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Collecting Abeokuta: Tracing the Provenance of Egba Material Culture from the Church Missionary Society Yoruba Mission

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collecting abeokuta: tracing the provenance of egba material culture from the church missionary society yoruba mission

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ABSTRACT

The Reverend Henry Townsend (1815–1886) was a missionary of the Church Missionary Society who worked in the city-state of Abeokuta, in present day southwestern Nigeria, from 1846 to 1876. While there he gathered artifacts, some of which are now in the collection of the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, in Exeter, England. This article is a study of part of this material culture, its trajectory from Abeokuta to Britain in the 1840s, and its use to create narratives of political power and Christian conversion in the context of the nineteenth century missionary encounter.

Keywords: missionary, Abeokuta, Egba, Yoruba, artifacts, collections, handover

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The Royal Albert Memorial Museum (RAMM), in Exeter, England, cares for a collection of 38 artifacts from Abeokuta, a city in present day southwestern Nigeria, emerging from the Anglican missionary work of the mid-nineteenth century in that city (RAMM n.d.-a). The artifacts were donated in 1868 and 1869 by the Reverend Henry Townsend (1815–1886) of the Anglican Church Missionary Society (CMS), on the occasion of the museum's opening (Donisthorpe 1868; RAMM n.d.-a).

Townsend, a native of Exeter, had become a CMS missionary in 1836 following his training at the CMS college in London. He was sent to Sierra Leone where he initially worked as a layman missionary in the village of Kissey [Kissy], teaching the local population writing and reading with theological texts. He held church services, while also settling disputes (Townsend 1836). He later became an ordained minister, working in Sierra Leone until 1844. By January 1845, together with his CMS colleagues Samuel Ajai Crowther and Charles Gollmer,[1] he embarked on a journey to the Bight of Benin to establish the Yoruba Mission in Abeokuta (Dadzie 2017).

In the early 1840s, Abeokuta was an independent city-state that attracted the attention of the CMS because of the immigration of formerly enslaved people, the so-called Liberated Africans from Sierra Leone (Warburton 1842; Anderson 2020). Led by Chief Sodeke,[2] the city-state was what may be defined as a military oligarchy. It was established after the chain of conflicts that ravaged the region known as Yorubaland (Figure 1) in the early part of the nineteenth century after the fall of the pre-eminent Yoruba kingdom of Oyo (Ajayi and Smith 1964).

After a failed attempt in 1845, the Yoruba Mission in Abeokuta was started in August 1846, with Townsend and Crowther as resident missionaries. Over the course of the following twenty years, Townsend and his colleagues gathered several artifacts of the Egba, the people of Abeokuta, through purchase and what might be called handover and political gifts. While Townsend kept some of them as his own private collection, he also circulated some artifacts within missionary environments in Britain and at the Great Exhibition of 1851. This article traces the history of some of the artifacts in Townsend's collection by focusing on an object of indigenous worship and a ceremonial sword as a case study.

Aspects of the Archival and Material Evidence

The research on which this article is based started in 2017 within the context of RAMM's *Discovering Worlds: Africa* project, which focused on collections and donors' biographies (RAMM n.d.-b). I researched Townsend's trajectory in West Africa, including an analysis of eight artifacts from the collection he gathered, which, I believe, speak to the relationships he cultivated with people in positions of authority. While limited in scope, the work foregrounded the history of the collection, which had been understudied until then.

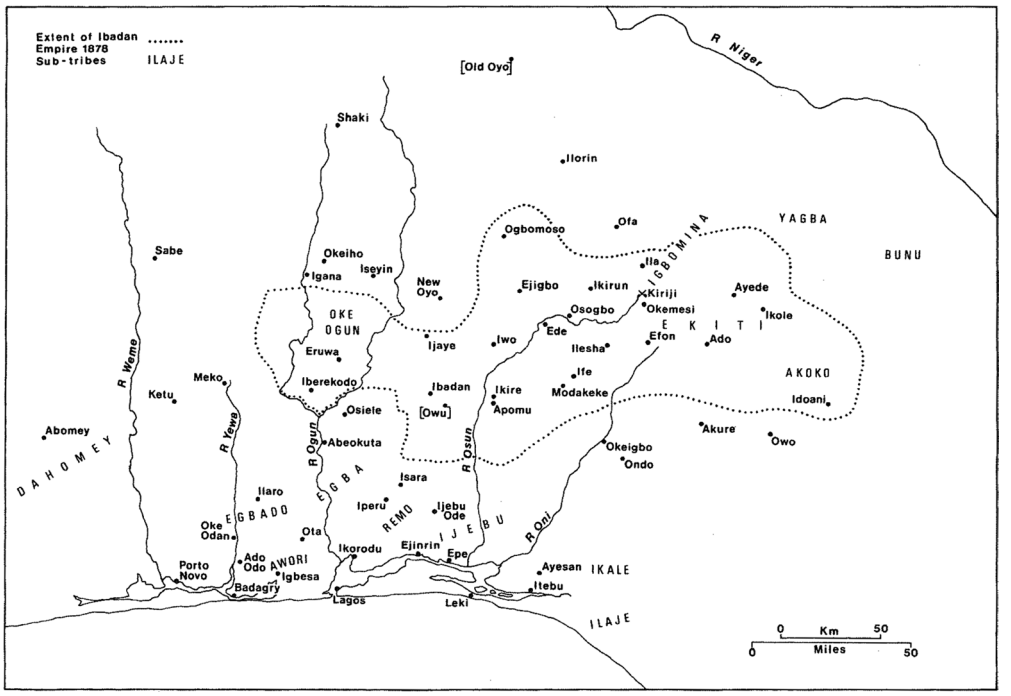

FIG 1

J. D. Y. Peel, *Yorubaland in the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 36, Figure 2.2, showing the location of Abeokuta. Reproduced with permission.

