

Akparabong and Yalla-Nkum Relations in the Middle Cross River Region, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: *People and cultures migrating from one location to another is thought to be a long-standing historical trend. This is essentially true during the formative stages of nation-states. Internal and external factors more frequently induced the movement of a diverse range of people in groups or trickled them to habitations deemed more favourable, secure, or conducive to farming, settlement, hunting, and so on. Wars, slave raids, hostile neighborhoods, or the search for resources like water, salt ponds, and so on, constituted the push and pull factors of early migrations of populations. This paper considers the migrations and settlement of Yalla-Nkum and Akparabong and their impact on intergroup relations in Ikom, middle Cross River Region, from 1815–2007. The raison d'être and the factors of contacts and relations in determining the politics of Ikom have all been considered. The empirical phenomenological approach used in this study. Checking data is based on information obtained from informed informants. Documented sources also complement the primary data obtained. Findings show that ownership and management of scarce resources attract envy, hostility, and even resource conflicts among pre-colonial groups, thereby setting the pattern of relationships during the colonial era.*

Budaya bermigrasi dari satu lokasi ke lokasi lain dianggap sebagai tren sejarah yang sudah berlangsung lama. Ini pada dasarnya benar selama tahap pembentukan negara-bangsa. Faktor-faktor internal dan eksternal lebih sering mendorong pergerakan berbagai macam orang dalam kelompok atau menggiring mereka ke tempat tinggal yang dianggap lebih menguntungkan, aman, atau kondusif untuk bertani, bermukim, berburu, dan sebagainya. Perang, penggerebekan budak, lingkungan yang bermusuhan, atau pencarian sumber daya seperti air, kolam garam, dan sebagainya, merupakan faktor pendorong dan penarik dari migrasi awal populasi. Makalah ini mempertimbangkan migrasi dan pemukiman Yalla-Nkum dan Akparabong dan dampaknya terhadap hubungan antarkelompok di Ikom, Wilayah Sungai

Lintas tengah, dari tahun 1815–2007. Raison d'être dan faktor kontak dan relasi dalam menentukan politik Ikom semuanya telah dipertimbangkan. Pendekatan fenomenologi empiris digunakan dalam penelitian ini. Pengecekan data didasarkan pada informasi yang diperoleh dari informan yang telah diinformasikan. Sumber terdokumentasi juga melengkapi data primer yang diperoleh. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa kepemilikan dan pengelolaan sumber daya yang langka menimbulkan kecemburuan, permusuhan, dan bahkan konflik sumber daya di antara kelompok pra-kolonial, sehingga membentuk pola hubungan selama era kolonial.

Keywords: *Migrations, Resources, Intergroup Relations and Contacts, Akparabong, Yalla–Nkum.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Akparabong and Yalla-Nkum are two political wards in Ikom Local Government Area (Ekwoke, 2018), Cross River State, Nigeria. Both occupy a stretch of land directly opposite each other, flanking the left and right sides of the Ikom-Ogoja highway from Atimaka. Both are bounded in the north by Nde and Afi Creeks, which flow into the Cross River, in the south by Ikom Urban, Etung, and Boki Local Government Areas to the east of Akparabong, and in the west by the Cross River, which flows from the Cameroon highlands. Except for Erim Odey's efforts on Yalla-Nkum, neither community has been subjected to critical scholarly interrogation until recently. More so, Yalla-Nkum is considered an intrusive group in a vast homeland peopled by various Ejagham groups, including Akparabong interalia.

As a result, Akparabong and Yalla-Nkum are of different ethnic origins (Idoma and Ejagham, respectively) (Onor, 2016). How migrations of these two groups brought them together, as expressed in protracted inter-ethnic warfare, cordiality, and mutual existence, makes it interesting not only in expanding the frontier of knowledge of these groups, but also significantly contributes to understanding the current politics of Ikom Local Government Area to 2007. The analysis seeks to proceed in segments, starting with the introduction shown above. The second segment considers the migration processes and routes taken by Akparabong to their present settlement with neighbours all around. The third segment likewise considers Yalla-Nkum. The factors of contacts between Yalla – Nkum, and Akparabong constitute the fourth segment. Lastly, the fifth segment will conclude the paper, followed by references.

