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## Percy Amaury Talbot and Diplomacy of Colonialism in the Calabar Province

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### **Abstract**

*Percy Amaury Talbot was a British colonial administrator, historiographer and “diplomat” who served in the Calabar Province and other parts of Southern Nigeria such as: Sapele, in present day Delta State, Calabar and Oban in Cross River State, Eket and Oron in Akwa Ibom State, Degema in Rivers State, Enugu Ngwo in Enugu State, Onitsha Province in Anambra State, Benin Province, covering the present Edo/Delta States and some parts of Yoruba land. He also served in Lagos and Ijebu Province in Ogun State. Based on the above pedigree, Talbot’s activities covered almost all sections of Southern Nigeria and he could be rightly regarded as an integral part of the colonial enterprise. He wrote many land mark books to project the culture of the peoples of Southern Nigeria; hence, he was one of those colonialists who laid the intellectual foundation of modern scholarship in humanities in Nigeria. However, Talbot was also an un-pronounced British diplomat who displayed tact and intelligence and also adopted diverse diplomatic processes, methods and strategies to extend the frontier of Pax-Britanica. In existing literature, Talbot is remembered primarily as an administrator and ethnographer to the exclusion of his role in the “diplomacy of colonialism”. This paper examines some of the diplomatic posturing towards the consolidation of the colonial enterprise in Oban, Eket and Oron axis of the Calabar Province. The paper adopts a historical narrative method.*

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### **Introduction**

Although the Portuguese were the first set of Europeans to make contact with Nigerians since the 15th century, their influence did not endure beyond the 16th century. However, enduring European influence which eventually resulted in the colonization of Nigeria was re-initiated by the British and actualised by her “diplomatic” agents. One British “diplomat” who contributed significantly to the actualisation of the colonial agenda in Southern Nigeria, particularly in the Calabar Province was Percy Amaury Talbot. Although he was not officially accorded the designation of a “diplomat” by his home government and in existing literature, Talbot obviously played the role of a seasoned diplomatic agent. In the discharge of his official responsibilities, he adopted several diplomatic processes, methods and strategies such as negotiation, persuasion, bargaining, visits, forging of friendships, compromise, inducement and some cases gunboat diplomacy. In addition, he was imbued with certain characteristics and qualities usually demonstrated by diplomats. Some of these qualities included good negotiation skill, tact, intelligence, shrewdness, sound analytical mind, humility, self-initiative, sociability and so on.

It appears that Talbot was aware of the fact that diplomacy is the fundamental means by which foreign relations are conducted and foreign policies of states implemented. He also must have been aware of the fact that without the instrument of diplomacy the colonial agenda would not be achieved. He used his position to gather copious information from indigenous people and wrote extensively on them. This broadened his home country’s view on the cultural beliefs of the people. In some instances, when it became obvious that only

compromise could convince some indigenous people in some communities in present day Esit Eket and Nsit Ubium Local Government Areas to allow the British agents to create access route from Calabar, the District headquarters to the hinterland, Talbot persuaded his colleagues to take the traditional oath which involved blood covenant administered by the people. The indigenous people ensured that the traditional oath was taken to guarantee the non-deployment of force in the area by the colonial authorities.

Indeed, it is doubtful if the British government would have succeeded in the entrenchment of the colonial infrastructure in the Calabar Province within the period the scheme was actualised if not for the diplomatic efforts of Talbot. In view of the fact that much attention has been paid to his exploits as a colonial administrator, ethnographer and writer to the exclusion of his diplomatic efforts, this paper documents his diplomatic exploits.

The paper is divided into six sections. Section one is the introduction, section two examines the foundation of the British influence in Calabar Province, section three discusses Talbot's birth, education and enlistment in the colonial service, section four looks at Talbot's diplomatic initiatives and the consolidation of colonial infrastructure in Eket and Oron axis of the Calabar Province, section five examines his diplomatic activities in Oban District and gives a brief insight into his life as a historiography, while section seven is the conclusion.

