

THE WORK OF N.W.THOMAS AS GOVERNMENT ANTHROPOLOGIST IN NIGERIA

R.M. Blench

15 Willis Road, Cambridge, CB1 2AQ, U.K.

Northcote Thomas, Government Anthropologist in Nigeria from 1909 to 1913, is scarcely remembered today. This is remarkable, as Thomas was one of the most energetic innovative researchers to work in Nigeria during the early part of the century, and his collections remain a largely untapped source for scholars interested in Edo and Igbo-speaking areas. He made a major contribution to the study of both anthropology proper and related fields such as linguistics, ethnobotany and ethnomusicology. The importance of his work has not always been recognised, as it was published in small editions, and in many cases has not been reprinted. His collections of material culture, plants, photographs and sound-recordings have never been published, and therefore his contributions have not been properly evaluated. Thomas's particular areas of study were the Edoid-speaking areas north of Benin city, and the Igbo areas around Awka. He also made subsidiary collections as far east as Abakaliki and collected in Yoruba areas such as Ifon. However, the collections of materials from Edoid areas such as Sabongida-Ora, Agenibode, Otua and Okpe are virtually unique, as no other major museum collections in Nigeria or elsewhere have focused on this region.

Thomas lived from 1868 to 1936. His interests were many and varied. Apart from his work in Nigeria, he later went on to Sierra Leone and produced substantial studies of the Temne people. He collaborated in psychical research, and later embarked on teaching languages at the Colonial Institute. He wrote books about psychical research, Australian aborigines, naval signals and even two weighty tomes entitled *Women of the World*. This varied career may explain his unusual approach to field-work. His life is at present being studied in some detail by Professor Richard Slobodin of McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, to whom I am indebted both for hospitality and for information, references and other details of Thomas's career, as well as help in tracking down elusive photos. The only published description of Thomas's work in Nigeria is in Lackner (1973: 123 ff.) which concentrates on the role of anthropology in the colonial administration. Although she quotes some correspondence illustrating his supposed eccentricity, little attention is given to his achievements. She repeats a comment by Flood in 1930: "[Thomas] was a recognised maniac in many ways. He wore sandals, even in this country, lived on vegetables, and was generally a rum person." This seems a poor epitaph for someone of Thomas' energy and diverse talents.

Mark Alexander and myself began the first phase of the project on Thomas in 1983, the object being to catalogue all Thomas's papers,

recordings and material culture collections relating to Africa. The extent of this task was not entirely clear when the project began, and it is still continuing. However, in view of the importance of what has been uncovered to date, it seems worthwhile to give other scholars an idea of the size, extent and locations of the principal collections. The present paper deals strictly with the Thomas collections. Apart from material culture, separate sections describe his ethnobotanical collections, sound recordings, photographs, and linguistic manuscripts and other unpublished field-notes. Only principal works relating to his fieldwork in Nigeria are given in the references. The bibliography of Thomas's published work is long and complex, and forms an addendum to this account. The main elements of Thomas's collections in Nigeria are described. They are divided into five parts: papers; photographs; sound recordings; ethnobotanical specimens; and material culture. In the conclusion the importance of the Thomas materials is discussed, and an outline is given for projected work to make the data more accessible and useful. An appendix lists all the regions where Thomas collected in Nigeria and gives the modern names of places, languages and peoples.

THE COLLECTIONS AND THEIR LOCATIONS

Papers

Thomas's papers are widely scattered; the most important collection is probably the Haddon Collection in the University Library, Cambridge. This includes many notebooks; in particular, collections of published materials, such as the words in many African languages for numbers. There are some carbons of his field note-books, but the great majority of his field notes are missing; a note in the Haddon collection suggests that there were once 37 and that these were transferred in 1922 to the Crown Agents. Enquiries there failed to establish any record of the ultimate fate of the notebooks: a major loss in view of the importance of Thomas's work on Edoid and Igbo communities at such an early date. However, one large set of Thomas's papers does survive: his linguistic notebooks. These were for many years stored in a filing cabinet at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. They are now being catalogued and put in the manuscript collection of the library. Among them are the field notebooks containing the texts published in Thomas's (1910) *Edo-speaking peoples*. Comparison of the notebooks suggests that Thomas published all his texts and that there is little new material.