II. METHOD

The empirical phenomenological approach used in this study is a research approach that does not use hypotheses or temporary conjectures in the analysis process, although phenomenology can also produce a hypothesis to be tested further. This research also provides insight to find out more about the culture of migration as a historical trend and policies of each country. The focus of the research will be on the Akparabong and Yalla-Nkum Cross River Region settlements, Nigeria. Supported by literature review based on

open sources (articles, reports, news), accompanied by the application of International Relations theory. Checking the data was based on information obtained from knowledgeable informants, some of whom were eyewitnesses or had close contact with the dramatic characters and leaders of the groups under consideration. Documented sources also complement the primary data obtained, as seen in the bibliography and endnotes.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Akparabong – Bosork (Rams and Elephants)

Akparabong comprises Nkpanjen, Nkanacha, Nturokim, and Ogbagante (Okedu, 2020). As a unifying nomenclature, 'Ekparabong', anglicised as 'Akparabong', was adopted during settlement in their present homeland. The processes of unification of the four units and adoption of a common nomenclature may not be unconnected with historical and maybe biological affinities. What is common and clear about the units is their warring prosperity, which could only be likened to 'rams' and 'elephants,' hence 'Ekparabong' (rams) and 'Bosork' (elephants), and a common tradition of origin from Nta. Traditions from Akparabong, which are also corroborated by their neighbors, attest to the warring prosperity of Akparabong during their formative stages. Nta traditions also corroborate the origins of Akparabong, as they refer to them as their 'brothers.' Nta is one of the three nuclei of most Ejagham and other Cross River people. In this homeland, are found designated burial sites of their previous priest kings identified by thirty-nine carved and uncarved monoliths, in anthropomorphic forms, each bearing the name of its previous clan heads (priest kings), which dynasty spanned several centuries back. The Nta kingdom commemorated their clan heads with a carved monolith, locally referred to as Akwansisi (Enor, et al., 2019).

It is not clear what sparked up a concatenation of migrations in and out of the Nta homeland (Onor, 1994), culminating in the disintegration of the kingdom before the 19th and 20th centuries. The donor's account of overpopulation and the quest for fertile land may not be convincing, especially because of a lack of population statistics for each group before the 20th century. Equally so, the quest for fertile land as a causative agent for migration of Akparabong from their aboriginal homeland is not satisfactory as the homeland and the general Ejagham country to the Benue and the Cameroun – Nigeria border enjoys the tropical rainforest with a humid soil that accommodates a variety of food and cash crops all round the seasons. Apart from Akparabong, some Boki groups that shared the homeland, viz., Iso-bendeghe, Bendeghe-Afi (Opu-balep), also drifted away from the Nta-Alok forest complex. Whence these migrations erupted remains conjectures from scholars who attempted a study of the region; what is however clear is that, as Akparabong and other groups moved to newer environments, the Nta homeland also received new comers or later arrivals who enjoyed the fertility of this homeland.

Allison (1968) and Majuk (2017) offered a more plausible explanation for the eruption in the Nta Kingdom and other Bakor groups in general. The duo attributed the developments considered above to pressure from outside Nta homeland. Allison (1968)

noted that the Igbo expansion from the West, and Tiv from the North pressurised other groups like Nnam and Nde, North of the homeland to areas where Nta, Ekajuk and Nselle were already established with the aim to participate in the budding European trade of the Cross River. The Cross River trade, which received a boost after John Becroft's expedition of the 1840s, actually induced hinterland groups to seek out more favourable positions that enabled them to participate in the trade (Cook, 2016). Traditions gathered from some groups in the area are replete with the desire to establish a foothold on the bank of the Cross River. This factor was weighty to pull groups from outside the homeland to the banks of the Cross River and equally push groups which were pressurised from the homeland to areas adjoining the homeland.

The Igbo pressure from the West for instance, dislodged Mbembe groups from their aborigines as they, (Mbembe) in turn, pressedurize the Nta homeland, thereby pushing Akparabong, Iso-bendeghe, and Bendeghe-Afi groups out of their aborigins. As they moved away, the eruption from the North equally pressured some Bakor groups from the Benue valley (Nkimtall), to drift into the Nta-Alok forest complex. Nta Alok forest complex, the Benue valley (Nkimtall), and areas around the Nigerian-Cameroun border (Nsan-Aragathi), have been traditionally and historically established as the primary or original homelands of the Bakor and other Ejagham groups in the Cross River Region.

Simon Majuk (2017) attributed migrations in and out of Nta homeland to two remarkable developments. The first was the instability associated with Portuguese trade along the Rio del Rey and its hinterland between 1500 and 1650s. Majuk (2017) noted that the shift in Portuguese trade to the Cross River Valley in the late 17th century may have pulled some Bakor ancestors from their ancestral homelands in search of greener economic opportunities, which the Cross River could offer. Secondly, was the expansionist tendencies of Bornue which produced remarkable effects in the Eastern Benue valley where some Bakor groups trace their origins to (Nkimtall). Allison's and Majuk's accounts provide more plausible explanations for understanding developments in the area.