My doctoral research into the narratives constructed during the early period of the CMS' Abeokuta mission has given me a greater opportunity to engage with the material evidence of the missionary encounter, the artifacts in particular. These, known today as the Townsend collection—though it is more appropriate to call them the Abeokuta collection—is part of a wider archaeology, so to speak, of the city. Therefore, the context of acquisition of the collection and its afterlife, directly concerns our understanding of the history of Abeokuta, as both a historical city-state established after the fall of Oyo and a city today.

The aim of this article is to offer insight into the history and trajectory of a selection of artifacts in the Abeokuta collection. Departing from an illustrated pamphlet published in England between early 1848 and 1850 (Figure 2), the article sketches the circumstances during which the artifacts were collected and brought to Britain. It also brings together unpublished missionary archival materials and historical newspapers and magazines related to the period of the artifacts' acquisition.

I approach the pamphlet's illustrations as evidence of the artifacts at a place in time and use the descriptions therein as a way of tracking the trajectory of the items from their owners in Abeokuta to their circulation in Britain. This is possible because I can now define the pamphlet's period of production, previously unclear, from CMS published magazines; consequently, I am able to reasonably deduce the period and circumstances of

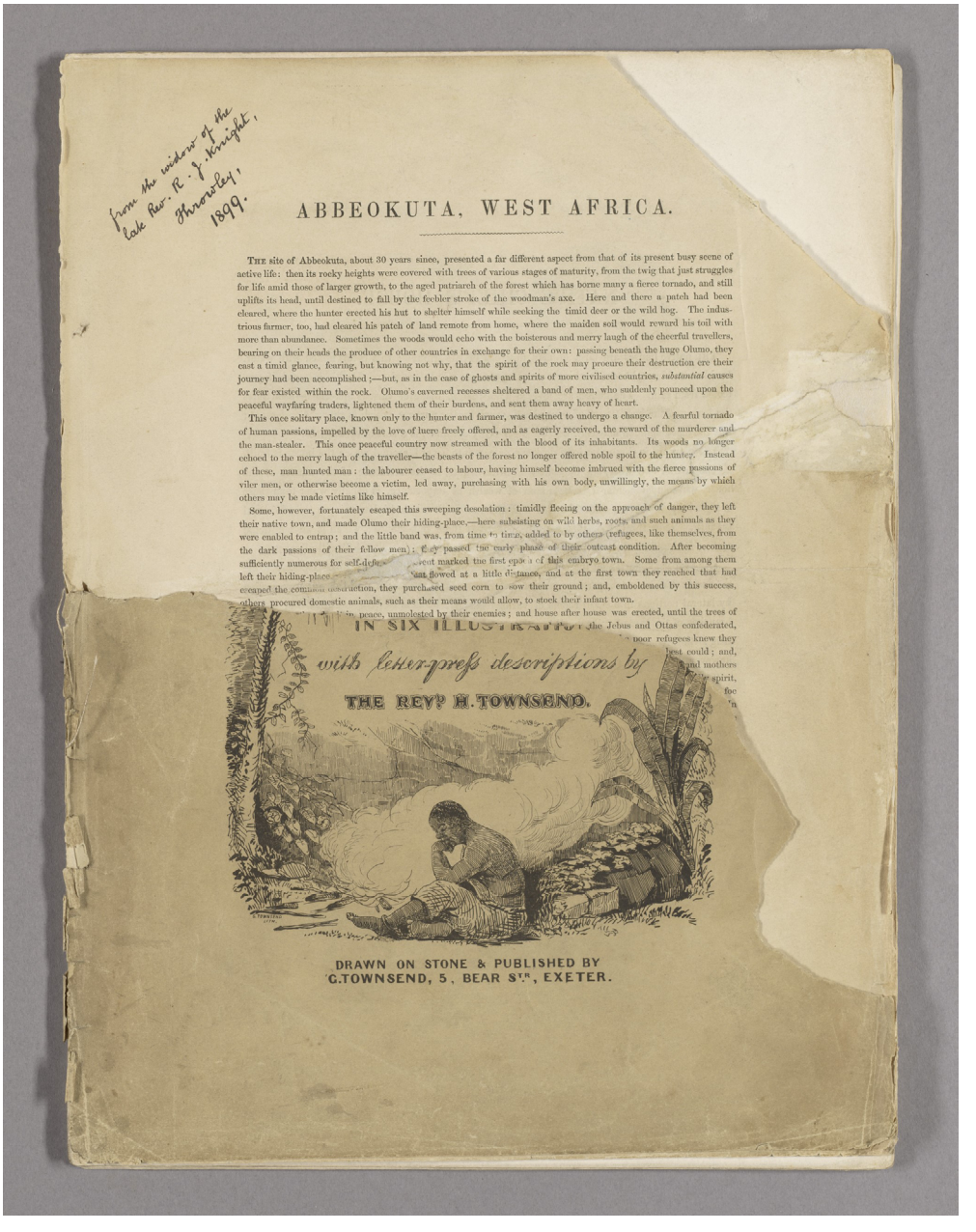

FIG 2

George Townsend (Exeter: Townsend n.d.), front cover of the pamphlet, with upper part missing. Material DT515.9.A17 T69 1880z+ from Yale Center for British Art, Yale University. Public domain.

acquisition of the artifacts from cross-referencing other sources. These artifacts appear to be some of the earliest Egba materials from Abeokuta to enter Britain.

A copy of the pamphlet is found part of the CMS unofficial papers of Henry Townsend archived at the Cadbury Research Library (CRL), University of Birmingham. I first came across it in 2017 while researching at CRL. The original appears to have been

published for local and/or limited circulation. Some of the illustrations struck me because they featured items I had previously seen at RAMM (Figures 3 and 4). At that moment the artifacts from the Abeokuta collection and the archival remains of the CMS mission were coming together. This chance encounter reconfigured, as it were, the pamphlet as an artifact of the mission, and not only as a source of information: the illustrations of objects found at RAMM made the pamphlet part of those items, albeit not situated at the museum. Stoler's (2008) invitation to scholars to view the archive and its content as objects and not merely as sites where information is stored is important here. In her work on the colonial archive, she notes that the ways in which the archive has been constituted calls for it to be investigated as a technology of empire. Analyzing it, we should ask who makes the archive; whom it serves; what voices are found or not found at the margins—both literal and metaphorical; how information is distributed across the pages and throughout various documents, and what can be gleaned about the value attached to such information from how it is distributed. Barber (2007), on the other hand, calls on scholars to study the documents that form the archive beyond what they show. What, for example, are the words of an archival text or the details of an image telling the reader or viewer? What meanings can be deduced from them? What social beings or concepts are being created?

