

## **Migration and Settlement Patterns of the Ejagham**

Author(s): **Awan Ayang**

Date Accepted: **1<sup>st</sup> April 2023**

### ***Abstract:***

*The Ejagham, an ethnic nationality with a long history in what became the southern Nigeria/Cameroon borderlands were mostly on the move until the 17th century. This migrations in groups usually led by warrior, kings, or rebel leaders evolved a pattern seen today in both the naming and order of their settlements. Using primary resources including oral traditions, face-to-face interviews as well as secondary sources, this study sought to traceback that process of migration, the people involved, and the pull/push factors which motivated the movement of the Ejagham people of the Cross River region.*

### **Introduction**

The Ejagham people are a Bantu group found in the Southeastern extremity of Nigeria and Northwestern Cameroon. Their cradle has been identified as the Nigeria/Cameroon corridor.

Although there are various academic and anecdotal suggestions for the origin of the word *Ejagham*, its association with, and possible origin from the lake Ijagham in the Manyu Division of Northwest Province of the Republic of Cameroon has gained wider acceptance.<sup>1</sup> Whatever the persuasion about the origin of this name, the Ejagham people are part of the larger Cross River region which cuts across southern Nigeria and western part of Cameroon. It follows therefore that, the study of Ejagham is a study of a much smaller portion of the Cross River region.

Given modern districting policy, the Ejagham constitute one of the largest groups that make up the present Cross River State. Of the eighteen Local Government Areas the state is made of, Ejagham people are found in six. These include, Ogoja, Ikom, Etung, Akamkpa, Odukpani, and part of Calabar Municipality.<sup>2</sup> In Cameroon, they are found mainly in the Manyu Division.

This study seeks to examine the settlement patterns of the group and factors which led to that pattern of settlement. The study employs both primary sources (oral sources) and secondary sources about Ejagham and the rest of the region.

## **THE EJAGHAM ORIGINS**

The Ejagham like most peoples of the Cross River region trace their origin to the Nigeria/Cameroon border area. Thus, Uya asserts:

*Some semi-Bantu groups in the southern part of the country, such as the Oron, Ibibio, and the Ekoi (Ejagham) would appear to have entered Nigeria from the present Nigeria/Cameroon corridor<sup>3</sup>.*

Onor, though indicating some support for the idea that Ikom Local Government Area is the cradle of the Ejagham, alludes to the Nigeria/Cameroon border nonetheless.<sup>5</sup>

It was at this cradle that the Ejagham built three of the most important cultural features that have come to define them. These include *Akwanshi* monoliths, *Nsibidi* (pictographic writing form) and the *Mgbe (Ekpe)* cult.

By the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD, the Ejagham group began migrating from this area. This migration created two naming systems for Ejagham settlements namely the *Ofu* and *Atan* settlement groupings which O. Enim calls the *Atan* (stone) and *Ofu* complexes.<sup>6</sup>

The *Ofu* complex cuts across present day Obubra and Ikom Local Government Areas. This is a cluster of ancient Ejagham settlements that resulted from the earliest migration of the Ejagham. This settlement cluster is identified by the predominance of *Ofu* suffixes in their names including: Ofudua, Ofatura, Ofunbongha, Ofat (Obubra LGA), Ofutop and Ofunatam (Ikom LGA).

On the other hand, the stone complex is another group of settlements which derive their name from the Ejagham word for stones - *Atan* . These include: Etananwana, Etan-nkpe, Ezabaatan, Etan Nkims, Insam etan (Ikom LGA), Agbotai and Ekughatai (in Etung Local Government Area). From the foregoing, it could be seen that both the *atan* (stone) and *ofu* waves of migration encircle the area of present day Ikom Local Government Area which is the reason Onor seems open to consider Ikom as the cradle of the Ejagham civilization. In line with this he asserts: “the seed which ultimately brought forth the Ejagham nation were located within modern Ikom Local Government Area.”<sup>8</sup>

This also supports a tradition that holds that Nsam Etan, (corrupted as *stand by early* explorers) a small settlement in Ekpokpa (in Nta) located approximately in-between the *ofu* and *etan* clusters forms the core of the Ejagham civilization, according to Maureen Nnigbi.

