight of Biafra. Slave trade was another way of recruiting members of the society while slavery was the means of integrating them into the corporate life of such societies. Their slave identity was rapidly deconstructed and they were absorbed into the host society with ease. Narratives of slave-master relations in the sub-region are usually on different issues.

In the centralized polities the tendency is to portray heroic actions of slaves in the services of their masters. Slaves are shown to have occupied very high governance positions, especially the royal slaves. Masters and lords gave such slaves wives and/or husbands to raise not slaves but more free people for the masters. This might explain why despite the intensity of slave business in the area it has remained demographical stable throughout history. In the narratives below, slave-master relations are portrayed to have been highly influenced by societal norms of filial-parental and or wife-husband.

**Narratives from the Banyang Country in Cameroon**

**Introduction:** The narratives below were recorded in the Upper Banyang country in Cameroon. The Banyang country is situated in the upper basin of the Cross River. The mouth of this river in the Bight of Biafra provided major exits through which slaves from the Bight entered into the trans-Atlantic trade. The Banyang were some of the peoples in the sub-region who were deeply involved in the relay that channeled slaves from the far hinterlands of the region into the Atlantic slave business. It was in playing this middleman role that the Banyang evolved an interesting slavery system characterized by

---


13. Fomin and Ngoh, 1998 pp6-8
elaborate slave settlements.\textsuperscript{14} The Banyang narratives of their slavery and enslavement practices are centered on how the freeborn and slave settlements interacted in social, economic and political matters.\textsuperscript{15} The narratives recorded here show how the slave-master relations in Banyang country apparently cordial could become very nasty on matters of economic and social disagreements.

1-Narratives:- Ashunken versus his slaves
The story is told by Nelson Egbemba and corroborated by David Egbemba. The authors were not eyewitnesses to the incident but they are some of the many Banyang who have been keen and interested in the orally handed down history of Banyang slavery. I recorded their accounts when I did research in Banyang country in 1981 and 1997.\textsuperscript{16} The accounts are as follows:

“Ashunkem was a wealthy slave owner. He was one the great slave owners of Ebeagwa town\textsuperscript{17} in upper Banyang country. His slaves lived in the Ebeagwa slave settlement.\textsuperscript{18} He had many male slaves, some of whom were married and had children. Ashunkem slaves, like those of most Banyang masters were largely employed in the production of palm oil which they sold at Ebuensuk market. Slaves carried the oil in calabashes to this market. He like other Banyang would sell the oil and give the slaves their agreed share of the proceeds.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid
\textsuperscript{15} Fomin and Ngoh, 1998pp 33-36
\textsuperscript{17} The Banyang live in villages and the inhabitants of each village build their houses close together in town like pattern.
\textsuperscript{18} This incident is also reported in E.S.D. Fomin, “Slavery in Cameroon: Case Studies in Slavery in Selected Centralised and Non-Centralised Polities” Doctoral thesis, Department of History, University of Yaoundé, 1985 pp 198-208., Slave settlement in Banyang country were own collectively by a freeborn town but wealthy individuals with many slaves could create and maintained their own settlements.
The Ebuensok market was a major border market between the peoples upper Banyang and the Cameroon Grassfields. Most Banyang masters also got slaves from this market. The strongest commodity that the Banyang could offer the Grassfields dealers in exchange for slaves and other goods was palm oil. Therefore Ashunkem and other Banyang slave owners valued palm oil a lot. The production of it in Banyang country was the job of the slaves because the climbing and harvesting of the palm fruits from which oil is made is risky. But Ashunkem slaves had always bore the risk because he gave them a commensurate share of what they produced. In fact he like other Banyang slave masters was initially fair to his slaves in sharing the wealth that they made.