FIG 3
RAMM, ceremonial sword (Exeter: RAMM n.d.), objects E588 in RAMM collection. Reproduced with permission.

FIG 4
RAMM, male *Esu* (Exeter: RAMM n.d.), objects E608a in RAMM collection. Reproduced with permission.

While the CMS archive differs from the colonial archive in the sense of Stoler's work, it presents similar features. The pamphlet, produced to circulate a history of Abeokuta among the British public from the perspective of a British missionary, became a technology of missionary enterprise. Its content, created for a mid-nineteenth century audience, is today in its archival form a way into the history of the artifacts illustrated therein.

The knowledge the archive and other historical documents provide is sometimes circumstantial, requiring extrapolation from little to no information. Taken together, the archive and the artifacts complement each other by offering evidence of choices and narratives the missionaries made.

The CMS in Abeokuta

The CMS, established originally as *The Society for Missions to Africa and the East*, was founded in England in 1799 by a group of Anglican evangelicals. It later became the missionary society of the Church of England (*The Church Missionary Intelligencer and Record* 1870). They operated in the abolitionist climate that was taking shape in Britain, focusing, initially, on the British colony of Sierra Leone, where they sent their first missionaries in 1804 (Kup 1972; Fyfe 1972, chap. 1).

In the early 1840s, the CMS noted the migration of Liberated Africans from Sierra Leone to the Bight of Benin. They decided to

establish a mission station on that coast. Writing to Townsend in November 1842, John Warburton, CMS secretary in Sierra Leone, states:

> The Local Committee have for some time been watching, with considerable interest, the events which have taken place in the Colony with regard to Badagry. They wish to cherish the hope, that they see in this movement of the Liberated African one of those signs of the times which mark the progress of the fulfilment of God's gracious intentions to this benighted land (Warburton 1842, 1–2).

With this in hand, Townsend was sent to Badagry to research if conditions were favorable for the establishment of a mission. Upon arrival, it became clear that Abeokuta was the final destination for many of the migrants (Townsend 1842, 11). Consequently, in December 1842, he embarked on a research visit to Abeokuta, arriving there in January 1843 (Townsend 1842, 23). At the time, Abeokuta was just over a decade old, born out of the destroyed towns in *Igbo Egba* (the Egba Forest) following the fall of Oyo. Conflicts had displaced the people of the region by 1826 (Biobaku 1957). Peel (2000) has suggested that, as a result of displacement and separation from their kin, Yoruba-speaking people re-created old and created new patterns of living, defined by the markers of their personal and social identity they had carried on their bodies, such as their *oríkì orílé* (family appellation),[3] *ilà* (scarification),[4] and *orí* (personal destiny). Through these markers, they formed communities based on identity.

Between 1836 and 1842, Abeokuta experienced a great population influx, including people who were not kin, but refugees from neighboring city-states, enslaved prisoners of war, as well as Liberated Africans (Biobaku 1957). It is in this environment that the CMS established the Abeokuta mission in August 1846 (Crowther 1846a, 5–6).

In their letters and journals, the missionaries chronicled the work they were doing to raise a Christian community: public preaching, in English and Yoruba, and conversations with individuals whenever the opportunity arose, as well as classes to teach Christian principles (Wilhelm 1844; Townsend 1846); engagement with chiefs like Ogunbona of Ikija for land to build a chapel (Crowther 1847a); and protecting converts persecuted for their turn to Christianity and neglect of the "custom of their forefathers"—that is their indigenous religion (Crowther 1847a, 3). Crowther, in particular, provides a great deal of commentary on Egba indigenous religion and its role in people's life, framing it across multiple letters as "vanities," "superstition" (1847a, 2), and "heathenism" (1848), which was a typical lens through which African religions, particularly their associated material culture, were viewed by Christian missionaries (Meyer 2024). He reports, for example, on women visiting Mrs. Crowther "to whom they open their minds, about the worship of their country fashion […]

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with the view to obtain children from them […]. Since our arrival at Abbe-okuta [*sic*], the confidence of a great many of them in these lying vanities began to shake" (1847a, 2).[5] What Crowther may not have grasped here is the seemingly transactional view with which these women may have seen the new religion: as a means to secure children. This utilitarian approach to Christianity is not often discussed in the primary or secondary literature.

Making Converts and "Idols"

Access to sources of power to change one's circumstances was the leading motivation for adherence to Christianity in Abeokuta and elsewhere in the region (Peel 2000, chap. 8). Peel (2000, chaps. 3, 8) has argued that, given the perilous conditions in Yorubaland in the nineteenth century, which he defines as an "age of confusion," many people were searching for *alafia*:

> [p]ersonal protection from enemies seen and unseen, healing and fertility, practical guidance through the uncertainties of life, all summed up in that state of worldly well-being called *alafia* – these were the fruits of power which Yoruba most looked for from Christianity, as from all other cults (Peel 2000, 219).

In such a context, missionaries' claim of a god more powerful than the existing ones was a potent proposition.

Bearing children was a chief concern. James White, a CMS missionary stationed at Ota, a town south of Abeokuta, reports the story of a young man whose conversion is prompted by childbirth:

> Abraham Ajaka is one of our first converts here […]. He was a great opposer of the gospel, and on one occasion he severely beat his nephew for listening to the preaching of the gospel in one of their streets. He has no children, and this has ever been a cause of much grief to him and his wife; and they had vainly spent all their living in supplicating the gods to favour them with an offspring. This was the state in which I found him when I introduced the gospel to him, and after much difficulty, he accepted a primer from me, simply with a view of obtaining a child from God […] (White 1857, 138).