### **The Foundation of the British Influence in Calabar Province**

The British agents actively engaged in slave trade until the Industrial Revolution made the trade obsolete, hence, the 1807 abolition legislation was issued. During the period, Calabar port was one of the most lucrative centres where overseas shipment of the human cargoes was undertaken. The abolition did not end the trade in Calabar area, traditional slave traders turned around to prosecute the trade under the flag of other nations like Spain and Portugal. In a desperate bid to bring the trade to end since it was hindering the trade in staple commodities, which now engaged the attention of the British, abolition treaties were entered into by Britain with Portugal and Spain. Britain eventually set up the Naval Preventive Squadron in 1819 to patrol the West African waters, which also could not bring the trade to an end. Consequently, in that year, an international tribunal known as the Court of Mixed Commission was established by Britain after she had acquired the right to search ships suspected of carrying slaves. By 1825, the ineffectiveness of the Naval Squadron was obvious and there was alarming increase in the trade. The difficulty of accosting slave ships once on the high sea became problematic to the extent that it was suggested that the court should be moved from Freetown in Sierra Leone to Fernando Po (Noah, 1990).

In 1827, however, Britain acquired from Spain the right to use Fernando Po as a naval base for the suppression of the slave trade. The first British Governor of the Island of Fernando Po was Edward Nicolls. With the aid of the British navy that was stationed there, Nicolls began to negotiate and sign treaties with the potentates of the Bights of Benin and Biafra as the best means of exterminating the trade slave trade (Dike, 1956).

To achieve stability in an area where inter-ethnic wars had been promoted for more than three hundred years as a means of securing slaves, was the most pressing task that confronted the British political officers at Fernando Po. Captain W. Owen, Nicoll's successor, involved deeply in the process of enacting treaties with the coastal chiefs in a bid to abolish slave trade. However, it was the appointment of John Beecroft in 1849, as the British Consul for the Bights of Benin and Biafra which helped to extend British influence in the Lower Cross Region (Noah, 1990). Because of his many years of experience in the region, Beecroft used his position to lay the foundation of British authority there. He adopted methods like bombardment, cajolery and direct intervention to achieve this. Other consuls such as Richard Burton, C.L. Livingstone, C. Hartley, D. Hopkins and E. Hewett were appointed in the area to help the British to actualize her imperial ambition. In 1885, Britain

declared a protectorate over the area and named it the Oil Rivers Protectorate and placed it under the jurisdiction of the Foreign Office. In 1891, Claude Macdonald was named the High Commissioner and Consul-General of the Protectorate, while in 1893, the name of the area was changed to the Niger Coast Protectorate. In 1896, a new administrator in the person of Ralph Moor succeeded Macdonald (Uya, 1984; Abasiattai, 1990; Noah, 1990).

It should be noted that for most of the period of the protectorate arrangement, a greater part of the hinterland of the Lower Cross River region was not effectively occupied; hence, some consular officials particularly Roger Casement had traversed some parts of Ibibioland. In 1894, Alfred Ashmall Whitehouse was appointed the Pro-Consul for Eket (Udo, 1983). These British agents, including Talbot, contributed significantly to the entrenchment of British rule in the hinterland of Calabar Province.

### **Percy Amaury Talbot: Birth, Education and Enlistment into the Colonial Civil Service**

Percy Amaury Talbot is listed in the *British Who was Who, 1941-50*, as having been born on the 26th of June, 1877. He was educated at the University College, Oxford, where he obtained the M.A. and D.Sc degrees. He was Gunsley Exhibitor of the University College, Oxford. As one of the pioneer colonial administrators in Southern Nigeria, he worked in many parts of the areas. For instance, he worked in Sapele, in present day Delta State. He also worked in Calabar, Cross River State, before he was transferred to Oban as the acting District Commissioner. In addition, he worked in Eket in Akwa Ibom State. He served in Degema, Rivers State, Enugu Ngwo, Enugu State, up to 1920, when he was placed in-charge of Onitsha Province in Anambra State as the acting Resident. He also served as the acting Resident in Benin Province, covering the present Edo/Delta and some parts of Yoruba land. Later, he served in Lagos, Warri and Ijebu Province in present day Ogun State. Talbot was Assistant Commissioner in the Anglo-Liberian Boundary Commission of 1902-1903. He served on the Alexander Gosling Expedition to Lake Chad, 1904-1905 and was awarded the first (Silver) Medal of the African Society in 1924. He retired from the Nigerian civil service in 1931, as Resident, Class 1, on a salary of £1,200, plus £240 duty pay (Bassey, 1999).