It was from this point and pattern of settlement that the Ejagham, driven by social and environmental necessities started migrating to their present settlements which Onor (1994) calls 'primary migration'.

## **THE WAVES OF MIGRATION AND SETTLEMENT**

Effiong U. Aye (2000) holds that by the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Efiks were fully aware of the Qua settlements and that there were regular contacts.<sup>9</sup> This means that the Qua extraction of the Ejagham was the first to migrate Southwards from the cradle area. Qua tradition holds that they were expelled from their original homeland in a battle with the other Ejagham,<sup>10</sup> a fact which Aye again corroborates, asserting that the other Ejagham acquired guns from the Efik to ward off the Qua kins. This war was due to the struggle for access to salt lakes which was an important asset.<sup>11</sup> However, it set the Quas, led by Eta Ntison on the move from the upper Cross River to their present southerly abode in Calabar.

It should be noted that leading bands of people across tick jungles was cumbersome and, in some cases, there was dissent and rebellion along the way. Such was the case that led to the establishment of the Odukpani community led by Okima Nkor. Both the Qua and Odukpani stock were firmly established between 1400 and 1500 AD.

Between 1780 and 1840 AD, the Ejagham group in present day Akamkpa Local Government Area settled in Mfamosing, completing the Southward migration of the Ejagham<sup>12</sup>.

Moreover, between 1600 and 1810 AD, other waves of Ejagham migration were taking place. This involved the Bakor group to their present homeland in Ogoja Local Government Due to resistance from already settled areas, some groups simply migrated around the periphery of the Ejagham cradle. This small communities are found today along the Cross Riverbanks which was also a pull factor for some of these migrations.

## **OTHER CAUSES OF MIGRATION**

In all the waves of Ejagham migration considered so far, the quest for salt featured mainly. Some groups migrated simply to settle around brine (salt) lakes or to gain access to salt trade routes. It suggests that salt was critical to this people but although it remained an important trade commodity,<sup>13</sup> interest in salt mines was not the only cause of the Ejagham migration. The following were other factors that necessitated migration.

**WARFARE:** Like the case of Mbakang war between other Ejagham groups and the Qua extractions, conflicts over salt lakes, farmland and other interests occasionally resulted in warfare which set weaker groups on the move. Sometimes in the course of groups' migration, feuds occurred within amongst them setting these groups apart and on in confrontation. This was the case with the Ekpokpa and other Ofutop groups.<sup>14</sup>

**ACCESS TO RIVERS:** Rivers provided a smoother means of transportation, compensating for the dense tropical forests. There were migrations towards such rivers especially the Cross River which provided easy access to the European trade. The scrambles for portions to build such settlements often resulted to warfare between groups.

**OVERSTRETCH OF KINGDOM:** As this analysis has shown, the Ejagham were a large people hence, poor administration led to dissent and rebellion.<sup>15</sup> This usually ended up in separation of groups. For groups which practical dynastic rule, there was a culture in which successors to the throne established settlements in honour of their accomplished predecessors. The *Akwanshi* monoliths served part of that function of immortalizing former rulers. For instance, the Ofutop group holds that Ekpokpa-Nkun settlement was named by king Akam in honour of his father, *atta Nku* who established the Nku dynastic line. This community still exists and despite disagreements on whether these oral traditions are based on legend or historical fact, what is important is that due to the establishment of new settlements the Ejagham at some points were overstretched, making their splintering inevitable. As King Frederick The Great once said: "*the first duty of a ruler is to maintain himself: the second is to expand*".<sup>17</sup> The Ejagham did but often to their own political disadvantage.

**THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE:** the Atlantic slave trade influenced migration in two ways. First, it attracted interested communities to trade routes and secondly, it set communities fleeing from raids by slavers.<sup>18</sup>

### **THE EFFECTS OF THE MIGRATION AND SETTLEMENT PATTERN ON THE EJAGHAM**

The long period of migration and settlement of the Ejagham has significantly impacted the Ejagham people.