We do not know if Mr. and Mrs. Ajaka were able to eventually have the child they desired. White goes on to share that "[a] long time after [Abraham] had embraced Christianity, he gave up all his idols to me" and later his drum (White 1857, 138).

"Idols," together with "vanities" and "superstition," were terminologies often used by the missionaries to describe not only the material culture but Yoruba indigenous religion in general, as articulated by James White above. In CMS missionaries' view, according to Peel, religion in Yoruba was akin to that of the ancient Greeks and Romans, the original pagans (2000, 88). Yet, the missionaries also knew they were competing with a resilient system of beliefs, comparable but different from the religion they were bringing.[6] Yoruba religion is to be understood

not as a defined institution with a central command (such as a pope or archbishop) and a holy book (such as the Bible) (Peel 2000, 88–90), but as a body of practices that engages seen and unseen powers in the Yoruba worldview, guided by allegiance to certain deities. In this sense, the phrase used by Crowther—"custom of their forefathers," that is, long-established practices performed since their ancestors' time—refers to the concept of Yoruba religion. CMS missionaries saw these customs and their associated paraphernalia as manifestations of everything that is contrary to the Christian religion.

Abraham had "thought nothing could part him and his drum" (White 1857, 138), but following White's inquiry into the purpose of drumming, and Abraham's confirmation of it being to please the "gods," White determined that the drum was also a source for worship, therefore an idol of sorts which required to be abandoned for the performance of Abraham's newfound Christian faith:

> Can you be a true child of God when you espouse the cause of His greatest enemy, the devil? And do you not, in effect, recognise idols to be something? Besides, not only the images we worship are sinful in the sight of God, but every thing that our hearts and affections are too much set upon, becomes an idol, for God has the first claims to our affections. I cannot compel you to leave off drumming, but ponder it over in your heart, and you will soon be able to tell whether or not it becomes you (White 1857, 138).

The conversation produced the effect White had desired—that is for Abraham to stop playing the drum. Three months later, Abraham "voluntarily brought me his drum […]," White writes (1857, 139).

Jacobs and Wingfield (2015, 11–12) have suggested that within the missionary framework of understanding, this act would be considered a triumph of Christianity, with the material outcome a trophy. It is unclear if White solicited the drum; yet, faced with the above conversation, Abraham must have felt an obligation not only to stop drumming but to rid himself of such an "idol."

Collecting at Abeokuta

The practice of Yoruba converts giving up the materials of their former indigenous religion appears to have been to demonstrate their new religious allegiance, and it may be defined as a *handover*. Unlike gifting, handover evokes an element of surrender of one's belongings to someone. While not forceful, there is a sense of renunciation that accompanies it, which, in Christian parlance, may be called sacrifice. Indeed, worldly sacrifice was part of a Christian person's journey, for the purpose of heavenly abundance. In such a context, handover can be understood as part of the process of conversion. This process, as it were, produced a gathering of material culture by CMS missionaries.

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After White took possession of the drum, he offered it to Townsend, who had been looking to purchase one for the CMS in London (White 1857, 139). It is unclear where the drum is, or even if it was brought to England as intended. What we do know is that Townsend's interest in Yoruba material culture began immediately after his arrival in Abeokuta.

The first documented Egba belongings acquired by Townsend to be sent to Britain was in 1843 during his visit of research to Abeokuta. In April 1843, he writes:

> I have taken advantage of the return of Mr. Beal to England to send to the Society a specimen of some of the articles manufactured in the country I have lately visited. The largest article is a […] cushion, used by the Akus to lean on when sitting at ease on their mats; […] [cloth], […] composed of cotton & made by the Akus […] (Townsend 1843, 1).[7]

Townsend and his CMS colleagues went on to further collect artifacts of the Egba upon the establishment of the Abeokuta mission from 1846, as shown in the following sections.

Engravings of the People of Abeokuta, Their Customs, and Idolatries

In a column titled "Our Mission Among the Yorubas" in the April 1850 edition of *The Church Missionary Gleaner*, a CMS publication, an unnamed author, presumably the editor, outlines the history of the Abeokuta mission. After introducing the genesis of the mission, he writes: "Mr. Townsend, when he lately visited England, published some engravings of the people of Abeokuta, their customs and idolatries, accompanied with notes of explanation." A star next to the sentence elaborates the following at the foot of the page: "Published by G. Townsend, 5, Bear Street, Exeter […]" (*The Church Missionary Gleaner* 1850, 1:5).

From the above description, we can ascertain that the engravings are those contained in the pamphlet, which has seven illustrated pages, with a cover that shows a man seated on the ground, next to open fire, dressed in cloth, and surrounded by vegetation (Figure 2). Except the frontispiece, the images are accompanied by lengthy descriptions which are entitled as follows:

- Abbeokuta, West Africa
- Native Chief's House
- Male and Female Costume
- Sheep and Goat Market
- Drums, Brass Sceptre &c.
- Idols
- Funeral Procession

Each image aims to represent an aspect of Egba life. The reach of this pamphlet at the time of its production is unclear, and the only known original, from which the CRL one was copied, is held at the Yale Center for British Art (YCBA) (Yale Centre for British Art n.d.). It was part of the bequest by the

American collector and philanthropist Paul Mellon to Yale University in the 1970s. Mellon, according to YCBA records, bought it in 1964 at Maggs Bros., a rare books and manuscripts seller in London.[8] The pamphlet, as indicated by a note on the second page (Figure 2), previously belonged to the widow of the Reverend R. J. Knight of Throwley parish, England.