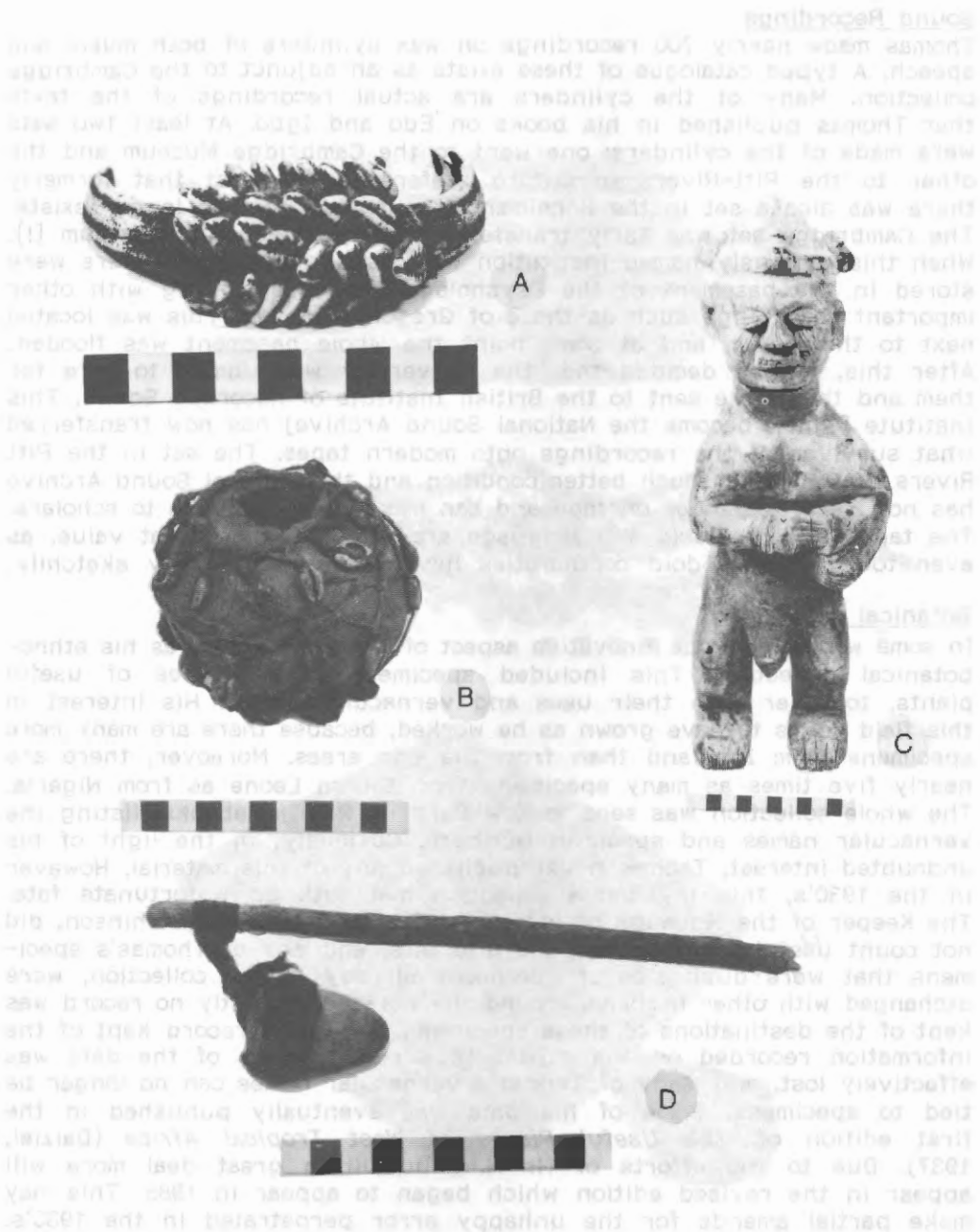
After Thomas's return from Nigeria he began the systematic collection of vocabularies of West African, and particularly Nigerian, languages. The files also contain extensive correspondence with missionaries and administrators together with a number of wordlists. These were collected in a series of notebooks of comparative vocabularies. Although Thomas published a number of linguistic articles, much of this material and his conclusions concerning the classification of Nigerian languages has remained unpublished. Other collections of papers relating to Thomas are held in the archives of the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthro-

