

Nigerian Market Furniture

Always keen to emphasise our reputation as a society interested in furniture internationally, I venture to share a few illustrations of vernacular furniture found in large covered (i.e. permanent) markets in Calabar, south-eastern Nigeria. The economy very much revolves around shopping in markets and many of the stools, benches and tables to be found there have been in daily use for decades and no doubt follow in an even longer tradition. That so many have survived must illustrate their being made of hardwood and their solid construction.

I begin with an exception, which is a table I understand made of Milana wood, now an endangered species, and which would appear to be a domestic import to the meat market as its figured timber and sophisticated tenoned construction are at odds with the more basic braced and nailed pieces more commonly found. Nearby were a counter/table of more usual type and a very solidly made and neatly squared-off storage chest. It may be noted how the slabs of timber are quite crudely sawn and, as with nearly all this furniture, the



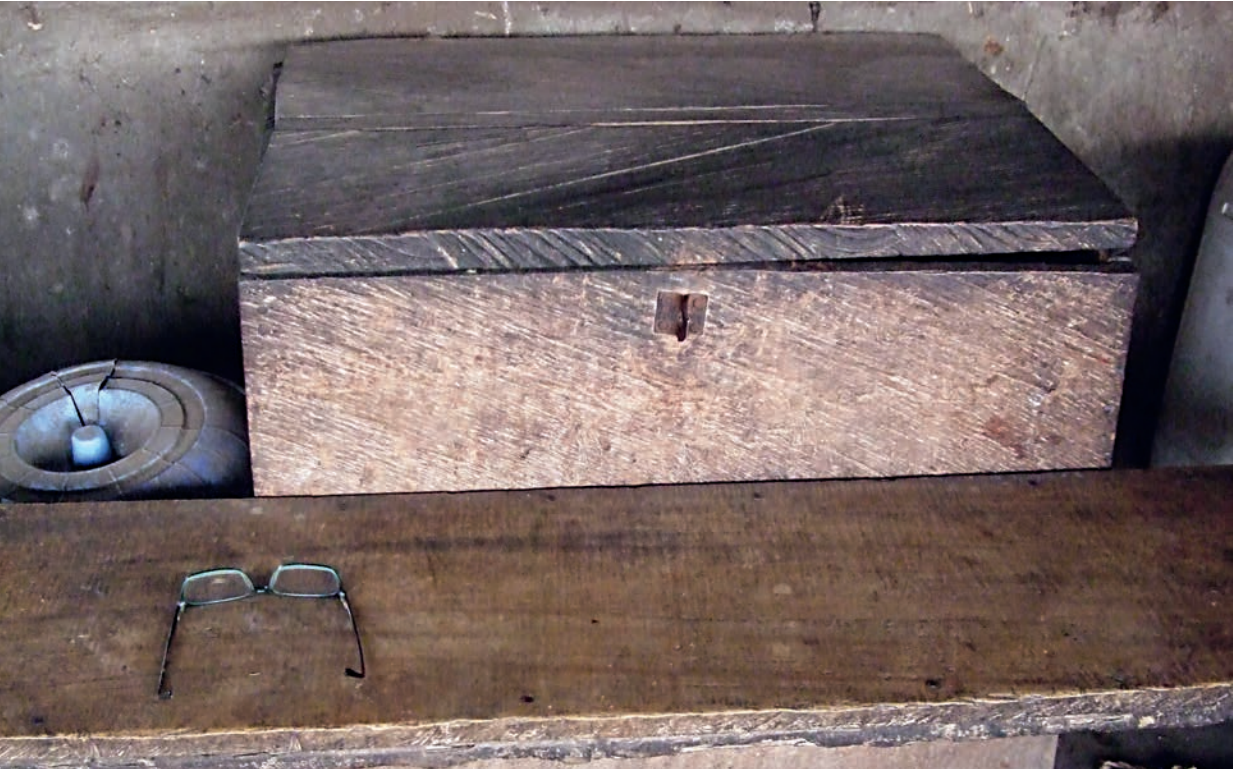
The Marian Meat Market at Calabar, south-eastern Nigeria. *Photo Christopher Claxton Stevens*



A table of tenoned construction, made of Milana wood and probably originally a domestic piece later transferred to the meat market. *Photo Christopher Claxton Stevens*



The more usual type of counter/table of solid nailed construction. *Photo Christopher Claxton Stevens*



A simple storage chest of nailed plank construction. *Photo Christopher Claxton Stevens*



Top left A bench with nailed braces and with V cut-outs in the ends; apart from the crude braces, it would not look out of place in an English church porch. *Photo Christopher Claxton Stevens*

Right A tall stool in the Bish Sunday Market, Calabar.
Photo Christopher Claxton Stevens



surface has been left unfinished 'in the white' and has developed an attractive grey patina over time.

Moving to seat furniture, a bench of braced and nailed construction has riven rather than sawn braces which are set in to the seat and ends. The maker has gone to the trouble of cutting decorative V-slots in the end slabs. *[Ed: would this also make the bench more stable on uneven ground?]* Stools such as these examples from the Bish Sunday Market, also in Calabar, typically have angled square legs and an apron nailed on to the exterior beneath the seat. In the image shown the peripheral stretchers are halved, although the cross stretcher would appear to be tenoned in place. A lower stool is of a similar form but with peripheral stretchers

nailed on. From the different colour of the timber, the seat and stretchers may be later replacements.

Although there was not the opportunity to carry out a more detailed survey, there is plenty of material to work with. It would be very difficult to attempt to date these pieces because of their constant use and wear, but there are definite patterns of construction which might suggest a regional style or even the work of specialist workshops which could perhaps go back to the days of British colonial rule before Nigerian independence in 1960. Unfortunately we were unable to find any new-looking examples or evidence of current makers, but there must be local carpenters around to undertake repairs, if not continuing the tradition themselves.

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