

Aspects of Pre-colonial Economic Diplomacy in the Lower Cross River Region

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Abstract

Relying on historical narrative methodology, this paper assesses economic diplomacy in the Cross River region during the pre-colonial period. The Cross River being the main artery and economic backbone of the region, rather than dividing the people served as a veritable instrument that facilitated trade and unity. In the process of deep interactions between the diverse groups, the Efik people, because of their advantageous location at the estuary of the sea, established early contact with the Europeans and subsequently played a dominant role in the ensuing relations. In the process of economic interactions between groups in the region, diverse diplomatic methods such as negotiations, treaties, gifts, threats, marriage, money-lending, peace building and some symbols were employed. Also spheres of influence were created by the major players. It should be noted that the paper particularly considers the interactions between the Efik and the Umon, strategically located at the estuary, the middle of the Cross River and the Agwagune, who occupy the upper reaches of the river. It refutes the Eurocentric assertion that the people of the area and their pattern of relations were characterised by isolation, separateness and autonomy. It is discovered that the interference of the British in the politics and trade of the area and the imposition of colonialism resulted in the elimination of the African middle men. Indeed, the existing pre-colonial network became the foundation upon which the British enterprise in the region was foisted. This early contact should serve as a veritable roadmap for economic cooperation among the existing groups.

Keywords: Lower Cross River Region, Pre-Colonial, Economic Diplomacy, Integration and Trade.

Introduction

The geographical space known as the Cross River region has been inhabited by various groups of people from the early period. These people include the Ibibio and her related groups of Annang, Oron, Eket, Ibeno and others, of Akwa Ibom State, the Efik, Biase, Yakurr, Mbembe and the Ejagham etc., of the present-day Cross River State and the Cross River Igbo, particularly the Aro and Ohafia, Abriba, Afikpo, Edda and others, found in present-day Abia and Ebonyi States (Onor, 1994; Njoku, 2000; Akpan 2017).

Nigerian scholars such as Abasiattai, Afigbo, Alagoa, Erim and Effa-Attoe in their separate works on the people of South-Eastern Nigeria have shown that these people are historically, culturally and economically related. Indeed, the Lower Cross River region existed as a socio-cultural unit. According to Uya (1986), the Cross River, with its main tributaries, has indeed been a highway for cultural inter-change between the peoples of the region because it served as the major artery of communication for the riverine peoples of the region. Through trade, fishing and cultural aspects of contacts, they gained intimate knowledge and exercised reciprocal influences on each other before the advent of Europeans to the area. Through deep process of interactions, the Cross River Igbo came to be influenced and borrowed cultural traits from secret societies, such as ekpe, obon, ekan, etc., and age-sets, which eventually served as important pre-colonial diplomatic instruments that enhanced contacts within the area. The Cross River enabled Efik traders, in the era of the slave trade and after, to expand their cultural, political and economic influences across the region. Indeed, the Efik at the estuary, the Umon in the middle and the Agwagune on the upper reaches of the Cross River exploited the opportunities afforded by their locations to achieve extensive economic power which carried considerable political and cultural significance (Uya, 1986). This paper concentrates on economic diplomacy in the Lower Cross River region excluding the Cameroon side of the geographical area. It pays particular

attention to Efik interaction with the Umon and Agwagune.

Erim (1990) posits that it has become the practice among scholars when discussing relationships which existed between the Efik and groups in the Cross River region between 1600 and 1900 A.D., to emphasise the political and neglect other aspects of these contacts. This development according to him was influenced by the fact that the Efik pre-colonial history is replete with claims of how kings exercised political authority over the hinterland groups in the past. The contention is that the above perspective of the history of the region is a major distortion of the reality of the historical situation. Largely because of the strategic location at the estuary, the Efik fully exploited the opportunities of their environment to achieve economic power in the Cross River region. In a bid to appreciate the complex nature of the relationship, which existed between the Efik and their hinterland neighbours in the past, a brief description of the geographical environment, and to some extent the socio-economic and the political set-up become necessary.

The Cross River Region: Geographical, Socio-economic and Political Particulars

The Cross River region is located in South-Eastern Nigeria and stretches from Benue State southward and covers all of Cross River State and Akwa Ibom, the Eastern part of Enugu, Imo, Ebonyi and Abia States, and continues into Mamfe Depression within which it flows into the upper courses of the Cross River in Western Cameroon. The entire drainage basin of the Cross River including the catchment area of all its tributaries covers about 53,590 square kilometers of which 39,490 square kilometers fall within Nigeria while the remaining 14,100 square kilometers lie in the Cameroon Republic. The northern three quarters of the Cross River basin, between latitudes 5° 30' North and longitudes 8° 0' and 9° 40' East, can be defined as the Upper Cross River area. A line running south of Ediba and Mamfe between the local watershed of the Calabar-Kwa River system and some northward flowing tributaries of the Cross River, forms an appropriate demarcation between the Upper and Lower coastal parts of the Cross River basin (Cited Akpan 2018).