pology, the James Frazer papers in Trinity College, Cambridge, the Public Record Office, and the Herbarium in the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew. The papers in the Cambridge Museum mostly concern acceptance of the collection of material culture items and the eventual disposal of some of Thomas's remaining papers. Among the James Frazer papers are a few letters between the two scholars, mostly of administrative significance. The papers in the Public Record Office relate to Thomas's work in Nigeria and Sierra Leone, and those in the Royal Botanic Gardens concern his large field collection of ethnobotanical materials (see below).

Photographs

Thomas was an avid photographer, and in view of the early date of his photographs, their importance is under-rated. He attached considerable importance to them, as an Appendix on field methods in his *Edo-speaking peoples* shows (Thomas, 1910: 153 ff.). His journeys in Edo and Igbo country are represented by some 4,000 photographs, roughly in the proportion 1:3. There also photographs of towns, such as Ibilo and Somorika, that are not represented in his linguistic work or his material culture collections. The subject matter of the photographs is not easily categorised. Like all anthropologists of the period, Thomas was interested in physical anthropology and took a great many photographs of 'physical types': simple face-on photographs of men and women. These are probably the least interesting of the photographs, as they are virtually without documentation. Thomas was also interested in disease, and a series of pictures show characteristic afflictions. The remainder of the pictures are a general spectrum of his anthropological interests: scenes of masquerades, dances, musicians, shrines and other architecture, and a wide variety of everyday objects in use. There are also portraits of chiefs and ritual leaders in ceremonial costume, but these are not linked closely to the objects collected.

As might be expected, documentation for the photographs is sparse. The first set of photographs has a printed catalogue accompanying it, which includes references to the location of each picture and sometimes a brief summary of what it represents. However, many interesting photographs in this set are misdescribed or else omitted altogether. Those of the Igbo area are almost undocumented, while those of Sierra Leone are not even specified as to locality. There are two sets of positives in Cambridge; a complete set in the archives of the Museum, and a bound set of a selection of the best photographs in the collection of the Haddon Library. Another set is in the Archives of the Royal Anthropological Institute, as well as the original glass negatives; these have not been re-photographed and are in poor condition. Many of the positives have also deteriorated, and should be conserved as soon as possible. A catalogue of the photographs, including numbers and listed subjects has been prepared as part of the Thomas Project. This is available in ASCII-delimited form, suitable for reading into a database, in the same format as the more complex catalogue of material culture (see below).



Artefacts collected by N.W. Thomas. A. Ornament made from boar's teeth and cowries, from Agbede (Z11870). B. Spherical gourd rattle, from Benin (Z12048). C. Wooden drummer figurine, from Aroko (Z11925). D. Child's spinning top, from Benin (Z12134). Photographs courtesy of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge. (Accession numbers in brackets)