For some unfortunate unexplained reasons Ashunkem got into a bitter acrimony with his slaves, as a group, over palm oil proceeds. Indeed, it is one of the serious feuds between masters and slaves known in Banyang country. He had purportedly and repeatedly cheated them in sharing the proceeds from the palm oil which they produced from his estate. The slaves protested but Ashunkem was unbending. They refused to produce oil and he meted out serious sanctions on them, threatening to deprive them of farmlands and other economic resources. He punished many of their ringleaders. They took their revenge also but mystically (it is alleged) by causing the pretty daughter of their master, Ma-agbor, to suffer from paralysis from waist to toes on both legs. At this juncture Ashunkem opted for reconciliation rather than tougher sanctions.

But Ma-agbor’s condition was never reversed. She is a well known figure in Upper Banyang cultural tales. She is known as the paralyzed daughter of Ashunkem, the owner of many slaves in the town of Ebeagwa. This mystical vengeance was the only way Ashunkem’s slaves could punish him and go without taking direct serious consequences.

---

19 This infamous market is also cited in Fomin and Ngoh, 1998, pp 40-41; also see cover picture of the same book.

20 I interviewed Nelson Egbemba at Nguti where he was serving as a primary school teacher, on 12, September 1981. He comes from Tali, a prominent Upper Banyang town, one of the main slave market towns in the area. Egbemba’s grandfather father was a slave owner and he saw some of his grandfather’s liberated slaves when he grew up. David Egbemba corroborated his account of the conflict between Ashunkem and his slaves and the misfortune of his daughter that resulted from it when I interviewed him at Tali on 10-09-1981.
Ma-agbor was a wonderful singer and was sought for here and there to animate occasions. When she sang, every lover of good singing was on his/her feet. And as she could not walk on her own she had to be hired and carried around Banyang villages to animate both funerals and festivals. This explains why she is very well known and the account of her incapacity also well known. The Banyang believe a lot in the mystical powers of slaves. This is one of the reasons way our forefathers created separate settlements for their slaves. They also prohibited sexual relations between slaves and freeborn because they believed that the witchery of the slaves could be transmitted through reproductive genes"21.

**Inferences from the folktale:**

a -The Banyang masters appeared to have allowed their slaves great latitude in economic matters and those of them who attempted to withdraw such privileges met with stiff resistance from their slaves. Slaves in Banyang country owned property and rights which they defended quite often against unscrupulous masters. During the colonial and post colonial periods they sought recourse in lawsuits against what they considered to be ill treatment from their masters22.

b-The Banyang slave settlements which brought slaves together, gave them a greater sense of unity and strength to regist ill-treatment from masters than it was the case in many slavery systems in Africa. Though slaves in the Banyang slave settlements came from different areas and backgrounds they had a common plight- slavery- that united them against the freeborn. They were excluded from most freeborn corporate institutions so they created rival ones thus consolidating their unity.

---

21 Ibid. Reconstructed from interviews with Nelson Egbeamba and David Egbeamba

22 Bongfen Chem-Langhëé and E.S.D. Fomin, “Slavery and Slave Trade Among the Banyang in the nineteenth and early twentieth Centuries” In Bongfen Chem-Langhëé(Ed.) Slavery and Slave dealing in Cameroom in the nineteenth and early twentieth Centuries, (PAIDEUM 4,11995) pp91-206
c-The dependence of masters in Banyang country on slaves in the exploitation of the oil palm trees, a key economic resource, gave slaves a wonderful bargaining power in their relation with masters. The exploitation of the oil palm resources was a major controlling factor in slave-master relation in the Banyang country. And because the freeborn Banyang never exploited the tall palms themselves, the slaves who did so got a fair share of the proceeds.

d- Though segregated socially and politically, slaves in Banyang country seemed to have been very powerful economically. The Banyang societal belief system influenced the slave-master relations tremendously as they fear the mystical power of their slaves. It was this fear that prevented masters from exploited the female slaves sexually as it was done in many slavery systems. It would be recalled that some slave masters, indigenous traditional monarchs and princes in the Adamawa region, made it a point of honor to have the first night (*jus primae noctis*) with every newly wedded wife of their slaves and subordinates including the Fulani immigrants.