The "Drums, Brass Sceptre &c." and "Idols" pages contain images of artifacts which, given the detail, were likely drawn from direct physical view (Figures 5 and 6), as suggested elsewhere in later years (T. 1865, 11). The latter, and likely the former, were lithographed by George Townsend (1813–1894), the publisher. He was the elder brother of Henry Townsend and an Exeter-based artist who supplied sketches about the south-west of England to the *Illustrated London News*, as well as missionary magazines including those of the CMS. An example of his work is the image accompanying "The Dahomians" story in *The Church Missionary Gleaner* of 1852 (*The Church Missionary Gleaner* 1852, 115), which is authored "G. Townsend Del. [delineavit]." His local newspaper described him as a man who "[…] treasured up curios and interesting documents, and his collection must be one of considerable general, local, and antiquarian value" (*The Devon and Exeter Daily Gazette* 1894, 2). It is fair to infer, therefore, that he would be engaged by Henry Townsend in his Yoruba material culture interest.

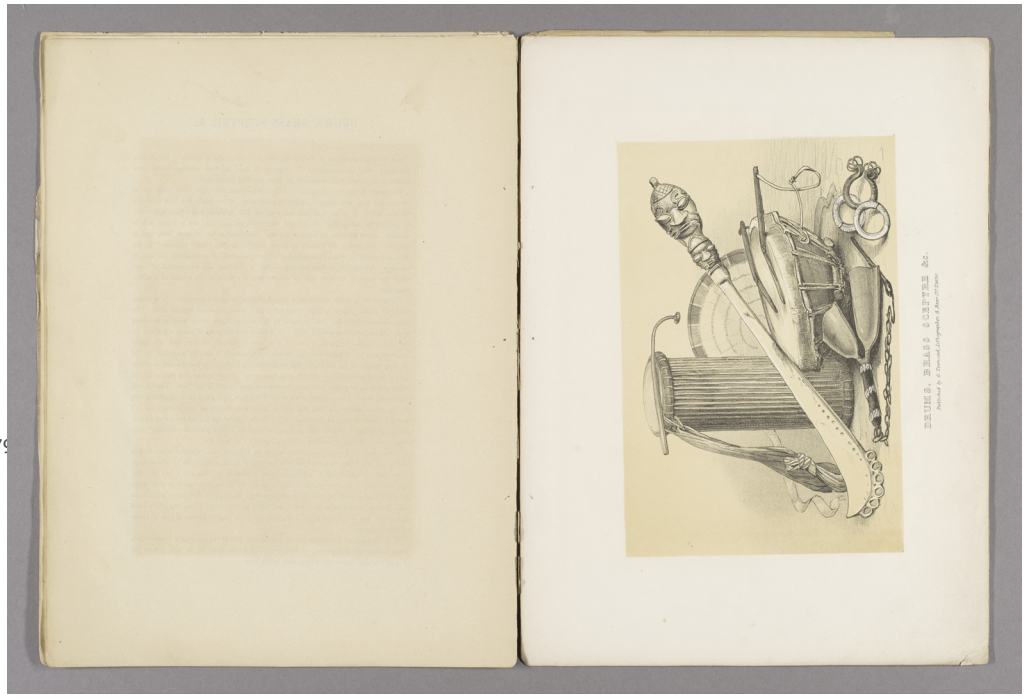

FIG 5
George Townsend, *Drums, Brass Sceptre &c.* (Exeter: Townsend n.d.), 8, showing a group of objects collected by Henry Townsend. It shows a sceptre or a ceremonial sword; *kànàngó* drum; *gúdúgúdú* drum; and iron bracelets. Material DT515.9.A17 T69 1880z+ from Yale Center for British Art, Yale University. Public domain.

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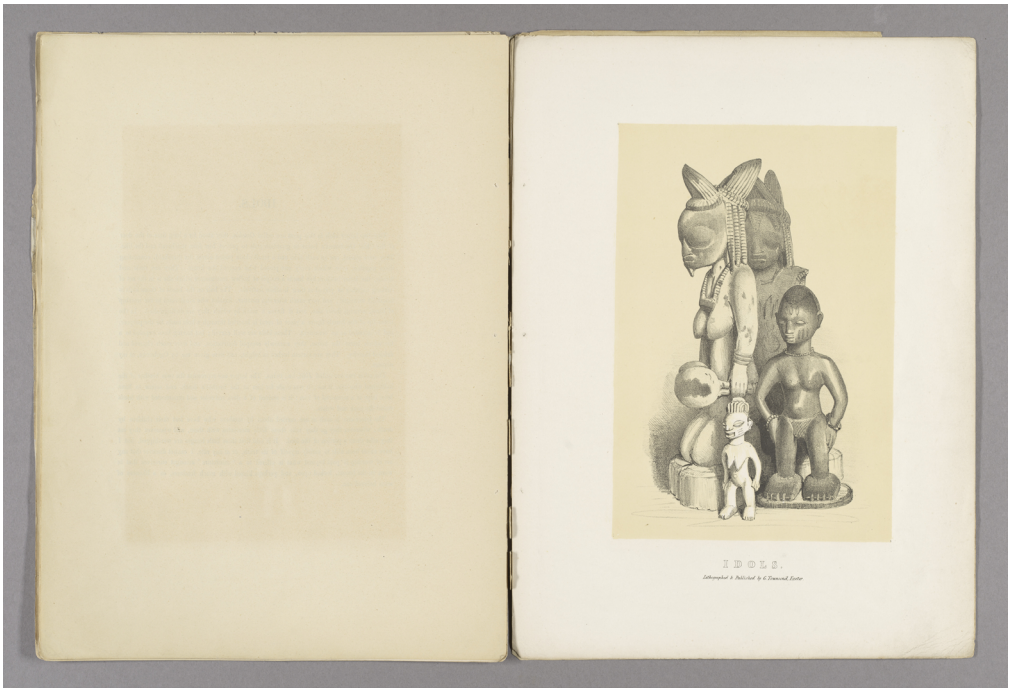

FIG 6
George Townsend, *Idols* (Exeter: Townsend n.d.), 10, showing a group of figures collected by Henry Townsend, including the two *Esu* figures later donated to RAMM. Material DT515.9.A17 T69 1880z + from Yale Center for British Art, Yale University. Public domain.