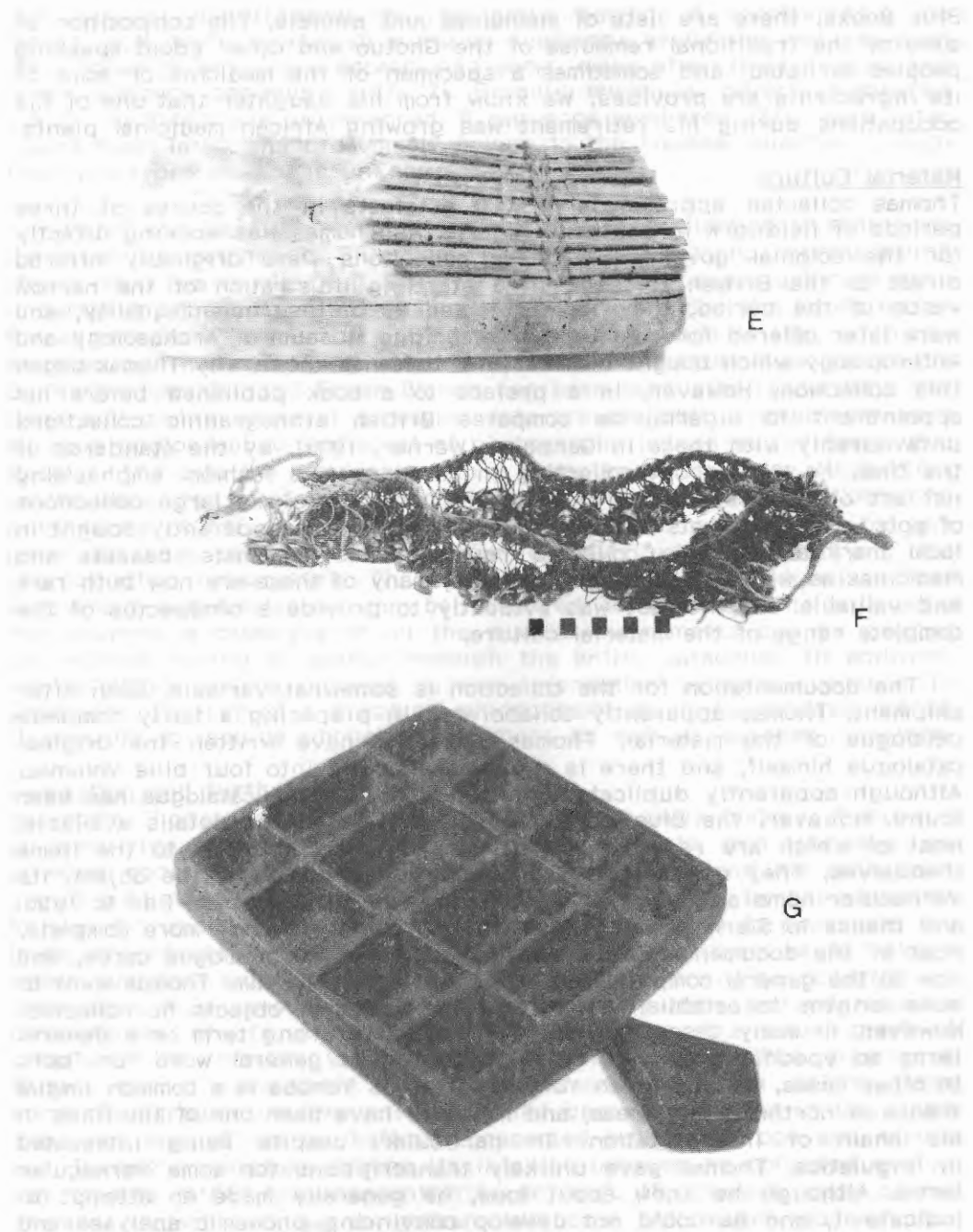
Sound Recordings

Thomas made nearly 700 recordings on wax cylinders of both music and speech. A typed catalogue of these exists as an adjunct to the Cambridge collection. Many of the cylinders are actual recordings of the texts that Thomas published in his books on Edo and Igbo. At least two sets were made of the cylinders: one went to the Cambridge Museum and the other to the Pitt-Rivers in Oxford. References suggest that formerly there was also a set in the Horniman Museum, but this no longer exists. The Cambridge set was early transferred to the Psychology Museum [!]. When this curiously named institution was disbanded, the cylinders were stored in the basement of the Psychology Department along with other important recordings such as those of Gregory Bateson. This was located next to the boiler, and at some point the whole basement was flooded. After this, it was decided that the University was unable to care for them and they were sent to the British Institute of Recorded Sound. This Institute [which become the National Sound Archive] has now transferred what survives of the recordings onto modern tapes. The set in the Pitt-Rivers Museum is in much better condition and the National Sound Archive has now recorded these on tape and can make them available to scholars. The tapes of Edo music and language are potentially of great value, as even today, many Edoid communities have been treated only sketchily.

Botanical collections

In some ways, the most innovative aspect of Thomas's work was his ethnobotanical collection. This included specimens of all types of useful plants, together with their uses and vernacular names. His interest in this field seems to have grown as he worked, because there are many more specimens from Igboland than from the Edo areas. Moreover, there are nearly five times as many specimens from Sierra Leone as from Nigeria. The whole collection was sent to Kew Gardens with notebooks, listing the vernacular names and specimen numbers. Curiously, in the light of his undoubted interest, Thomas never published any of this material. However in the 1930's, this invaluable collection met with an unfortunate fate. The Keeper of the Museums of Botany in Kew at the time, Hutchinson, did not count useful plants among his interests, and any of Thomas's specimens that were duplicates of specimens already in the collection, were exchanged with other herbaria around the world. Apparently no record was kept of the destinations of these