The routes of Akparabong migration from Nta, as gathered from traditions, appear to be circumlocomotus. Their movement from Nta appears to have headed Northwards to '*Okim Atta Spring*' an area in present day Ogoja. Their sojourn at *Okim atta* was short-lived as the spring was reputed for taking Akparabong children on each passing day. The alarming rate at which Akparabong infants drowned at *Okim Atta Spring* was omenous, thereby forcing Akparabong out of Ogoja country to 'Ererep' through the Afi/agbogbo confluence recalled in the tradition as 'Effi teng bah feh'; Ererep is currently north of Akparabong and bounded by Orimekpang in Boki Local Government Area. It was during its sojourn at Ererep that two Akparabong hunters strayed into a group that was later identified as Yalla, an Idoma stock. The hunter, named Beben Asu, is actually an Iso-Bendeghe native, raised by an Akparabong uncle of the family of Tambo Nsan Agong (Tambo Okim) in Nturokim, Akparabong. It will be recalled that Iso-bendeghe, Bendeghe – Afi and Akparabong trace their origins to Nta homeland, Bendeghe – Afi and some Akparabong groups according to a tradition, moved to Ngah then to Nto, in the general area before its present settlement at the bank of Afi Creek, while Akparabong and Iso-Bendeghe moved further to Ererep and Iso-Bendeghe respectively.

The incidental meeting of Akparabong (Nturokim/Ogbagante) with the Idoma group of Yalla produced dramatic consequences amongst which altered the demographic and geographical structure of the groups. The discovery of a salt pond owned and extracted by the Yalla induced an immediate conspiracy by Akparabong, whose daring hunter Beben Asu, in consultation with elders, assembled a spy team comprising Beben Asu, Tawo Lifu, Ayok Omang, and Nsan Ntara, among others, to do a reconnaissance survey of the Yalla settlement adjoining the salt pond. The team returned after three nights away with promising reports of a possible invasion of the Yalla settlement. Consequently, an invasion of Yalla was planned and executed in what is recalled by traditions and rendered by local musicians as:

1. Epo – echen – oche bera bin Nkum
2. Eko esin osi, bera bin Nkum
3. Bera – bi Nkum ber jor baneh (N. Ayok, Personal Interview, 6th January, 2022).

The above expression, as captured by oral accounts, testifies to a protracted interethnic war never before experienced in the region. Translated as ‘at dawn is Yalla – Nkum war, the evening is Yalla – Nkum war, people are tired of Yalla – Nkum war. The rendition above describes the course and conduct of the Yalla–Nkum–Akparabong war, which Akparabong won by sacking Yalla–Nkum from its settlement and possessing its salt pond, but at great cost to its military capability. The palpable loss of its salt pond and dislodgement from its settlement necessitated a change of tactics to guerrilla warfare of ‘hit and run,’ whose repeated reprisals wearied Akparabong military might, frustrated the elders, and angered the decimated population, whose expressions regretted its military’s inability to completely wipe out the Yalla, who now resorted to guerrilla warfare to reclaim their settlement, but to no avail.

The sudden capture of a Yalla war priest in a nearby toilet at Akparabong finally broke the backbone of Yalla bellicosity and the consequent retreat southwards, bordering Ekpache-Nkome kingdom (Ikom Urban), at Atimaka Creek. The Yalla migration from the upper Cross River to a point where they were met by Akparabong will constitute the immediate segment.

Yalla – Nkum Origin and Migration

Yalla – Nkum is constituted by five lineage groups who speak a variant of Idoma language. They are a scion of Idoma – Alago who fanned out southwards from the Benue valley to the upper Cross River Region from about the 17th Century (Ecoma & Ecoma, 2014). The struggle over ‘Clay Wells’ at Okpoma split the groups and set the Yalla – Nkum in five lineage groups led by their leaders or family heads into another round of movements to Ofrekpe in present day Ebonyi State of Nigeria. The Nyankor were led by Ose Enya, Osim Odey led the Orom group, Ogor and Ose Erim (2022) led the Mbianang group, Owom were led by Ogar Ayambem and Ose Onawu. Leading the okpochi group At Ofrekpe, the paucity of farming land further induced their movement to Ogada in Mbembe country. The Mbembe share a common border with the Izzi, Ngbo, and others of Ebonyi State extraction. Unsuitability with the friendly Ogada triggered another movement to Ekpokpa, a Bakir speaking group in Ikom. The Ekpokpa forced the Yalla-Nkum out of their

homeland, alleging cannibalism. The Yalla, who could not defend itself against this allegation, further moved across the river to a place where the Akparabong met them before the war, which further drove them back to the right bank of the Cross River from Cameroun.