George Townsend's access to these artifacts he drew suggests that they were likely in the custody of his brother Henry. If so, it raises the following questions:

(1) When were the artifacts brought to England?
(2) How were they acquired by Townsend?[9]
(3) When were they acquired by Townsend?
(4) What was their trajectory once they arrived in England?

I start my analyses with question one by comparing information in the pamphlet and *The Gleaner* with Townsend's movements between Britain and West Africa. To answer the second and third questions, I focus on three artifacts (a ceremonial sword and a pair of *Esu* figures) illustrated in the pamphlet, which I analyze as both artifacts and sites of information. I then compare each with CMS unpublished and published material, and other sources. Finally, I answer the fourth question focusing broadly on the artifacts, but also moving chronologically towards the 1860s when the items were donated to the RAMM.

The Gleaner issue of April 1850 notes that the images were published "when [Townsend] lately visited England." Townsend had last visited England from April 1848 to early 1850, and arrived back in Sierra Leone by 8th March 1850 (Townsend 1850; Dadzie 2017, 15). In 1848 he had left Abeokuta for England due to the illness of his wife, Sarah Townsend, who had been

suffering from dysentery (Crowther 1848, 1). If Townsend brought the objects with him to Exeter prior or during this visit, the objects likely arrived in England by April 1848, so that between then and early 1850 the engravings could have been made for the pamphlet to be published.

Brass Sceptre or Bill-Hook

In the above paragraph, I have established the likely period by which the drawn artifacts were brought to England, as well as when the pamphlet would have been published. Now, spotlighting the "Brass Sceptre," a ceremonial sword, in the "Drums, Brass Sceptre &c." illustration (Figure 5), I offer a likely date and the circumstances of its acquisition.

In the description accompanying this engraving, Townsend writes: "Laying across the lower drum is a brass sceptre or bill-hook, the upper end ornamented […]. [I]t was taken in a slave war with the Chief of Abaka, and given me by the conqueror" (Townsend n.d., 9). From CMS missionary unpublished letters and journals, we know that, indeed, a war had been waged against the people of Abaka by Abeokuta from November 1846 (Crowther 1846b), which culminated in the siege and destruction of the town in March 1847 (Crowther 1847c, 1). In a journal extract dated 26th March 1847, Townsend writes: "This morning we heard of the destruction of Abaka the town against which the Ebas […] have been for the past four or five months encamped" (Townsend 1847, 1). He goes on to state that he believed the true motivation for the war had "been the hopes of plunder" by the people of Abeokuta, which was also a hope to enslave people. Crowther's two sisters and their children, who had been living in Abaka, had been caught during the war and brought to Abeokuta as captives. There, he ransomed them for 150 dollars equivalent in cowries, making them free persons (Crowther 1847c, 1). In September 1847, Crowther observed another enslaved person from Abaka when noting that Chief Ogunbona had "sent two children to school one his own son and the other a captive from Abàkà whom he treats as his own son" (Crowther 1847b, 3). This information by the two missionaries places a "slave war" involving Abaka in which there would have been a "conqueror" from Abeokuta between November 1846 and March 1847, a few months after the commencement of the CMS mission and a year before Townsend's stay in England from 1848.

It is unclear why "the conqueror," presumably a high-ranking chief of Abeokuta, would have "given" this obvious trophy of war to Townsend. It would have embodied the long-awaited defeat of Abaka, an important symbolical gain for the chief that captured it. What was the role of a European missionary in that event, such that he would be offered a trophy of war?

Certainly, we know that at the start of the Abeokuta mission, the CMS missionaries were positively valued by several chiefs. Some of them sought to cultivate a relationship with the missionaries on account of the material benefits they

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believed would have come from the Europeans (*The Hull Packet and East Riding Times* 1856). It is possible that "the conqueror" may have presented this ceremonial sword to Townsend as a political gift, strategically offered within the context of a victorious war campaign, with all the gravitas the object would have carried, as a way to maintain a relationship with the mission. Likewise, it is also possible that Townsend may have requested to have the item precisely because of its emergence from what he believed to be a "slave war." He abhorred the Slave Trade, and spoke critically against it, including in the pamphlet (Townsend n.d., 1). Given the missionaries' interest in showcasing Abeokuta's material culture and ways of life to acquaint the British public with the mission field, this sword may have offered Townsend the materiality associated with the activities of enslavement he had witnessed in the region. Whether the "Brass Sceptre" was a political gift or evidence of enslavement, it was, unlike Abraham's drum, clearly acquired outside the context of conversion. It demonstrates Townsend's (or the CMS') access to important figures in Abeokuta and his engagement with local political affairs—at least to the extent necessary to receive a trophy of a long-fought war.

Guardian Gods

While the motivation for the acquisition of the Abaka sword is not well defined, the *Esu* figures illustrating Egba "Idols" (Figure 6) appear to provide a clearer example of a political offering. In the description of the image Townsend writes:

> The two larger idols in this print are called *Ossehin* [Esu], they stood for a long time at the door of the Chief Ogubunna's [Ogunbona] house as guardian gods to protect him from witchcraft and the like. They were placed, one on each side, and a small chain passed across the threshold, connecting them together, over which every one [*sic*] passed who entered the house. They are male and female, the latter holds in her hands a couple of hollow instruments which she is in the act of striking together as played at their heathen festivals. […] These idols are well carved; [*sic*] but having been exposed to a fire which burnt the house, they narrowly escaped destruction […], [they] were given me [*sic*] by Ogubunna, at my request (Townsend n.d., 11).