specimens nor was a record kept of the information recorded on the cards. As a result, much of the data was effectively lost, and many of Thomas's vernacular names can no longer be tied to specimens. Some of his data was eventually published in the first edition of *The Useful Plants of West Tropical Africa* (Dalziel, 1937). Due to the efforts of Mr H.M. Burkill, a great deal more will appear in the revised edition which began to appear in 1985. This may make partial amends for the unhappy error perpetrated in the 1930's.

One of Thomas's particular interests seems to have been in traditional medical remedies. In pages appended to the catalogues of artefacts, the



Artefacts collected by N.W. Thomas. E. Wooden sansa with cane keys (unprovenanced) (Z12035). F. Rattling anklets, from Afuge (Z11716). G. Game board, from Agbede (Z11778). Photographs courtesy of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge. (Accession numbers in brackets).

Blue Books, there are lists of medicines and amulets. The composition of some of the traditional remedies of the Ghotuo and other Edoid-speaking peoples is listed, and sometimes a specimen of the medicine or some of its ingredients are provided. We know from his daughter that one of his occupations during his retirement was growing African medicinal plants.

Material Culture

Thomas collected approximately 3,000 artefacts in the course of three periods of fieldwork in southern Nigeria. As Thomas was working directly for the colonial government, these collections were originally offered direct to the British Museum. In a startling illustration of the narrow vision of the period, they were rejected as of insufficient quality, and were later offered for sale to the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology which bought them in 1918. It is not known why Thomas began this collection. However, in a preface to a book published before his appointment to Nigeria, he compares British ethnographic collections unfavourably with those in Germany (Werner, 1906). By the standards of the time, he went about collecting in an innovative fashion: emphasising not art objects, but items of everyday use. There are large collections of pots, combs, baskets and other items that Thomas apparently bought in local markets. He also collected raw materials for mats, baskets and medicines as well as masks and carvings; many of these are now both rare and valuable. His interest was evidently to provide a conspectus of the complete range of the material culture.