Determined to live at the bank of the Cross River, bordering Ikom in the South, Nta in the North and Akparabong to the East named the settlement 'Nkumuma,' translated as 'at last, I have found a place I shall live until death.' Nkumuma was later anglicised as Nkum and Yalla-Nkum to maintain its identity with the core Yalla groups, who are distributed into three Local Government areas in the Central and Upper Cross River Region: Obubra (Nkum Okpambe), Ikom (Yalla-Nkum), and Okpoma in the Yalla Local Government Area, respectively. Side – by – Side, the Akparabong, and other neighbouring groups around definitely triggered contacts and exchanges. These exchanges and contacts, along with their impacts, will constitute the subject of the subsequent segment.

Factors of Contact and Relations between Akparabong and Yalla - Nkum and their Neighbours

The forgoing narratives clearly depict that the two groups under examination as different ethnic stock. While Yalla-Nkum is Idomoid, Akparabong is Ejagham. Neighborliness in their area of settlement produced contacts and relations expressed in warfare and socio-cultural exchanges, including inter-marriages. According to the migration narrative, the Yalla were the first occupants of the land, which Akparabong seized after the war to wrestle Yalla Salt Pond. It may never be known how long Yalla-Nkum dwelled on the land before Akparabong met them, as oral accounts are silent about absolute dates. Evidence from oral accounts indicates that the first major interaction between the Yalla, Nkum, and Akparabong can be traced to about 1815, when, on arrival from Nta, Akparabong invaded Yalla to take over its salt pond. Odey (2022), an informant from Akparabong, stated that his informant, Takim Tawor, from Bendeghe-Afi, a teacher at Adiginkpor, informed him that the eldest man at the time was Ekpang Obi, who lived over a hundred years according to this source; Bassey (2022) stated that Tawo, who informed him in 1963, said the war was fought about that time. He and his other colleague, Okpa Bessong from Bendeghe-Afi, estimated the probable date of the war using generational leanings to arrive at 1815. Be that as it may, the Yalla-Nkum-Akparabong war, which lasted for 22 years according to the accounts, did not terminate relations between the duo as should be expected; rather, the war intensified social relations and exchanges between them and their neighbours.

During the 'Salt Pond War,' for instance, Akparabong sought allies from Iso-Bendeghe and Bendeghe-Afi to strengthen its flanks (Röschenthaler, 2014). After the war, the allies were allowed to take turns partaking in the mining of the salt pond. Salt was a very valuable resource at a time when European salt was unknown. It was used as a spice, a currency, and a commodity by Akparabong and its neighbours. Unfortunately, the mining processes and schedules generated conflicts between Akparabong and Bendeghe-Afi, one of its two allies. Bendeghe– Afi challenged Akparabong's duration of mining. Being larger and more populated, Akparabong mined the salt pond from November to March annually, giving room for Bendeghe-Afi, which took its turn from April to May before the

rainy season commenced. Bendeghe – Afi demanded that Akparabong reduced the duration, it used the pond to February and March which rancur culminated into threatening to stop Bendeghe – Afi from mining the salt pond all together. Akparabong claimed that they merely allowed Bendeghe and Afi to partake in the salt pond because they showed good faith in the war effort, even though they arrived in the war theatre recently and missed the cross-fire exchanges.

Others in Akparabong expressed their surprise that Iso – Bendeghe at the far north of Akparabong participated actively in the war whereas, Bendeghe – Afi a few kilometres away, was late to the war. It will be recalled that though Bendeghe – Afi, Iso – Bendeghe and Akparabong allied against Yalla – Nkum; Olokpo (Bendeghe – Afi), never really took part in fighting as they arrived late. Iso-Bendeghe and Akparabong warriors met Olokpo at a stream that was named *Ekiem Kai* on their return journey after executing the war. Olokpo was fined for lateness. Olokpo (Bendeghe-Afi), also nicknamed ‘Bendeghe-Okiem,’ a noisy bird, acquiesced and paid the fine (*kai*). *Kai* is Akparabong’s term for the fine paid at the stream, which was renamed *Okiem Kai*. The other groups were pacified, and this was the basis on which Bendeghe-Afi was regarded as having participated in the war and therefore allowed to partake in the annual salt extraction. The matter of the threatened expulsion of Bendeghe-Afi from the mining salt pond was resolved by the District Officer in Ikom, who appealed to Akparabong to restore the status quo for the sake of mutual relations and neighbourliness.