2-The Tale of a slave buried alive in a boundary peace pact

**Introduction:** Mbonghagesoh was a royal male slave of the palace of Essoh-Attah fondom in Lebialem division, Southwest region of Cameroon. Like many Cameroon Grassfields polities, Essoh-Attah was deeply involved in the enslavement of other peoples, in slave trade and slavery. Again like the other polities in the sub-regions, its ruler and notables acquired and used slaves in all types of ways. In fact slaves were central in administration of palaces in the area. It was in serving the palace of Essoh-Attah that the ill fated Mbonghagesoh became the sacrificial lamb in a boundary peace pact.

---

23 E.H.F. Georges, Assessment Report on Banyang Tribal Area 1930, File Af 17, National Archives Buea, Para. 289


25 *A fondom* is one of the appellations for a traditional state in the Cameroon Grassfields. Essoh-Attah is one of such states although administrative it is in the southeast region of Cameroon.


27 While subjugated and created chieftains ruled the villages of the fondom, the slaves and persons of slave origin administrators of the palace was
pact between Essoh-Attah and Lebang fondoms. He was buried alive to mark eternally, the boundary which had been the cause of many conflicts between the two states\textsuperscript{28}.

This happened around the second half of the nineteenth century when Tanjoanji and Asonganyi the then rulers of Essoh-Attah and Lebang respectively decided to fix in a permanent and ritual manner the boundary between the two fondoms. This was not very long before the arrival of the Germans, in the area in the 1890s. The two rulers who concluded this ritual boundary pact were still alive and active when the German colonialists arrived and subjugated the traditional states in the area to the German colonial rule.

Though relatively recent, the facts about this tale of extreme exploitation of a slave have only been handed down orally in what may sound like a fairy tale but which is indeed a fact of history. It has been told and retold, interpreted and reinterpreted. It is reconstructed here as a classic tale of enslavement and slavery in a typical centralized traditional state of the Cameroon Grassfields. The point I want to underscore here is the institutional influences on indigenous slavery in Africa. Slaves were important in all sense of the word in building the glorious kingship which characterized state creation and governance in this sub-region in the past. But the centralized state rulers seemed to have valued nothing more than the state itself which they incarnated. When I interviewed a number of persons on what would have happened if there was no slave in the palace to sacrifice on the occasion, one recurring answer I got is that even a royal person would have been sacrificed. I was told princes not slaves were often in the forefront of wars in the sub-region\textsuperscript{29}. It would be recalled that both rulers offered themselves to be sacrificed by the German colonialists in lieu of their states.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid
\textsuperscript{29} When the German colonialists invaded the states in the area many paramount rulers accepted exile rather than sacrificed their peoples and state.
The Tale as told by Taih Bezanchong:

“Mbonghagesoh was a first generation slave of Ateng-Attah palace. He came from a far Bamileke fondom. I do not know his exact place of origin but he could speak a distant Bamilike dialect, very different from nweh that Essoh-Attah and other nweh speakers in area speak. He was sold to Tanjoanji, the fon of Essoh-Attah by1860s around the time when he succeeded Achemandeng as the fon of Essoh-Attah. Mbonghagessoh was one of the youngest slaves of Tanjoanji. He was a handsome boy, strong, intelligent and lovely. He was probably just a victim of circumstances because he was one the many slaves of Ateng-Attah palace at the time. No person can say for certain why he was chosen for this ritual peace pact.

I do not know his original name. Tanjoanji, his lord, gave him the name Mbonghagesoh which is the short form of Mbonghagessoh a te behg, which means there is no good Essoh-Attah person. This was an indictment of the people of his fondom rather than a curse placed on the young man. And his name had nothing to do perhaps with the circumstances that led to his being sacrificed for the state. Masters here usually gave new names to their slaves and most were often pregnant with meanings.

The boundary conflict between Essoh-Attah and Lebang had lasted for long. But when Tanjoanji noticed the growing power of the young Asonganyi he was eager to arrange on a permanent basis the boundary between their fondoms. And the way to make it so was to ritualize it. The most memorial ritual was the one that involved human life. Human blood was used in the fondom for important rituals, especially the ones that were concerned with wars and their settlements.