The documentation for the collection is somewhat variable. Soon after shipment, Thomas apparently collaborated in preparing a fairly complete catalogue of the material. Thomas seems to have written the original catalogue himself, and there is a summary bound into four blue volumes. Although apparently duplicated, no other copy of the catalogue has been found. However, the Blue Books do not include all the details available, most of which are recorded only on small labels attached to the items themselves. They normally give a summary description of the object, its vernacular name and use. As the collection progresses from Edo to Igbo, and thence to Sierra Leone, these notes gradually become more complete. Most of the documentation has been transferred to catalogue cards, and now to the general computerised catalogue of the Museum. Thomas went to some lengths to establish the vernacular names of objects he collected. However, in many cases he was given either a wrong term or a generic term; so specific pots may only be given the general word for 'pot'. In other cases, he was given Yoruba terms, as Yoruba is a common *lingua franca* in northern Edo areas, and may well have been one of the links in his chain of interpretation. In particular, despite being interested in linguistics, Thomas gave unlikely transcriptions for some vernacular terms. Although he knew about tone, he generally made no attempt to indicate it, and he could not develop convincing phonemic analyses and overburdened his transcriptions with unnecessary diacritics. The documentation is also defective, because of the large number of objects that

had lost all identification in the early period of cataloguing. The Cambridge Museum operates an accession numbering system by year. However the Thomas objects were accessioned some years after their receipt and given numbers beginning with 'Z'. Broadly speaking, objects numbered Z11111 to Z14000 are provenanced. A sequence numbered Z21... were catalogued much later, and presumably belong to the Thomas collection though their exact provenance is unknown.

One of the by-products of re-cataloguing the collection is that some items can be matched to Blue Book entries, for which no corresponding object could previously be found. The cataloguing process must have been undertaken once before, at some unknown period, since the labels on all the objects have two numbers. One number corresponds to that originally assigned by Thomas, and the other to no known catalogue. A new catalogue by Mark Alexander and Roger Blench has been completed, describing the items and giving whatever accession data are available. The objects have all been photographed and a set of photographs lodged in the Cambridge Museum. The data are incorporated in a computerised database, MUSCATEL, on the Cambridge mainframe, Phoenix MVS. This has now been downloaded to a PC-format ASCII-delimited file, and in principle can be read by any major database software, and suitable for distribution at relatively low cost to other researchers. The advantage of a database format is that specialised sub-catalogues can be prepared to meet specific interests. For example, a catalogue of all the musical instruments can be printed out without having to search through the entire catalogue. In addition, the catalogue can be updated as new information becomes available. In particular, the use of a graphical environment, such as *Windows*, makes it possible to include phonetic characters as well as scanned graphics.

Evaluation and further research

Northcote Thomas was a remarkable figure in the early history of anthropological research in Nigeria. His broad interests and emphasis on physical documentation, were unusual for the period, and his collections are of continuing interest. He has been largely ignored, perhaps because he was not employed in a University and had no pupils to propagate his ideas and reputation. The intention of the Thomas Project is to make a wider audience aware of the importance of his work. The collection is remarkable from several points of view: its early date, and the relative completeness of its documentation. However, for the Edoid-speaking peoples it is virtually unique: no other Museum in either Nigeria or Britain has a comparable collection. Indeed, until the 1970's, little more ethnographic or linguistic work had been carried out in this area. The Igbo, are, of course, better represented both in Europe and Africa, but Thomas's collection retains its interest because he collected everyday objects rather than concentrating on 'art'. The second phase of the Thomas Project will be to gather additional information to set this collection of objects in its context. This has been started in the regions of Ghotuo and Sabongida-Ora. The technique has been to return to

the communities where Thomas originally collected, and to discuss with them the objects, their names and the notes he made. In this way, Thomas's remarkable pioneering work in Nigeria can be set in its historical context and made useful to present-day researchers.

