

Traditional Alliances and Intergroup Relations of Bakor Groups in the Middle Cross River Region, Nigeria 1600-1900

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Abstract: The Bakor speaking group in the middle Cross River Region is a group of north and north-western Ejagham people who share a contiguous homeland from Nde in Ikom Local Government Area to Ogoja Local Government Area in the upper Cross River Region. Their history, culture, and geographical spread provide a homogeneity unparalleled in the region; yet, the Bakor evolved a delicate system of alliances dedicated to warfare as a *modus vivendi* at a period when land became highly contestable following pressure from new arrivals from the north-east and west of their homeland. This paper has attempted to trace the historical trajectory of some Bakor groups from their formative stages to the 20th century. The basis for their alliances, the factors of contacts and relations with neighbors far and near, and their socio-political elaborations as the fulcrum of their unity have all been examined. The historical-analytical method has been adopted to examine data derived from primary investigation of the region spanning three summer holidays. Findings, *inter alia*, have shown that, with some exceptions, warfare does not constitute deep discontinuities in the intergroup relationships of traditional societies. Among this study group, traditional alliances, warfare, and other socio-cultural factors provided the basis for the formation of ethnic identity and unity among the Bakor people.

Keywords: Precolonial alliances, Bakor groups, Cultural homogeneity, warfare, ethnic identity, inter-group relations.

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Citation: Enor, F. N., Gboshe, E. & Akwaji, F. N. (2023). Traditional Alliances and Intergroup Relations of Bakor Groups in the Middle Cross River Region, Nigeria 1600-1900. *Social Sciences, Humanities and Education Journal (SHE Journal)*, 4(1), 164 – 172.



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INTRODUCTION

The Bakor groups can be classified into two: the southern Bakor and the northern Bakor (Enor & Chime, 2012). The southern group is found in the Ikom Local Government Area. They are comprised of Abanyom, Abangork, Nde, Nnam, Nselle (Njimetop), Nta, and Ofutop. Ekajuk, Nkim, and Nkumm constitute northern Bakor in the Ogoja Local Government Area. Together, they occupy a stretch of land from Nde (Ikom) to Ogoja, flanking the left and right sides of the Ikom-Ogoja highway to Mfom and Yahe, leading to Abakalike in Ebonyi State. The Bakor speak a language that is mutually intelligible and classified by Crabbot (1965) as Ekoid Bantu. They are home to a premier stone culture, whose carvings appear in anthropomorphic forms, some of which are said to represent their clan heads- *Atoons* and cult symbols in the past.

The general homeland of the Bakor in the Benue-Cross River-valley to the Nigeria/Cameroon border is associated with the cradle of the great Bantu stock, who vacated the region from the first century A.D. to the 16th century to constitute the Southern, Eastern, and Central Bantu of African history (Russell, et al., 2014). They are flanked in the north and northwest by the Yala and Bekwarra groups; in the east by the Bekwarra and Boki groups; Ukelle and Izzi Igbo to the west; and the Cross River flowing from the Cameroon highlands forms their southern frontier (Greenberg, 1963).

The rain forest's habitation, with its seasonal variation, enabled different species of yams and other food and cash crops to be farmed as a means of livelihood (Gallois, et al., 2021). The many tributaries adjoining the Cross River allowed for group contacts and exchanges of local produce until contacts with distant neighbors from the lower tributary introduced exotic products in the later part of the 19th century (Ecoma & Ecoma, 2014). As agricultural communities, disputes over farming land

and hunting grounds were sporadic, on some occasions leading to fratricidal warfare when diplomacy failed. To survive the times and guard against intruders, some Bakor groups formed alliances cutting across their geographical spread. Alliances enabled them to maintain and establish footholds in areas designated and delineated as spheres of influence. It also facilitated contacts and relationships between many groups far and near. The Bakor are also culturally homogenous, with the matrilineal inheritance pattern, the age grade system, burial and initiation rites into manhood, and the tradition of priestly kingship running across all the groups (Carlson, 2003). The high point in kingship development is the creation of stone carvings as memorials to their priest kings, locally referred to by some Bakor (Nta) as *Akwansisi* (dead person in the ground) (Enor, et al., 2019).