### **Talbot's Diplomatic Initiatives and the Consolidation of Colonial Infrastructure in Eket/Oron Axis of Calabar Province**

One of the diplomatic methods adopted by Talbot to facilitate the process of colonialism in the Calabar Province was the use of political agents. Political agents were educated indigenes, most of whom had been exposed to Western education and were co-opted to form the nucleus of local officers who acted as assistants to British officials during the colonial period. Being usually more enlightened than the others in their community, the agents had to get involved with colonial administration at a time the British government sought to strengthen its control but lacked the financial and human resources to attain their goal (Nair, 1972). Some of the agents included: Daniel Henshaw, Richard Henshaw, John Mfon, Sergeant Ime, Chief Edoho Eket, Akpe Ntuen of Ofiryo Eket among others (Okoko, 1988).

According to Ikime:

These agents were usually delta middlemen who were used to the British for various purposes. They served as intelligence officers for the British; they were often sent to the hinterland to prepare the ground for the visits of British political officers, they invariably accompanied British military expeditions and served as guides and interpreters. As paid agents of the British, they were expected to persuade the hinterland peoples to accept British rule (Ikime, 1977, 212)

Talbot records that in 1899, the colonial government made the first attempt to pass from Oron to Eket when Captain Ross-Brown was in charge, but the Oron people gave the colonial agents false guides, "who led us round and round by Eyo Abasi and Ekim...Ubium.

Through swamp after swamp, sometimes we passed, sometimes climbing over fallen trunks, on which we had to balance ourselves like monkeys amid the branches, but more often wading and swimming through water up to the lips and so cold that it numbed our limbs. Then the guides said that they could lead us no further, and, after two nights spent on the way, we arrived back in Idua Oron” (Talbot, 1923).

He adds that:

Next year, another route was tried, under F.S. James. This time we went with a small escort from Itak to Nsia, hoping thus to reach Ikot Ubo and thence Eket. The chiefs of the last friendly town declared, however, that a little farther on people were lining the way, ready to fight us; so they refused to give a guide. We, therefore, followed a straight road which seemed to lead in the right direction. Before us in the bush sounded the blowing of horns gathering the people together to oppose our passage. We would have pressed forward, but the head priest came and so earnestly begged us not to do so, lest government should blame him for anything that might befall us, that we had to go back....Next year, white rule had grown in power in this part of the world. Mr. A.C. Douglas was District Commissioner at Eket, where the African Association had built a factory which then could be reached by way of the Kwa Iboe River (Talbot, 1923: 258-259).

At this time, Major Winn Sampson was Commissioner in Calabar and Oron and he was anxious to open the road between Oron and Eket to enhance trade. One afternoon, Sampson summoned Chief Richard Henshaw (a political agent) and Talbot to discuss the project with them. Talbot and Henshaw advised Thompson to delay the commencement of the project until they could use diplomacy to establish friendship with the chiefs and powerful people along the route and collect information from them. The idea was accepted by Sampson. Consequently, Talbot and Henshaw resorted to extensive use of diplomacy in this direction. They sent for Chief Edehi of Etebi and Chief Ekong ‘Nyang (sic.). Talbot records that “when these men came, “we treated them kindly, for they were powerful men who controlled many neighbouring villages, beside their own. They put before us that they understood government always brought war upon a community when it had once been allowed to pass through; but we told them we only came in friendliness and to open up the land to trade. So they agreed that we might come to their village. A day was fixed for making a new start; they provided guides and we set out from Oron by way of Eyo Abasi to Ekim, Obodu, Oroku and Etebi” (sic.) (Talbot, 1923).