31 I interviewed him in 1981 at Essoh-Attah. He is of late today. By the time I interviewed him the most authoritative palace historian of the fondom

32 The appellation of Essoh-Attah palace by the people themselves

33 Fomin,1994, p23

34 It would be recalled that most names among the Essoh-Attah and other Bamileke peoples have deep historical or philosophical meanings.
Mbonghagessoh was among the few but important Essoh-Attah people who happily went to the ritual spot with their fon to mark the boundary between Essoh-Attah and Lebang. All participants in that ritual knew that some solemn ritual would be performed to end the boundary conflict and mark the boundary in a lasting manner that day but the victim of the ritual seemed to have been known only to Tanjoanji alone. At the site, precisely at Ahreankeng, a hole was dug in the ground. As the digging went on, Tanjoanji asked Mbonghagessoh to go in and measure it. He did so many times unsuspectingly. The last time the hole was deep enough to be his grave and Tanjoanji ordered that Mbonghagessoh be covered with soil alive and it was so done.

It took Mbonghagessoh and many who were there by surprise. He cried and cursed Essoh-Attah as he died. The people took the curse seriously. They have made many rituals of atonement (traditional and Christian) to reconcile with him and with God his creator for the act. The people of Essoh-Attah honor him today as a fallen war hero and Ahreankeng is today considered in the fondom as a pilgrimage site. Fon Asonganyi, also buried a gun and other royal ritual things to eternalize the boundary. And so like the biblical Isaac, Mbonghagessoh prepared the sacrifice in which he himself was the victim. But unlike Isaac, he was unlucky for the lord god did not provide an alternative for him.

**Some Deductions from the tale:**

a-The tale of Mbonghagessoh is one of the most memorial acts of slave-master relations in this sub-region where monarchs would spare nothing to safeguard their states. Taih Bezanchong’s tale shows how close and trusting slaves could be of their lords. From sight, one would imagine that the plight of slaves was dangerously irksome in the sub-region. But from the many studies that have been done on slavery in this area, the general agreement is that the treatment of slaves by masters was rather benign not harsh. In fact the centralization of authority that gave rise to such extremes in the exercise of state authority favored and disfavored slaves at the same time.

---

35 Interview with Taih Bezanchong at Essoh-Attah, 1981
36 Bongfen Chem-Langhëë, 1995
b-Slaves and persons of slave descent were many and the main pillars of the all powerful centralized palace administration. They were in charge of such aspects of palace administration as the collection of tribute for the fon, administration of justice and the control of many secret and sacred societies in palaces. The rulers here were never buried with their slaves as it happened elsewhere in Africa where the monarchy was centralized and strong. But slaves were frequently used in rituals especially war charms. Thus the interpretation of slavery among the peoples of the Cameroon Grassfields as hash or benign is relative. What is certain is that royal slaves were among the rulers not the ruled. The creation of the heterogeneous centralized states in the area involved conquest and subjugation of weaker autonomous chieftains, usurpation of more collaborative ones and boundary pacts with other strong state builders. Thus regional balance of power was established as the one in the tale of Mbonghagesoh. However, the use of human blood for war charms, ritual pacts and other sacrifices was not limited to the blood of slaves but there is no doubt that slaves were more likely to be victims when such needs arose.

c-The immediate conclusion of a reader of the tale of Mbonghagesoh is that he was the most expendable of Tanjoanji peoples, free and slaves alike. From the account, his fate was neither a punishment for any wrong doing nor his expendability on account of any physical defects in him. His master appeared to have chosen him perhaps because he suited the purpose most, as the person who would be remembered as a wonderful offer for that very important pact for the sake of the state. This is explained in the various accounts of the tale. In fact he is depicted as a hero in most narratives.