Among the Nta groups, reputed to be the nuclei of stone carving traditions, thirty-nine carved and uncarved monoliths were named after previous priest-kings, who were buried in a groove carved out as burial sites for their clan heads, in their twin capitals of Etinghinta and NnaOrakpa (Enor, et al., 2019). The last priest-king commemorated with a carved monolith died in C. 1900. Currently, the number of the carvings has been grossly decimated by human and ecological forces, and the burial sites, which used to be a groove, are being deforested for agricultural purposes. This paper aims to discuss issues of Bakor origins, the alliances of some Bakor groups, and how warfare and other socio-cultural interactions shaped their modern existence.

BAKOR ORIGINS

Bakor origins are closely linked with Bantu migration (Ganyi, 2009). The acquisition of iron technology in the first and second centuries A.D. enabled the Bantu to fan out in extensio. The remnants of these movements are from all indications, the ancestors of the

present Bakor and Ejagham clusters. From linguistic analyses, the Nigeria-Cameroon borderline has been convincingly noted as the cradle of Bantu before their migration. Bakor traditions corroborate linguistic claims by reference to three discernible primary homelands, which include the Nigeria-Cameroon border, Nkimtal in the Benue valley region, and Nta-Alok forest zone. These homelands are in the general area from the middle Cross River-Benue Valley to the Nigeria-Cameroon border. An understanding of their geographical distribution and patterns of settlement will be enhanced by classifying Bakor traditions of origin into two categories. Traditions that speak of autochthonous origins on the one hand and traditions that refer to homelands outside their present abode on the other hand

Speaking about autochthonous origins are the Etinghinta Nta (Nta), Alok (Nnam), all of southern Bakor and Ebanimbim, Mfom, Ntara-Aya in (Ekajuk), and Ukpagada (Nkumm), (Northern Bakor groups) (Francis & James, 2016). They laid claim to being aboriginal from millennia ago, when new arrivals met them. Majuk (2017) noted that among those who claim autochthonous origins are "carved stone monoliths" (p. 60). Such claims, he noted, do not serve to legitimize ownership of the land on which the monoliths stand. The Ukpagada (Nkumm), without monoliths on their soil, claim autochthony, and the Esam (Ekajuk), with monoliths, do not claim autochthony. Some groups, he maintained, may no longer remember any other homeland outside their present abode, largely because they have lived in their present locale for millennia.

On the other hand, there are traditions that claim outside origins in their present locale. Members in this category include the Nkim, some groups in Nkumm, and some groups in Ekajuk. The Nkim and Nkumm refer to Nkimtal as their primary abode before migration to their present settlement. Nkimtal is

located in the Boki Forest or the Benue Valley. The Boki are Bakor's eastern neighbors (Ganyi, et al., 2016). The Ekajuk group, with the exception of those in the autochthonous category (Ebanimbim, Mfom, and Ntara), trace their origins to Nsan-Araghati in the Nigeria-Cameroon borderline. It is not clear whence Bakor migration commenced but, by the second half of the 19th century, some groups had firmly established their modern settlements with earlier arrivals dotting the left and right banks of the Cross River and its tributaries, the Ewayon and the Aya. By the commencement of the trade of the Cross River in the 1840s, earlier arrivals had fostered their positions as middlemen through which hinterland resources arrived on the banks of the Cross River (Behrendt, et al., 2010), with Ofunta gaining prominence as an exchange entryport where the Efik, Agwagune, the Aro, and European traders from the estuary of the Cross River anchored their canoes to receive loads of forest resources from hinterland people. The social and commercial intercourse that these exchanges engendered impacted the corruption of "Ofunta" to "Ofunatam", which nomenclature became synonymous for groups in the middle and upper Cross River Region.

It does appear that the budding trade of Cross River in the 1840s sparked a concatenation of migrations of those who were outside this homeland. It is recalled that some Bakor groups claim autochthonous origins. The arrival of newcomers not only staggered the demographic structure, which sometimes generated skirmishes and warfare, but it also added another version of a tradition to the existing one. It is little wonder, therefore, that one may find two or more traditions of origin within a group. It was to guard against encroachment and dislodging on their farmlands and other spheres of influence by these later arrivals or new comers that the primary occupants and some

who claim autochthonous origins formulated alliances to safeguard their positions. The composition of these alliances and their implications for group relations are considered in the subsequent segment.