After the meeting with the two chiefs, Talbot and Henshaw received their assurances to help in the enterprise. They extended an invitation to the colonial agents to visit their domain. Consequently, Talbot and Henshaw were accompanied by Major Winn Sampson and others in the visit. When they arrived, Major Winn Sampson explained the reason for the visit. “The chief advised that the best place from which to start would be Ntak Inyang. They therefore went and stayed a little while, talking to the principal people, who all seemed pleased and friendly. Next day, more chiefs came in from far-off towns, to join in the discussion. “They would hardly allow us to speak, but declared over and over again that they knew we were coming to bring war and take their land. When we denied this, they brought *juju* stones, about fifteen inches square, thin and flat, and asked Major Sampson to take an oath upon these. He said he was quite ready to swear that government would not trouble the people so long as they did no harm. When Richard Henshaw was asked to take the oath they said: you and Daniel are cousins, the *juju* must kill both of you” (Talbot, 1923).

According to Talbot (1923), as the time was already drawing toward evening, the colonial team spent the night in the village and next day, they began their journey to Eket. Then the people brought out *juju* horns made of elephant tusks, which gave forth a strange booming sound. These they sounded through the bush so that all the villages might know that they came in peace. When such horns were blown, people knew that the new-comers were

under the protection of powerful chiefs and therefore not to be harmed. In this way they arrived safely, and the District Commissioner, Mr. Douglas, was very pleased to see them at Eket at last. After twodays in his station, they went back with him, in addition with the agent of the African Association and Edoho Eket, head chief of the town. They took “many dashes bought at the factory, such as cloth, tobacco and other things” to Etebi and went there and held a big meeting. ADuring the meeting, one of the chiefs observed that the District Commissioner of Calabar had taken oath not to bring war, but perhaps the District Commissioner of Eket, who had not sworn to such an oath, might do this. He added that we must therefore swear another round of oath involving blood *juju*.

Talbot explains the oath-taking episode thus:

The three white men, with Edoho Eket and five of the principal chiefs, sat together. A bowl of *mimbo* was brought, with a glass for each, and one over. Into the latter, every man had to let fall a few drops of blood, from a cut made in the back of the hand by the wrist. When all had contributed, a little *mimbo* was poured in and the glass carefully shaken so as to mix the contents. These were then shared out into the glasses of the five principal people; more *mimbo* was added and the mixture drunk off. After the rite, a big dash was given, while much palm-wine was drunk amid great rejoicing. In the evening a splendid play was performed, and the white visitors also joined in the dance to show that they were glad and friendly (Talbot, 1923: 261).

It was this diplomatic initiative that facilitated the opening of the Oron-Eket road. Before the first mails were sent along it old newspapers were folded and put in a bag to look like proper mail. At the bottom was just one letter to the District Commissioner, Eket, in order to find out if the road was safe and clear. To the relief of all, the runner passed through unharmed. Again and again the experiment was tried and always with a success. So the real mails were sent at last. After a while, it was found that the road was a very long one, so the same year, the government started a new route via Ikot Ubo (Talbot, 1923).

However, as Talbot has observed, the Ubium people was uncooperative with them. He notes further that:

...of all those whose help was asked in clearing the creeks only the Ubium seemed unwilling to co-operate. A deputation of chiefs came to complain that since they were born, they had never learned to manage a canoe...so they pleaded that is was impossible for them to cut through the tree trunks which had fallen and were blocking the water-way....it was obvious that the objection given was not the real one, but failure followed the most careful attempts to get at true cause of their unwillingness. Once more, as so often, the intentions of the white man were found to beat powerlessly against the dead wall of a world of thought and feeling utterly different from his own. It was not until a month later that the true reason was revealed, namely, dread of harming the sacred totemic fish...which dwelt in the water (Talbot: 1923:260).

While the government was trying to open the route through Ikot Ubo, the chief of Afaha Ubium came out to thwart their effort. The chief of Ikot Ubo informed the colonial agents that the people of Afaha Ubium would not allow them to pass through their territory without permission. For the colonial agents to have their way, they swiftly resorted to another round of diplomatic process which involved oath taking. An oath of friendship was initiated between the colonial agents and some Ise chiefs. According to Okoko (1988), the Ise community produced *mbiam* (*juju*) and the government representatives produced the Holy Bible and both parties swore to be friendly with each other and to safeguard and protect the interests of the other. Because of the existing diplomatic relations already established between the colonial agents and the chiefs of Ikot Ubo, the friendly chiefs opted to act as escorts and lead them safely to Oron.