Wescott (1962) has described Esu, generally represented as a male figure, in Yoruba worldview as the mediator god between higher Yoruba gods and men. She notes that he is a messenger, but also an agent provocateur of sorts that moves men to do mischief. At the same time Esu is the manifestation of the gods' anger. In Abeokuta today, Esu is seen as a deity that restores order by punishing those who commit crime.[10]

In such a context, the reason for the two Esu figures' placement as guardian gods on Chief Ogunbona's front door is apparent. Less evident, however, is why he would give them to Townsend. Yet, the narrative provided in CMS sources across

multiple authors about the Chief suggests that he regarded the missionaries highly, both for the possibilities their presence offered for Abeokuta as compared to neighboring kingdoms; as well as for his own standing among the chiefs of Abeokuta. Peel has argued that Ogunbona's approach and engagement with missionaries were underpinned by his desire to "[…] [conjoin] the older prestige values of chiefship with the symbols of 'civilisation'" (Peel 2000, 129). Indeed, this is confirmed by the Chief building the first storied structure in Abeokuta, earning him the epithet *Agboketoyinbo*, meaning "He who lives upstairs like the white man" (Peel 2000, 129). He also hosted a European-style dinner at his house in 1854 to which all European missionaries were invited. The dinner included the paramount civil chief of Abeokuta, *Sagbua* Okukenu, as well as a military chief, *Basorun* Shomoye, and it became an occasion for Ogunbona to showcase his wealth.

European missionaries generally—and CMS missionaries specifically—were long-term residents of Abeokuta. Associating with them and meeting their needs, for example, for land and people to teach and convert to Christianity, would have been a way to cultivate a relationship, and therefore a sure means of continuing access to European goods, such as silk and velvet (Peel 2000). Ogunbona astutely understood this and appears to have engaged with the CMS accordingly. It is therefore not surprising that, at Townsend's request, he gave him the figures, perhaps as a way to maintain the relationship he had established with the missionaries.

Townsend does not state why he solicited these figures, but a CMS source frames the transfer as a handover following the Chief's supposed conversion to Christianity. A report of a youth meeting in Holywell, Wales, in the October 1850 edition of *The Church Missionary Juvenile Instructor*, a CMS magazine for young audiences, notes the following:

> Nothing seemed to interest them [the young people at the meeting] more than the exhibition of Ogubonna's idol, which has been sent from Abeokuta, by the Rev. Samuel Crowther, to a friend in England […]
>
> The circumstances connected with the strange alteration in this idol's position are very striking. The house of its owner, Ogubonna, one of the Chiefs of Abeokuta, was burnt down about three years ago. His servant, at the imminent peril of his life, rushed into the building, when in flames, to save his master's god. For this courageous and devoted service he received high praise from the Priest and the Chief, who commended him for his valour to Mr. Crowther. The good Missionary remarked, in reply, that, if the idol could not help himself, he did not see how he could possibly help the Chief. Ogubonna was struck with this simple remark, and declared he would consider it. He did so, and to some good purpose; for in a few days he brought the ugly block of wood to the Minister of Christ, declaring that he would never worship idols any more [*sic*], and asking to be received as a Candidate for Christian Baptism (*Church Missionary Juvenile Instructor* 1850, 292–293).

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It is unclear if the "idol" *The Instructor* referred to is one of the Esu figures: this report and the narrative provided by Townsend in the pamphlet clearly differ. It attributes custody of the item to Crowther, who sent it to a friend, and describes the "idol" as an "ugly block of wood," whereas Townsend's figure was "well carved." Yet, the similarities in both stories about the burning down of the Chief's house during the same period stand out and point in the direction of the "idol" and Esu being the same item referred to. Equally, the "idol" could be a different object from the same fire event. In any case, I am not convinced that Ogunbona gave the Esu figures within the context of conversion because it is unlikely that, considering his social and military role as chief warrior of Ikija township, he would have converted to Christianity in this period.[11]

The description in the pamphlet does not provide a date for the acquisition of the Esu, which likely entered Britain by early 1848. It does, however, mention the fire that engulfed the Chief's house, which caused the figures to become darkened (see Figure 4 for the male Esu, the body is darker than areas on the base). This information, together with notes from other sources, supports us in defining a period during which Townsend would have collected these artifacts.

In his journal ending June 1847, Townsend mentions that Ogunbona's house had burnt down in the dry season (Townsend 1847, 11), which would have been sometime between November 1846 and April 1847. We also learn from Townsend that the Chief had built a new house by late 1849, with its front elevation sketched and featured in the October 1849 issue of *The Church Missionary Intelligencer* (Townsend 1849, 140, 142). This may have been, perhaps, to replace the house he had lost. Returning to the "idol" in *The Instructor*, we know Ogunbona's house burnt down "about three years ago," which, given *The Instructor*'s publication date of October 1850, would place that event somewhere in 1847. These details suggest that Townsend would have acquired the Esu figures sometime between late 1846 (start of the dry season) and early 1848 (departure for England), not long after the Abeokuta mission had been established.

Various Articles from Abberkutu

The Instructor of October 1850 mentions that the "idol" formerly belonging to Chief Ogunbona was exhibited at the juvenile meeting in Holywell, Wales, and that the young people gathered took great interest in it. The unnamed author also notes that the "idol […] has recently made a tour of Missionary Meetings in Wales."

Exhibiting the material culture of the people of Abeokuta in Britain appears to have been part of the CMS missionary endeavor. This was done to showcase, as it were, the so called "idolatries" of the Egba and tell specific stories about the city-state. At Holywell, for example, the "idol" was performed by being "made to march round the room [presumably carried by one of the adults present], that the children might see a

specimen of the gods which the Heathen worship" (*Church Missionary Juvenile Instructor* 1850, 294).

Beyond missionary spaces, artifacts brought to Britain from Abeokuta in the late 1840s were circulated elsewhere. In the "British Colonies and Dependencies" section in the catalog of the Great Exhibition of 1851, under Western Africa, several objects, including iron bracelets, clothes and "[v]arious articles" from "Abbrokuta" and "Abberkutu" are described under the name "Townsend, G., Esq. *Exeter*" and "Townsend, G., *Exeter*" (Royal Commission 1851, 2:954). It is clear that "Townsend, G." was George Townsend, and that the material he showed at the Exhibition were those gathered by his brother. Indeed, it is possible that some of the objects featured in the pamphlet, such as the iron bracelets (Figure 5), would have been on display at the Exhibition.