TRADITIONAL ALLIANCES OF SOME BAKOR GROUPS

The foregoing segment provided reasons for Bakor's traditional alliances; it is pertinent to understand the basis for the choice and composition of allies who evolved into two antagonistic blocs whose division cut across their geographical spread. It is recalled that the Bakor occupy two local government areas, i.e., Ikom and Ogoja, respectively, with the southern Bakor in Ikom and the northern Bakor in Ogoja (Ganyi, 2015). The Nta, Nselle, and Abanyom (southern Bakor) and some Ekajuk (north) contrived a formidable alliance against the Nnam and Nde (in the south) and the Nkumm (north). The first bloc considers the second as "interlopers from the north and their traditional enemies." The hostility and warring propensities of these blocs were so fierce that Allison noted that "the normally cooperative elders of Alok (Nnam) refused to give me a guide to the nearby Ekajuk village of Era; while my Abanyom guide from Akumabal, some sixteen miles from Era, was welcomed and found family connections there, but would not accompany me to Nde villages, within four miles of his home" (Allison, 1968, p. 31). The above narrative is understandable. Alok (Nnam) is a member of the opposition bloc like Nde, while Ekajuk and Abanyom are allies of the first bloc.

It should also be clearer that members of the first bloc derive from early arrivals or autochthonous groups. Reference to the second bloc as "interlopers from the North" refers to those who trace their migration outside the homeland (Allison, 1968). This depicts the migratory pattern of the Bakor groups. Early arrivals or claimants

to autochthony will court allies of their kind across the geographical spread, as the case herein examined. Primary occupants would therefore jealously guard against intruders or later waves of migration, especially when their areas of influence have been delineated. The second bloc from our analyses represents members whose primary homeland was outside their present locale: this is clearly the case for some in the Ekajuk group, Nde, Nkim, and Nkumm who came in from the Benue valley (Nkimtal), and Nsan Aragathi on the Nigeria-Cameroon borderline.

Migration from any point of dispersal involved small bands or units led by family heads, hunter warriors, a ritual priest, and so on at intervals. Where later arrivals are warmly welcomed into a delineated homeland, as was observed in many cases, oaths of allegiance cemented by blood covenants were taken for the purpose of peaceful coexistence. These covenants conferred brotherly status on such members. These historical processes over time provided the fulcrum for ethnic identities and unity for a wide gamut of those who shared the same experiences. It should be clear too that precolonial groups did not "express themselves in functional socio-political entities as we have them today" (Allison, 1968, p. 33). Alliances were dictated by warm relations, the primary occupation of spheres of influence, oaths of allegiance usually clothed in the myth of "brotherhood," and so on.

Studies by Allison (1968) and Majuk (2017) have attributed Bakor's expansion and incursions to pressures from outside their present homeland. Philip Allison, for instance, noted that "Igbo expansion from the west and Tiv from the north pressured the Nnam and Nde to move to areas where Nta, Ekajuk, and Nselle were already established with the aim of participating in the European trade of Cross River". The trade of the Cross River, which Allison alluded to, was a mid-19th century development after

John Becroft's pioneer expedition of the 1840s. Before this date, primary occupants were already established at the banks of the Cross River, which flowed southward from the Cameroon highlands, and evidence of early trade beyond their vicinity is fragmented until the 1840s. There is no doubt that Nnam and Nde were equally interested in establishing a foothold on the banks of the Cross River, which became an attraction to many hinterland groups. A collision of interests therefore provided the basis for testing the strength of the delicate alliances formulated by the two blocs in what colonial officials described as "fractidal warfare".

Majuk (1995); (2017) attributed Bakor's movements from primary centers to two remarkable developments: the first was the instability associated with Portuguese trade along the Rio del Rey and its hinterland between C. 1500 and C. 1650. As noted by Majuk (1995), 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 that the Cross River could offer.

Secondly, there were the expansionist tendencies of Bornu, which produced a remarkable effect in the eastern Benue valley, where some Bakor groups trace their origins (Nkimtal). These two developments, Majuk (1995) noted, triggered a concatenation of movements from the hinterlands to areas already delineated by autochthonous groups or earlier arrivals, thereby resulting in warfare to secure space on the one hand and to maintain positions or spheres of influence already acquired on the other hand.