Apart from diplomatic instruments that engendered peace, force was also used on some occasions to enable the administrators achieve their goals. For instance, when the attempt to open a link way from Eshi beach (sic.) on the Ubium River was rebuffed by the indigenous people, the government resorted to the use of military expedition against the people of Afaha Ubium.

Abasiattai (1990) corroborates the account thus:

The Afaha Ubium rebuffed Whitehouse's successor, C. Douglas; they opposed his proposals for opening a road from Oron to Eket, refused to abjure human sacrifice, and rather murdered some Opobo traders stationed at Nnung Obong, an Afaha village. On their part, the Afaha Eket people strenuously opposed Douglas when he arrived to establish an administration for Eket District in October 1898. Their opposition would last for over a decade in spite of successive punitive expeditions to subjugate them (Abasiattai, 1990: 163)

Noah (1990) also notes that the troops marched to Ubium where Chief Ekpumo had earlier sent a bundle of four poisoned arrows to the consul, daring him to attack his own town. In the encounter, the courage and stiff resistance of the Ubium people soon yielded to the superior weapons of the invading forces. All Ubium within a radius of five miles were burnt and a proclamation was issued forbidding any resettlement until two chiefs from each of the rebellious villages surrendered to the consul. By the end of that decade, the British had signed treaties with Ikot Akpatek and Ikot Ubo, among other places.

However, Okoko (1988) notes that the political agents, as diplomatic agents, who had informed the chiefs of the impending war with Afaha Ubium promised that the war would not enter the Ise side. When the chiefs wanted to know how they would be recognized by the soldiers, they were asked to come and collect the British flag which they would hoist at the boundary between them and Afaha Ubium, conspicuous enough for the soldiers to see. He also adds that as "intelligence officers", the political agents knew about separate identities of Ise and Afaha group of villages in Ubium and decided to employ the policy of "divide and conquer"; hence, they entered into a separate pact with the Ise group of villages. They also relied on their friendship with one Chief Okono Osom of Ise Ubium "who, because of his trade in slaves had travel out and knew of European fighting power to dissuade his people from supporting the Afaha Ubium".

According to Uya (1984), the expansion of colonial authority into Oron involved the application of considerable force as well as the participation of a noted Efik Political Agent, Chief Daniel Henshaw. The first expedition was sent against the people of Udung Uko in 1897. In the month of July that year, the second son of Chief Osung Atanang of Udung Uko, one of the largest and most important towns in all Oron area, killed one of the women of his father's household having accused her of being a wizard that caused his brother to fall sick by her magic. He first murdered her; then cut out the unborn baby from her body and slashed off its head. This was reported to Talbot and he informed other colonial government officials. Consequently, the man was arrested, tried at Calabar assize, and sentenced to death by hanging in his village; so that all the people could take precaution and understand that a new government was in charge.

When Chief Atanang heard what government proposed, he threatened that, should the white man attempt to hang his son, he would take measures to prevent it; and all the men of his town agreed to stand by him. On the previous day before the execution, Talbot sent for Chief Atanang and several of his important chiefs to visit Oro. "There he entertained them so well that they did not notice the arrival of the launch bringing the District Commissioner of Calabar, Mr. Whitehouse and Captain Hill, who was then head of the police, was also part of the trip in addition with the was the murderer" (Uya, 1984).

For the execution to be successfully accomplished, Talbot adopted his usual diplomatic skill. He records thus:

...the father and the chiefs were induced to lie down and sleep while I went with the white men to Ukpata beach; giving charge to my people that all should be done so as to persuade the visitors, if possible, to stay at Oron until business was over. In consequence, the young man was hanged in the midst of the town, while all the people ran around seeking the chiefs, for whose arrival they begged us to wait. Had these men been present to take command, the inhabitants would certainly have fought to save the prisoner. As it was, we hurried and got the matter safely over. When all was finished and the body buried, we came back to Oron, where the white men left me and went themselves to Calabar. I went to break the news to the chiefs, who said: "you shall see what will happen in consequence of this! Had I been there, my son would never have been hanged! After this, he went home, swearing vengeance against the District Commissioner and myself (Talbot, 1923: 324-325).