REFERENCES

- Dalziel J.M. 1937. *The Useful Plants of West Tropical Africa*. Crown Agents, London.
- Lackner H. 1973. Colonial administration and Social Anthropology: Eastern Nigeria 1920-1940. In *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*. ed. Talal Asad. Ithaca Press, London. pp.123-152.
- Werner A. 1906. *The Natives of British Central Africa*. Constable, London.
- Thomas N.W. 1910. *Anthropological Report on The Edo-speaking peoples of Nigeria*. Harrison & Sons, London.
- Thomas N.W. 1913. *Anthropological Report on The Ibo-speaking peoples of Nigeria*. Harrison & Sons, London.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Thomas Project could not have been undertaken without a generous grant from the trustees of the Crowther-Beynon fund and the interest and enthusiasm of the Curator of the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology, Dr D. Phillipson. I would also like to thank the Deputy Curators, Dr R. Waterson and Dr P. Sant Cassia, for their assistance with the administrative side of cataloguing and photographing such a large collection of objects. I am grateful to Mr H.M. Burkill of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, for drawing my attention to the significance of Thomas's ethnobotanical collections. Professor Richard Slobodin, of McMaster University, was of great assistance to us by providing references to some of Thomas's little-known publications.

APPENDIX -- Peoples and Locations where Thomas collected.

The Appendix gives a comparative table showing the peoples represented in Thomas's various collections, the modern names of the languages and ethnic groups. Because of Thomas's use of the names of sometimes very small towns, it has not proved possible to identify them all unambiguously. Though most of Thomas's work was on the Igbo and Edoid speaking peoples, there are some items from the 'Ifon', a group of Ekiti-speaking Yoruba, and the 'Afunatam', now known as the Nta, who speak an Ekoid Bantu language. Thomas photographed a number of places where he did not collect artefacts, although the less than adequate documentation for his photographs makes these only of marginal value.

LIST OF NIGERIAN ETHNIC GROUPS REPRESENTED IN THE THOMAS COLLECTIONS

I. EDO

<u>Thomas's Name</u>	<u>Town</u>	<u>Ethnic Group</u>	<u>Language</u>
Agbede	Agbede	Aviele	Etsako
Afuji, Afuze	Ovbiomu	Afuze	Emai
Agenibode	Agenibode	Yekhee	Etsako
Aroko	Aroko	Aroko	Emai ?
Bini	Benin	Bini	Bini
Fuga(r)	Avianwu	Avianwu	Yekhee
Ijeba=Kukuruku	Ijeba	Yekhee	Yekhee
Nofia ?			
Okpe	Okpe	Okpe	Okpe
Otua	Otua	Ghotuo	Ghotuo
Sabongida	Sabongida	Ora	Ora
Ubiaza=Ubiaga	Ubiaga	Esan	Esan
Ugboviatu ?			
Uromi	Uromi	Esan	Esan
Uzaitu	? = Uzairue	Uzairue	Yekhee

II. IGBO

<u>Thomas's Name</u>	<u>Town</u>	<u>Ethnic Group</u>	<u>Language</u>
Afikpo	Afikpo	Igbo	Afikpo Igbo
Agala	Abakaliki	Agala	Idoma (south)[]
Aguku (Nri)	Aguku Nri	Igbo	Igbo: Awka
Asaba	Asaba	Igbo	Igbo
Ezi	-	Izi	Izi
Nibo	Nibo	Nibo	Igbo: Awka
Nise	Nise	Nise	Igbo: Awka
Nkalagu	Nkalagu	Igbo	Igbo: Enugu
Obu	Obu	Igbo	Igbo: Awka
Omoku	Omoku	Ogbah	Ogbah
Ugwoba	Ugwoba	Igbo	Igbo: Abwaja

III. CROSS RIVER

<u>Thomas's Name</u>	<u>Town</u>	<u>Ethnic Group</u>	<u>Language</u>
Afunatam	Afunatam	Atam	Nta
Ibibio	-	Ibibio	Ibibio

IV. YORUBA

<u>Thomas's Name</u>	<u>Town</u>	<u>Ethnic Group</u>	<u>Language</u>
Ifon	Ifon	Yoruba	Yoruba: Ekiti