Undoubtedly, there was pressure on Bakor from the west and east. Igbo pressure on the west by Izzi Igbo of Ebonyi extraction dislocated some Mbembe groups of Osopong from their homeland in search of empty spaces. These secondary migrations

compounded the situation for the Bakor on the right banks of the Cross River. Nta traditions, for instance, claimed that the Nde incursion from the north facilitated their unification under a central political institution headed by the Ntoon Asiane (a priest-king entitled to a human head). Ntoon Ebiji Ekan sent men from the parent village of Etinghinta to establish Oyenghe as a frontier to protect Nta's eastern boundary from Nde incursions. Nta further consolidated their eastern boundary by accommodating pressure from some Mbembe groups from the west who had been dislodged by expanding Izzi Igbo. These migrants, who served as a buffer between Nta and Nde, later relied on their growing numerical strength to attempt to dislodge their host (Nta), which culminated in the Nta-Nselle/Mbembe wars of 1993–15.

Among the northern Bakor, Ebanimbim, Mfom, and Ntara, who claim primacy in their area, were pitched against other groups of Nkim, Ekajuk, and Nkuum until the advent of the colonial regime, which incorporated Mfom, Ebanimbim, and Ntara to form a clan. The incorporation of the trio or independent groups into the Ekajuk clan prompted the formation or rebirth of Mfom, Ebanimbim, and the Ntara Accord, called MEN, to retain claims to the primacy, which are now threatened by the emergence and dominance of the Ekajuk.

To the north of Nta, the Nnam group pursued an expansionist policy, which resulted in the establishment of Agba. The Ekajuk (Nta allies) checked Nnam's expansion at that front by driving Nnam out of Agba. Nnam retreated to the south, where they sacked Nselle (Nta's ally) and fled with Ntrigom and Nto to the south. The alliance of Nta, Nselle, and Abanyom checked Nnam's bellicosity to the south, thereby stabilizing Nselle in their present locale. Such was the warring propensity of the Bakor groups, who jealously guarded their established positions against intruding groups or newcomers from the

north, north-east, and west of their homeland. Thus, whereas some groups vacated their primary settlement around the Benue valley and the Nigeria-Cameroon border in the north and northeast of Bakor's homeland, other groups were vacating Nta-Alok nuclei out of pressure from the west to the Boki forest and Nigeria-Cameroon border. These groups included Akparabong, Iso Bendeghe, Bendeghe-Afi, and some Boki groups.

The affairs so described culminated in the early part of the 20th century, giving impetus to punitive expeditions by forces of the colonial regime that claimed to be engaged in wars of pacification of the "wild and intractable Ekoi" (Sic) (Allison, 1968, p. 19).

SOCIOCULTURAL AND POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS OF BAKOR

The Ntoon Asiane

The existence of groups with a sense of military alliances all around presupposes a centralized political administration directing the affairs of state or an organ of state that wielded such influence. As recalled, the Nta group came under centralized authority with the *Ntoon Asiane* (a priest king entitled to a human head) as the political leader when Nde, a warring neighbor to the east, incurred the same authority on its lands. In other words, before their encounters with the colonial administration in the early decades of the 20th century, the Bakor people had evolved identities with a political structure headed by the *Ntoon*, a definite territory or landmark for farming and hunting, and a language structure. The highpoint in the evolution of political centralization is the erection of a carved monolith in commemoration of their past priest chiefs, *Ntoon Asiane*. The *Ntoon Asiane* was the paramount chief and head of the traditional government. He combined political and religious functions. He was not permitted by

tradition to leave his compound, as he sat daily resting his feet on two human skulls taken during tribal warfare. He was assisted by chiefs drawn from the villages that made up the clan, and this was at a period when villages were overtaken by clans as the political unit. Before now, the village groups constituted the political unit.

Age Grades

The age grade was another prominent and important institution among the Bakor people. Its functions cut across civil and military duties. It provided the "men of war" during inter-group wars and contributed men and resources to construction work in the villages and clans. The age grade also provided warriors who kept guard over the *Ntoon Asiane* and his palace. They constituted laborers' hands for self-help projects and communal labor, as paid labor was unknown in pre-colonial Bakor. There were male and female age groups with commensurate community responsibilities. The age grades were distinguished by different nomenclatures. At Alok (Nnam), for instance, a particular grade was reputed for stone carving (Yoder et al., 2009).