In those days, there was a Minor Court at Ukpata, which was a dependency of Udung Uko. Talbot used to attend the court every Wednesday. The Assistant Clerk of the court was one Etetim Ene Okon, who used to go beforehand on Tuesdays to inform the people to turn out for the court sitting. Despite several warnings by the colonial authorities and his friends not to go to Ukpata that day, the assistant court clerk refused to heed such advice.

While the chief Atanang, whose authority had obviously been challenged in his domain and his people were still smarting over the humiliation, Ene arrived the village to announce an impending court session at Udung Uko and to invite people with complaints to prepare to appear before the court session. As if to add insult to injury, when Ene saw Chief Atanang, he disdainfully sneered at the fact that the chief who had sworn to avenge the death of his son or take his own life was still around. Angered by this insult from Ene, Chief Atanang ordered that Ene be murdered and skinned. He was accordingly murdered and his mutilated body distributed to the neighbouring villages. The Udung Uko villagers marched on the court house at Ukpata, considered as the symbol of the new authority and burnt it (Uya, 1984).

The action of the Udung Uko people was interpreted as a show of resistance and a threat to the new authority. Without prior approval from the Foreign Office, as required by regulations, Whitehouse ordered a punitive expedition to be mounted against Udung Uko, contrary to the advice of his more senior officer, Wall, who preferred to use "all pacifying and persuasive measures" to deal with an explosive situation. This reluctance later led to Wall's withdrawal from Calabar. Meanwhile as the news of the impending action against Chief Atanang and his people spread, the neighbouring villages perfected their alliances to assist Chief Atanang to fight off the invading colonial army. Finally, Talbot, Whitehouse and Captain Hill in company of about sixty soldiers arrived. They first tried to persuade the "guilty villagers" to surrender, but they refused (Uya, 1984).

Talbot's team took an unusual route from which the people of Udung Uko did not expect, and since they were unprepared, they were easily overpowered. The chiefs were rounded up and tried. Eight of them were found guilty and sentenced to death. To further ensure peace and order, Chief Daniel Henshaw was stationed at Oron as Native Political Agent charged with the responsibility of appealing to the villagers in Oron to accept the colonial dispensation (Uya, 1984).

Chief Henshaw, in that capacity went from village to village in Oron and got involved in the second important episode in the establishment of colonial rule in Oron in 1902. This featured the march of a military detachment from Oron town to Eket. He held periodic meetings with the village chiefs in many parts of Oron, spied on Oron district for government officials and made periodic reports of threats to law and order to the colonial officers in Calabar. He also adjudicated in disputes involving village. He was appointed the permanent President of the Oron Native Court (Uya, 1984; Noah, 1990).

According to Abasiattai (1990), in the armed resistance, the people used both traditional and modern arms and methods of warfare including bows, arrows, machets, spears, mostly dane guns, spying and ambushes. In many instances, actual fighting was preceded by some parleying or diplomacy between the chiefs and the British officials intended, from their view points, to turn back the British or to induce the people to surrender (after initial talks-as it often occurred – or continued to defy the British after initial surrender, or entirely refused to parley or otherwise treat with British officials that fighting ensued). Another aspect was the use of supernatural “weapons” such as magic and medicine (ibok) and poison. Such “weapons” also included lightning and thunder, manipulated by medicine men with the intent to destroy colonial troops, officials or station; and charms placed on the paths, property or food of these troops and officials to injure them.

Talbot, who had become the District Commissioner for Eket in 1913, wrote that “it would be too tedious to tell the many attempts” to poison him. He adds that: “One chief and clerk...were sentenced each to five years penal servitude; while, just before leaving the District, a man in whom we had complete trust was found in possession of a calabash and contents of which (he) intended to administer at the last moment, so that we might die on the way home...on several occasions we were warned that fowls brought as dashes had been poisoned with the idea of killing us...” (Talbot, 1923).

### **Talbot’s Diplomatic Activities in Oban District,**

As noted earlier, Talbot served in Oban between 1907 and 1912. During the period, he interacted deeply with the people because he established deep and sustained friendship with them. He sometimes used gifts to attract and sustain the attention of the people. Interpreters were used to enable him communicate with the people. Because of the trust and respect the people had on him, they voluntarily opened their hearts to tell them much about their past and ways of life. With such magnanimous window being opened, Talbot conducted extensive research in the area. He also encouraged the people to acquire Western education since the Efik, their neighbours, used the same instrument to dominate them.