3-Enslavement and Liberation of Mba told by himself, his masters and witnesses


38 Interview with Forcheh Faulefeh, Nchû, Essoh-Attah, 21April, 1981

39 The tale of Mbonghagesoh is very popular in the oral accounts of the history of Essoh-Attah. In addition to the account and the interpretation of Taih Bezanchong, William Fualefeh also stressed this point in an interview I had with him at his Nzanchen residence in 14 March 1981.
Introduction: This interesting tale of the enslavement of a young boy called Mba by multiple masters in the Cameroon Grassfields is reconstructed from evidence given in a matter heard in the British colonial Bamenda provincial court. In the matter he gave evidence as the first prosecution witness. His two masters also gave evidence as first and second accused persons. Four prosecution and one defense witnesses also testified before the court on the same matter. It is from the evidence and testimonies of the witnesses, accused persons and the cross examinations by the court that this tale is reconstructed. The cross examinations by the court helped to elicit good facts which have been very helpful in this account. On oath by the gun Mba, like other witnesses and accused persons stated before N.C. Denton, the colonial divisional officer, in three different court sessions which started on the 18th ended on the 28th of January 1927 as follows:

“I do not remember where I was born. I do not remember my father. For the last three years I have been living with 2nd accused. 1st accused took me to 2nd accused. I can’t remember how I came into the possession of 1st accused. 2nd accused always called me “nkwa” (slave). About three months ago 2nd accused took me to the house of one Anu of Bi. 2nd accused said he wanted to exchange me for a girl. Anu refused. Later on 2nd accused took me to Kwangi village and gave me to Bonaw. Bonaw gave 2nd accused a girl in exchange for me. I do not know her name. Bonaw called her “nkwa”. Shortly after Bonaw gave me to Ngwabili of MAW, who kept me at KWANGI. Ngwabili offered me to Nji who refused me. He returned me to Ngwabili’s house. Ngwabili was not there so Nji tied me to the house. I was found by the court scribe Petrus Nnofu who took me to NSUNGLI court and brought me to the Assistant Divisional Officer.”

After Mba’s evidence, the matter was adjourned. It was reopened the next day and the following accounts were heard from witnesses and accused persons. The second prosecution witness was Mba’s brother who stated as follows “(Mba) is my brother. We have the same father. My father’s name is Ndifon. He is a very old man and can not walk. About 3 years ago, one Ngon of Ke, a friend of my father, asked my father to allow Mba

---

40 Denton (D.O. Bamenda) Annual Report on Bamenda Division 1931, Case No.4,1927, File Cb(1928)2, NAB, p20
to work for him for a while. My father agreed and Mba went to live with him. My father later sent for Mba but Ngon ran away and later died in Bekom. We could obtain no news of Mba. Recently I saw Mba at Nsungli. Mba was then with Mr. Hawkesworth, the Assistant Divisional Officer.”

Anu alias Nji, the third witness, also stated thus: “I am a native of BI. 2nd accused brought Mba to my house 6 months ago. He told me to keep the boy for a few weeks to see if I like him. I kept him for about 3 months and returned him to 2nd accused. 2nd accused wished me to give my daughter to him in marriage in exchange for Mba but I would not agree to this.”

The fourth prosecution witness, Ndifon, also gave the following evidence: “Mba is my son. I am the father and Ndidis the mother. Ndid is now dead. About 3 years ago I lent my son Mba to one Ngon of Ke. Ngon was my friend and I said he could keep Mba for one month. When I sent for Mba later Ngon ran away with him. I tried to find Mba without success. I heard Ngon died at Bikom. Today is the first day I have seen Mba since Ngon ran away with him.”

Speaking on oath again Mba told the court “I recognize Ndifon, (4th witness). I now remember that he is my father.” Yet another witness, Nger took the oath also to state “I am chief of Oku. I remember Mba and I now recognize him. Mba disappeared about 3 years ago. Ndifon (4th witness) is his father.”

The statements of the accused persons and their witness were also recorded as given here below. Mvuri, the first accused stated “Ngaza of Nsi is my brother-in-law and Mba is his son. Ngaza gave me the boy to make medicine for him. Mba had bad legs and was slight
mad at the time. This was about nine years ago and Mba was then quite small. Ngaza and his wife are now both dead. Mba stayed in my house for four years and I now handed him to the 2nd accused to make medicine for him.”