Secret Societies

Secret societies and cult groups for entertainment and police duties were prevalent in Bakor (Onu & Fadila, 2019). While some societies are peculiar to particular groups, others are common to all, and some are borrowed from neighbors. Among the Nta group, Ebiabu, a secret club by that name performed police duties as prescribed by 'tribal' law. A carved monolith with that name served as a symbol of the club. Atamm performed similar duties to Ebiabu but existed in the Ekajuk and Nkuum groups. Other secret cults among the Bakor were Nyamgbe, Ibirambi, Atimambi, Abubu, and so on. Secret cults or societies functioned like judicial bodies, while other warring cults provided bodyguards for the *Ntoon Asiane*.

The Family

The Bakor are matrilineal; this singular cultural trait distinguishes the Bakor from their neighbors all around (Orisaremi, 2021). The Bakor family was therefore made up of offspring who identified with their mother's lineage. A man's children did not belong to their father's lineage; they did not inherit their father's property. The lineage consisted of the female descendants of the original mother. This was why the lineage attached a great premium to the females whose offspring increased the numerical strength of the lineage. Lineage members who are usually widely dispersed trace their lineage during times of funeral or festive occasions that demand their presence.

The most senior male was the lineage head, who presided over the social and religious activities of the lineage. He was the custodian of the family Akwansisi, a collection of stones commemorating the spirits of the deceased heads of the lineage. He offered sacrifices of food, prayer, and drinks in times of eventuality, like when a member took ill and so forth. These collections of stones are passed on to the succeeding lineage. The lineage institution of language was a strong unifying factor among the Bakor.

Factor of Contacts and Relations

The factors of contacts and relations among the Bakor groups were migratory routes, alliances, warfare, the lineage institution, and later, trade and markets and social exchanges like intermarriages and secret societies. The language spoken by these groups is perhaps the most unifying factor of the Bakor. Crabbot (1965) described their language as Ekoid Bantu, after the original inhabitants of the region. *Bakor* "means come and take"; the mutual intelligibility of this language among Bakor-speaking groups informed the elders of the group to adopt the expression *Bakor* as an identifying

nomenclature for all the Bakor-speaking people.

In the 20th century, the Bakor groups harnessed their varied historical experiences to form a socio-cultural association, which they named "The Bakor Union" (Carlson, 2019). The union comprised all the groups from Ikom to Ogoja Local Government Area of Cross River State aforementioned. Elders decried their warring propensities of yesteryear as a search for identity and solemnly vowed never to shed the blood of any Bakor man for any reason. The leading proponents of this union, from the Ekajuk clan, convened an inaugural meeting of all the Bakor clans on the 29th of January 1963 at Essam Abuntak or Emangdak to birth the Bakor cultural union.

From 1900, when societies experienced relative peace traceable to the punitive expeditions of British agents, the Cross River was open to free trade. The many tributaries that connected the Bakor to the Cross River became vibrant with forest resources, bringing them to the bank of the Cross River, where English, Efik, Agwagune, and Aros from the estuary of the Cross River conveyed forest products such as yams, camwood, bush meat, and so on. Bansara and Ofun-Nta, later corrupted to Ofun-Atam, became prominent entrepots and market centers. Other centers in the hinterland included Mfom, Mbok, Ekpugrinya, Okondi in the Boki, and so on until the Ikom-Bansara highway in 1946 exposed the area to modern commerce and other contacts and developments.

CONCLUSION

Common historical experiences of northern Ejagham groups that trace their origins to the Nta-Alok forest zone, Nkimtal in the Boki forest, the Benue valley, and Nsan-Aragathi in what is currently the Republic of Cameroon shaped their settlement patterns and intergroup relations. Exigencies dictated alliances that cut across their geo-

political divide, providing strength to maintain their foothold in areas delineated as spheres of influence at a time when their homelands received pressure from the west and north-east, respectively. The 1840s ushered in a period of trade along the Cross River, inducing more hinterland groups to establish their presence. The incidence of colonialism reshaped their familiar patterns, and with a homogenous culture, a common language, and contiguous landmasses, a nationality was born. Thus, traditional alliances, warfare, and socio-cultural exchanges fostered by a common language provided the basis for what could be termed the Bakor nationality in the middle Cross River Region of Nigeria.

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