The display of Egba material culture was not only done through physical items but also images, which circulated widely within the British evangelical community in missionary magazines. In this, George Townsend, as an artist, appears to have been a useful collaborator to his brother and the CMS in general. Apart from the pamphlet, which is a clear example of image circulation, George Townsend reproduced items, such as the Esu figures in an 1865 issue of *The Church Missionary Juvenile Instructor* (T. 1865) (Figure 7). Here the Esu, stylized, was drawn "from the originals" which were "[…] sent home from Abeokuta by the Rev. H. Townsend […]" (T. 1865, 11).

The extent of the circulation and display of the artifacts illustrated in the pamphlet is yet to be fully understood, but we know that seven of the total ten items drawn and a dress similar to

FIG 7
Church Missionary Society, *Shango and Other African Idols* (London: J. Nisbet and Co., 1865), 10, showing a stylized drawn image of the *Esu* figures, likely by George Townsend. Material from the CMS Archives, Church Mission Society. Public domain.

SHANGO AND OTHER AFRICAN IDOLS.

one worn by an individual in the "Male and Female Costume" scene were part of the collection donated to RAMM by Townsend between August 1868 and April 1869 (RAMM n.d.-a). Some of these artifacts in the collection had (and still have) labels and markings on them that pre-date their entry into the museum, which suggest they had been cataloged or marked for a purpose, perhaps to be exhibited or for the custodian to remember the function or assigned meaning of certain items. The labels and markings range from numbers to short descriptions, some adhered or attached to the object, others directly written on the objects. While the purpose of these inscriptions remains unclear, we know that by the period of his retirement in the 1880s, Townsend had gathered a considerable collection (Townsend 1880), which would have presumably needed cataloging at least for the sake of organization.

Conclusion

In this article, I have outlined how we may trace the provenance of Egba material culture gathered in the nineteenth century by CMS missionaries. The work brings together for the first time the archival material, written and drawn sources, and the evidence deposited on the artifacts to study the Abeokuta collection assembled during the early missionary presence in the city-state. While analyzing the artifacts' circumstances of acquisition and trajectory, the sources provide insight into how missionaries engaged with Egba people to tell a narrative of Abeokuta to the British public.

Earlier scholarly works, notably by historian Ajayi (1965) and anthropologist Peel (2000), mostly used the CMS archive as primary source data, and, in the case of Peel, featured Abeokuta city-state to the extent necessary to provide examples of religious encounter in Yorubaland. They did not engage with artifacts from the mission, which, in certain instances, are the evidence of views missionaries held about the Egba and the wider region. The diversity of the sources (textual, visual, and material) offers us a greater understanding of how Abeokuta was fashioned and presented to outsiders historically, and how its residents take stock of their history today.

More broadly, this article has shown that material culture from the missionary context was used for various purposes by the different parties. For example, the analysis of the Esu figures illustrates how missionaries and their audiences created a specific narrative by turning what appears to have been a political gift by Chief Ogunbona into a trophy of conversion. Yet, when brought together, the sources do not bear out that the Chief converted to Christianity; rather they affirm his interest in maintaining a relationship with the missionaries on account of the tangible material benefits and intangible prestige his association with Europeans would have brought him within his community. Certainly, Ogunbona's willingness to part with such powerful objects and the missionary's decision to collect them tells us that both parties chose to participate actively in the missionary encounter, albeit for different reasons.

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notes and references

[1] Crowther and Gollmer's name are sometimes spelled Samuel Ajayi Crowther and Carles Gollmer. In this text I use the spelling associated with their official letters and journals in the CMS archive at the University of Birmingham.

[2] Yoruba is a tonal language. Standard Yoruba orthography uses accent and subscript marks on Latin alphabet to indicate tones. In this article I do not use accent and subscript marks. Names of people are written as shared with me by the descendant families I have engaged with. Names of places are written as they are commonly written by people in Abeokuta today. Where a direct quote is provided, accent and subscript marks are maintained from the original source.

[3] "There are Yorùbá names meant for appraising the bearer, these sets of names are called *Oríkì* names. These names express endearments or heroism depending on the specific name and the bearer. These names have the power to calm, motivate, persuade or push the bearer to carry out certain actions" (Adébọ́nọ̀jọ 2021, 27).

[4] Egba facial scarification was made of three short vertical lines on each cheek (Biobaku 1957).

[5] In this passage, talking about the indigenous religion Crowther wrote "country fashion worship" but strikes through the word "worship." One wonders if this is an innocent mistake or an unconscious assignment of religious validity to "country fashion."

[6] Ibid.

[7] The Yoruba people, and in this case the people of Abeokuta, were called Aku after their way of greeting each other in the Colony of Sierra Leone.

[8] Personal communication in March 2025 from Department of Rare Books and Manuscripts, Yale Center for British Art.

[9] For clarity, hereafter when referring to George Townsend I write his full name; when referring to Henry Townsend I write his last name only.

[10] Personal communication in October 2024 from Baba Olawale Fatomi, elder at the Ogunbona family compound, Abeokuta, Ogun State, Nigeria.

[11] 1847 is the approximate date offered by *The Instructor* as to when Chief Ogunbona would have converted to Christianity. Ogunbona's name is not mentioned as part of the people baptised in February 1847, which was the first time CMS missionaries baptised converts in Abeokuta; and it's not mentioned throughout that year by Crowther nor Townsend as it relates to conversion and baptism, as far as I have been able to find. This is not to say he did not convert to Christianity; it is to say he is unlikely to have converted during the period under discussion. Some descendants of Chief Ogunbona believe that he became a Christian (Personal communication in October 2024 from Baba Olawale Fatomi and Mutiat Muhammed, at the Ogunbona family compound, Abeokuta, Ogun State, Nigeria).

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