According to Bassey (1999), Talbot’s love for the Oban people was demonstrated in his contribution to African historiography. He extensively corrected the misconception that erroneously disparaged the Africans including the Oban. He cites his contributions in his book: *In the Shadow of the Bush*, which he refers to the following racist remarks by Northcote Thomas that:

Although the Negro is able to carry loads for long distances, he must go at his own pace; even without a load his endurance is small, when he is called upon to move faster than usual. In his “Report on Edo Speaking Peoples”, Part 1, at page 6, Talbot disagrees with Thomas thus: “So far, from my experience, I have found the Negro show powers of endurance over the whole extent of country covered by me in West and Central Africa since 1902” (Bassey, 1999: 53).

Bassey also notes that his assessment of “Ekoi”, Ejagham people was accurate and unbiased. He quotes Talbot’s account *In the Shadow of the Bush* thus:

The Ekoi are mentally an intelligent race, and though they have not the concentration of mind possessed by white people, they can undeniably fix their attention for hours at a time on any subject which interests them, while their memories are incomparably better, and their senses, at least those of sight, hearing and smell, are-as is to expected-far keener than those of Europeans...With respect, though it appears to me that concentration and fixing of attention for hours at a time on any subject which interest them, seem to mean the same thing (Bassey, 1999: 53).

Bassey (1999) also adds that “those who knew Talbot speak fondly of his contribution to economic welfare of Oban people, anything one did for Talbot, he would photograph and



pay for it”, “if you took it to him during his exhibitions - whether it was stylish hairdressing by young girls or fanciful carvings or other handiwork by elderly people...say our elders, even if it is an interesting story you tell, he would pay for it”. This was, no doubt, the source of the collection, which so richly adorn his book, *In the shadow of the Bush*.

When Talbot was transferred out of Oban in 1912, regrettably, the colonial authorities did not send any replacement to Oban. According to Bassey (1999), that act therefore marked the beginning of the backward slide of Oban. This was completed in 1926, with the closure of the Oban Government School founded in 1905 and sustained by Talbot. It was not until 1935 that the light of education was re-kindled, with the founding of St. Michael’s School, Oban, through the determined efforts of Oban people. Apart from the fact that Talbot “opened” Oban and wrote a book *In the shadow of the Bush* in 1932 about the Ejagham people, he created “immortality” for himself, because all written words are “immortal” in a way. Bassey strongly notes that as an indigene of Oban, brought up among his people and very interested and curious about the customs and ways of life of his people, “I have found no fault” with his work.

As noted earlier, a diplomat is supposed to possess some qualities such as humility and endurance. Talbot was a very humble agent of the British imperialism who endured hardship to pioneer the colonial agenda. Bassey (1999), in applauding his pioneering role in the development of Oban, drew a contrast with the behaviour of an indigenous administrator who came to serve in Oban almost four decades after the exit of Talbot from the area thus: After consistent pressure on the government for the recreation of Oban “Division”, the Eastern Regional Government in 1966, through the assistance of Mr. Ntienyong Udo Akpan, then Secretary to the Eastern Regional Government, posted an Administrative Officer in the person of Patrick Imagha to Oban in 1967. Mr. Imagha finally yielded, to severe pressure and assumed duty at Oban, but just as the Nigerian Civil War was booming in Nigeria. He did stay in Oban, but just for a few days, complaining bitterly of flies, mosquitoes, and lack of social amenities, such as: light, pipe borne water and hospital. Mr. Imagha refused to stay in Oban, and made his way back to Calabar. Here is a young Nigerian in 1967, refusing to accept an opportunity to champion the cause of his countrymen and instead, running away. By this time, at least, Calabar could be reached from Oban by car. Compare this with 1907, when a European was posted to Oban and, although he could only get to Calabar and other areas in Oban District under him on foot, he persevered and set out to develop the place” (Bassey, 1999: 54).