The animosity between Yalla-Nkum and Akparabong after 22 years of protracted warfare was sharply eroded by intermarriages. Akparabong was quick to assess Yalla women’s folk as humble, submissive, and hardworking, especially on the farm. Being agrarian communities, marrying hardworking women meant expanding their yarn farms, and later, with the advent of cocoa farming, Akparabong increased their residue of housewives from Yalla more than Yalla did for Akparabong. The end result of these marriages, which began as early as pre-colonial times, was robust family relationships, and cultural borrowings. Field work conducted among the Akparabong and Yalla communities revealed no fewer than twenty-seven mixed marriages between the two communities. It was gathered that most of the women never returned to Yalla-Nkum after the demise of their husbands. They remained with their families at Akparabong. Evidence abound of most women, who remarried at Akparabong at the demise of their first husbands. A few examples are here recounted: Mma Agbor Oghiri, Mma Rose Nkang, and Mma Nenka Tangban all remarried to Chief Ayoga Ewonkom, Tita Etta Ndifon, and Chief Ojong Nkpa, respectively. Intermarriages and the family institution become a major factor of integration of Akparabong and Yalla – Nkum. Later, the robust relationships so created were exploited to their political advantage during the local government elections in 2007.

In 2007, in the face of two other formidable political blocs in Abeayi (Nkome, Olulumo, and Adijinkpo) and Bakor (Nta, Nselle, Abanyom, Nde, and Nnam), in Ikom, the Yalla-Nkum had only the support of Akparabong to bulldoze their way to grasping the local government seat as Chairperson in Barrister Ndoma Egodo. Earlier, the Yalla also sought allies with Akparabong to grab the chairship of the defunct Afi Local Government Area. Such have been the robust socio-political ties between Akparabong and Yalla-Nkum.

Akparabong and Yalla-Nkum have also had a good economic relationship. Being agrarian communities, they rely on each other for the exchange of edible commodities that may not be readily available or produced locally. Yalla-Nkum are good at palm wine tapping, mushroom extraction from decaying palm trees, and yam farming. Akparabong are better at cocoa farming. Cocoa replaced salt extraction as the economic mainstay of Akparabong. The duo have consistently maintained healthy economic relations since the beginning of the colonial era.

Common beliefs and totemic observances also characterised Yalla-Nkum and Akparabong relations (Carlson, 2003). The snail is sacred to both. It is held that during the days of inter-ethnic wars, medicine men turned into snails, which protected them during the war. The leopard, Boar and Antelope were never eaten in the 'Old days'. It was believed that eating them could cause leprosy. It was also said that eating crab turns one's body complexion red. In both cultures, whoever kills a leopard makes sacrifices, and he is thereafter initiated into a warrior club. Belief in witchcraft, wizardry, ghosts, and spirits is also prevalent among the people; sacred objects are revered and sacrosanct. In Akparabong for example, the Ekpe drum in the Ekpe Club house is never touched by a non – initiate; similarly, among Yalla – Nkum, the 'Ebrambi', carved drums are sacred and can only be handled by cult devotees (O. Enagu, Personal Interview, 8th January, 2022).

Certain plants or trees, like the cotton tree, streams, or the outskirts of the communities 'eri-mpam' (Akparabong) or 'Lerfu-okplo' (Yalla), are sacrosanct to the Yalla and Akparabong as these are believed to be special residences of spirits. Prayers or gift items are offered to these spirit beings, 'apirija' (Yalla) and 'barlim' (Akparabong), as we pass by them in the days of old.

IV. CONCLUSION

Yalla – Nkum – Akparabong relations as examined to 1815 interestingly reveals, contacts and relationships during migrations and settlement. In most cases, as in this, settlement pattern was determined by 'first come' or primary settlers or warfare as shown above. Warfare was a recurring theme among pre-colonial groups once their interests were infringed upon and diplomacy failed to restore a peaceful resolution. Contrary however, as a proximate factor, warfare as Yalla – Akparabong case has shown, did not constitute deep severance of relationship as inter-marriages and other socio-cultural exchanges produced political alliances and robust cordiality which has been sustained overtime. Monopoly of scarce resources or its management will continue to dictate the conduct of group interactions and responses to conflict situations.

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