The second accused, also defended himself in these words, “the 1st accused gave Mba to me to make medicine for him. I thought 1st accused was the father. I expected 1st accused to pay me when Mba was cured. The boy ran away to kwangi. I did not try to sell Mba. I wanted to marry Anu’s daughter and sent Mba to stay with Anu. There was no question of exchange of Mba with Anu’s daughter.”

The last evidence in the matter was heard from Tantaw who stated on oath as follows “I am a native of Nsi. Mba is the son of Ngaza of KUMBO (Nsi quarter). I Know 1st accused. He married one of my daughters. When Ngaza died 1st accused took charge of Mba. 1st accused married Ngaza’s daughter.” In response to a question from the court as to whether he is sure Mba is the son of Ngaza, he added, “Ngaza told me he obtained Mba from OKU country. I said Mba was son of Ngaza because he had stayed with him for a long time.” Again the court asked how Ngaza got Mba and he said, “Ngaza told me he paid dowry for an OKU woman, and when he went to claim the woman, the OKU man gave him a boy (Mba) instead. The court also asked if Mba was known and treated as a slave and he answered “yes, he was always called “Nkwa” slave.”

From the facts of the matter the court found the two accused slavers guilty and sentenced them to prison for slave dealing contrary to section 36 of the Nigerian Criminal Code (2). Both were given 18 months imprisonment each with hard labor. Meanwhile Mba was restored to his father Ndifon.

45 Ibid p 22

46 Ibid


48 Interview with Valentine Asongtia II, Buea, S.W. Region, Cameroon, 5 March, 2009. He was Regional delegate of Social Welfares when interviewed.
Lessons from the tale:

a- This story of the enslavement and liberation of Mba and the punishment of his masters shows the extent to which dealers cum masters in Cameroon tried to circumvent and resist colonial abolitionist interventions in slave dealing in the sub-region. In fact enslavement was still quite rife in this area right deep into the first half of the 20th century although as we see masters were well aware of the risk in keeping slaves.

b- From the many accounts of the accused persons and witnesses in the story it is clear that only prosecution in court could dissuade masters and end of the practice of enslavement in the area.

c- The short time it took the colonial divisional officer to hear and give judgment on the matter shows the seriousness of the colonial in abolishing internal slave dealing which appeared to have still been very deeply rooted but which masters had disguised into different forms of relationships making it extremely difficult to end on its own.

d- It is also shown in the tale how slave masters acquired often only the helpless and hapless through complex and complicated means. Indeed, this same area is today a leading area in Cameroon where child stealing is rampant. The acquisition of children by dubious men and women for enslavement using pretexts such as recruiting them as apprentices, house helps and baby sitters is still highly prevalent in this region of Cameroon.

e- It is also seen from this story how masters could easily graft enslavement, slavery and analogous practices into the marriage culture in the area and so it was usually difficult to tell whether a woman in a so called marriage was indeed in slavery. It was not often easy to identify and punish the culprits and liberate the victims. The children like Mba who could easily be stolen, controlled and exchanged for women and other goods must have been and are still the main victims of this post-Atlantic internal slave dealing. From his name, Mba should be of Meta ethnic origin and that could explain why his father’s so called friend sold him with impunity in Bikom country. Children of the poor are still the most vulnerable victims of this

49 Ibid
50 Ibid
type of enslavement in Cameroon today\textsuperscript{52} although some of noble and wealthy parents were/are also stolen and sold during and after the Atlantic transactions\textsuperscript{53}.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid; He told me that sometimes orphans abandoned at orphanages with unscrupulous operators are trafficked. The acquisition of children by dubious men and women for enslavement using pretexts such as recruiting them as apprentices, house helps and baby sitters is still highly prevalent in this region of Cameroon. d

\textsuperscript{52} Like Ndifon, most wretched parents even today are enticed with frivolous things and Quixotic promises to give their children dealers whom they might never see again.

\textsuperscript{53} In separate interviews with William Faulefeh and Ndi Nkemacha, they cited names off princes of Ateng-Attah and Azi palaces respectively who were caught and sold into slavery during the post-Atlantic slave trade.