### **A Diplomatic Agent as an Historiographer**

For a very long time there existed the notion that Africans had no culture or civilization worthy of consideration. It was believed by many scholars particularly Western scholars that the Africans were barbaric savage prior to the arrival of the Europeans into the continent. According to these writers, all that was worth recording concerning African past was simply the activities of Europeans such as European explorations, slave trade, Christian missionary works, European scramble for and partition of Africa, colonial rule and the like. The Eurocentric observations were based on their view that Africa was pre-literate and never produced any form of written records; thus, to them, writing was equated with culture and civilization. Various theories were postulated to justify this heinous claim (Ozo-Esson, 2012).

Uya (1994) observes that as was the practice elsewhere, the early colonial administrators in the state were commissioned and directed to compile reports on the history, culture and socio-political organization of the communities under them. With varying degrees of enthusiasm and expertise, these administrators compiled information, classified variously as Annual Reports, Intelligence Reports or simply Reports on all aspects of life of the people

which have substantially affected and influenced recent scholarship on the Cross River region. Best known in this regard was Percy Talbot.

These commissioned reports were intended to comment on basic social and political characteristics of the peoples of the area to facilitate better administration. Each report attempted a historical survey of the origins and migrations of the groups, their language, the relationship with their neighbours, major occupations and aspects of their social, political and cultural organization through interviews conducted in the various communities. From this point of view, they serve as useful windows into the world of the people in the colonial period. The works of these early administrators and scholars have proved extremely useful in recent studies of the history and culture of the area. Indeed despite some limitations, the views of these earlier writers have become the whetstone to sharpen, stimulate and challenge modern indigenous scholars into undertaking scientifically organized investigation into the region (Uya, 1994).

As a scholar-administrator, some of Talbot's published works include:

Surveying Chapters in Boyd Alexander's *From the Niger to the Nile*

*In The shadow of the Bush*

*Life in Southern Nigeria, the Magic, Beliefs and Customs of the Ibibio Tribe of Southern Nigeria, 1923.*

*The Peoples of Southern Nigeria* (four volumes)

*Some Fertility Cults*

*Tribes in the Niger Delta*

He also encouraged his wife, Dorothy, to publish a book entitled: *Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive People: The Ibibio of Southern Nigeria.*

## Conclusion

Obviously, Talbot was a pathfinder. Like all diplomats, he exhibited intelligence and tact and created the structure that the subsequent colonial and even post-colonial edifice was built. He is associated with the conduct of the 1921 census in Nigeria. Moreover, his contribution to the historiography of Southern Nigeria has consistently enhanced scholarship in the region. Talbot made use of some political agents like Chief Daniel Henshaw and Richard Henshaw, John Mfon and Chief Edoho Eket, who were familiar with the terrain and culture of the areas and therefore served as "spies" and "intelligence officers". He was also apt in establishing diplomatic contacts, friendship and treaty with some local chiefs who facilitated his access into the hinterland.

Talbot used dialogue and on many occasions induced the people with gifts to succeed. The African themselves in some cases resorted to the use of pre-colonial African diplomatic mechanism like oath-taking which was to ensure adequate bargaining. For instance, the people of Etebi and Ise Ubium used oath to be assured that Talbot and his co-colonial agents would not use military expedition against them. Having secured their bargain, the people granted the Europeans free passage and necessary immunity. Thus, the diplomatic engagement in the era of Talbot was a two-way process.

In some cases, the colonial establishment resorted to the use of force. The military expedition against the people of Udung Uko and Afaha Ubium clearly demonstrated this aspect. In resisting the colonial penetration and subjugation, the people applied various traditional weapons such as magic, sorcery and poison. It is reported that on many occasions, attempts were made to poison Talbot. If the people had succeeded, the colonial enterprise in the area of study would not have taken the shape it took and the benefits that are being enjoyed at present through Talbot's extensive anthropological research would not have been achievable. Indeed, Talbot, as a man on the spot, paid huge sacrifice as with his sound diplomatic capacity left indelible foot prints in Calabar Province. In Oban, his memory still

lingers and his sound diplomatic methods still applauded. Talbot's "diplomacy of colonialism" has clearly established the fact that diplomacy is the fundamental means by which foreign relations are conducted and foreign policies of states are implemented. His exploits helped in the entrenchment of British interest in Nigeria and finally resulted in the direct colonialism of the area by the British.

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