First, it has spread them contiguously from the upper cross river area to the South. This has made Ejagham one of the largest groups in Cross River State of Nigeria.

Secondly, it led to dialectical differences in the Ejagham languages. The impact of this is that even though there is sometimes mutual intelligibility among speakers of these languages, today, Ejagham is identified with pockets of settlements each with its language.

Finally, Ejagham expansion brought them inevitably into contact other groups with whom they interacted in both in peacetime and wartime.

### **CONCLUSION**

It could be seen that between 1500 and 1810 AD, the Ejagham extended beyond their nucleus in the Nigeria/Cameroon corridor in the upper Cross River to the estuaries of Calabar. This expansion, evidenced by their current settlement pattern was necessitated by geographical and social factors. That period of migration and settlement continues to impact on the politics, economy, and historiography of the two countries (Nigeria and Cameroon) which Ejagham history brings together.

### **ENDNOTES**

<sup>1</sup>Sandy, Ojong Onor, *The Ejagham Nation in the Cross River Region of Nigeria*, Ibadan: Kraft books, 1994. p.39.

<sup>2</sup>Onor. p. 1.

<sup>3</sup>Edet, Okon Uya (ed), *Contemporary Nigeria*, Buenos Aires: Artes Graficas Editoriales Y Publicitarias EDUPUBLIS. A, 1992. P. 15.

<sup>4</sup>Onor, p. 50.

<sup>5</sup>Onor, p.144.

<sup>6</sup>Elder Osim Enim, Interviewed 31, march 2013.

<sup>7</sup>Onor, p.17.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid. p.50

- <sup>9</sup>E.U. Aye, *The Efik People*, Calabar: Glad Tidings Press Limited, 2000. Pp.225-227.
- <sup>10</sup>Nair K. Kannan, *Politics and Society in South Eastern Nigeria, 1841-1906; A Study of Power, Diplomacy and Commerce in Old Calabar*, London: Frank Cass, 1972. p.3.
- <sup>11</sup>E.U. Aye, *The Efik People*, Calabar: Glad Tidings Press Limited, 2000. p.221.
- <sup>12</sup> Onor, pp.64-70.
- <sup>13</sup>Abasiattai, M. B; *A History of the Cross Region of Nigeria*, Enugu: Harris Publishers Ltd. 1990. p.136.
- <sup>14</sup>Onor, p.73
- <sup>15</sup>Ibid. p. 52.
- <sup>16</sup>Ibid. p. 75
- <sup>17</sup>K. R. Perry, *The Bourgeois Century, European History, 1780-1870. The Evolution of Western Society*, London: Macmillan Education Limited, 1972. p.21.
- <sup>18</sup>Onor, p.52.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abasiattai, Monday B, A History of the Cross Region of Nigeria, Enugu: Harris Publishers Ltd. 1990.
- Aye, Effiong U. The Efik People, Calabar: Glad Tidings Press Limited, 2000.
- Enor, Frank. The Nta and their Neighbours: Inter-group Relations in the Central Cross River Region, Calabar: Jochrisam Publishers, 2007.
- K. R. Perry, The Bourgeois Century, European History, 1780-1870. The Evolution of Western Society, London: Macmillan Education Limited, 1972.
- Nair K. Kannan, Politics and Society in South Eastern Nigeria, 1841-1906; A Study of Power, Diplomacy and Commerce in old Calabar, London: Frank Cass, 1972.
- Onor Sandy Ojong, The Ejagham Nation in the Cross River Region of Nigeria, Ibadan: Kraft books, 1994.
- Roschenthaler M. Ute, Ejagham (Cameroon, Nigeria). The Rosen Publishing Group, 1996 (from Ebooks).
- Uya E. Okon, (*ed*), Contemporary Nigeria, Buenos Aires: Artes Graficas Editoriales Y Publicitarias EDUPUBLIS. A, 1992.

Maureen Nnigbi

Elder Osim Enim, Interviewed 31, March 2013.