As a natural region, the identity of the Cross River basin is evident from its physical setting which defines a low land surrounded by watersheds of varying elevation and prominence. The Lower Cross River region which is the focus of the study is a vast area encompassing many ethnic groups some of them mentioned above. The area is flat and low-lying and is characterised by its mangrove swamps with its many creeks and rivulets. The region is drained by four important bodies of water, the most important of which is the Cross River. The other rivers include the Qua Iboe, the Imo and Akpa Yafe. These rivers with their tributaries and creeks, provided excellent means of transportation especially at a time when road transportation was scanty and far between (Noah, 1990).

According to Noah (1990), the region can be conveniently divided into two main occupational zones. Though not mutually exclusive, those who live by the river banks and along the estuaries of the region's numerous rivers engage mostly in fishing, while those who live in the drier parts are mostly farmers. The products of the farm like yams, palm oil and vegetables etc., constituted the main items of trade which were exchanged for the products of the sea such as shrimps, fish and salt manufactured from the salt water. Locally produced crafts of various types including woven goods usually made out of raffia and from barks of trees, carvings and pottery formed parts of the merchandise. Edible roots spices and honey were also important trade supplements. It should be added that the environment has greatly affected the settlement pattern of the region. At the coast were, and still are found Efik trading and fishing settlements clustering along favoured spots which later grew into city-states. Within the hinterland (outside Efik land) are two types of settlement patterns: nucleated villages clustering along river banks as well as groups located within surrounding forests (perhaps for defensive purposes). Also, although, early occupational specialisation led to various forms of contacts, each ethnic group preferred to defend its political independence. This scenario in turn produced "economic sphere of influence" which generated conflicts that sometimes made life unsafe for traders and travelers (Erim, 1990).²⁶

In view of the ethnological background which the region presented to the early explorers and visitors, Afigbo (1972) and Erim (1990) observe that the explorers and visitors concluded that the existing structure was that of political fragmentation. Indeed, like other areas of later day Nigeria, the area consisted of autonomous village communities whose people were very democratic and disliked centralised governmental control. For example, the Efik, from the 16th century formed settlements which later developed into city-states. Available records reveal that these city-states derived their prosperity from the trade with the Europeans on the one hand and with the hinterland groups on the other. Their political organisation was based on the "House System". The head of the "House" was responsible for trading activities of members. Among the city-states there is no tradition of any house exercising any form of control over others, rather, each "House" was politically independent and individualistic. However, Afigbo (1972) notes that it would be absurd to regard any of these tiny republics as absolutely independent of its neighbours economically or otherwise. According to him, the fact of the autonomy of each unit did not constitute severe hindrance to trade.

The issue of fragmentation was not applicable only to the Efik, but also to the communities within the area of study. Politics was organized on the basis of "village democracies". The village formed the fulcrum of the socio-economic contacts. Those who lived outside these communities or visited them were regarded as "strangers. Consequently, inter-group relations between these splinter communities were quite unpredictable. However, this should not give an impression that anarchy prevailed in the region in the past. Evidence shows that the entire region formed an economic unit with none of the "tiny" settlement particularly on the river banks being neither economically isolated nor self sufficient. The political independence and autonomy did not constitute an absolute hindrance to the movement of trade and trade goods within the region. Occasionally, trade was punctuated by either by inter-ethnic wars, suspicions or open warfare. On such occasions, each community had to erect all kinds of trade barriers fondly referred to as tolls (Afigbo, 1972, Erim, 1990).

Pre-colonial Economic Diplomacy in the Lower Cross River Region

Available evidence shows that there existed economic interactions between the Cross River estuary and the people of the hinterland groups. For example, European observers recorded information about the Cross River hinterland which they obtained from Africans at the coast. One of the recorded information which reveals that there were various levels of commercial interaction already present at the coast of Calabar even before 1700 is from Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis cited in Ubi (1985). The commercial interaction involved the exchange of farm and sea products among the Ibibio, Ejagham, Agwagune and the Efik communities. According to Ubi (1985), Barbot's record of his visit to Old Calabar in 1698 showed the names of traders from whom he bought provisions. He posits: "forty baskets of plantain, sixty copper bars, twenty copper bars to Duke Aphorom for the same". Another evidence is derived from Portuguese description of commercial relation in the Cross River before the advent of the Europeans states thus:

At the mouth of Rio Real (Cross River) ... is a very large village in which dwell, 2000 souls; much salt is made there and in this land there are canoes made from a single trunk, which are the largest known in all Guinea. Some of them are large enough to hold 80 men. These came down this river for a hundred leagues and more and convey many yams ... and many slaves, cows, sheep ... all of which sold to the Negroes of the aforesaid village (Ubi, 1985: 10)

By the second half of the 16th Century, external factor imposed itself on the pattern of trade and resulted in trade expansion which the European presence at the coast generated. Initially, it created a plethora of communities which before that time were land-locked, had to rush to the Cross River banks with the primary aim of controlling as much of the trade. The outcome was the creation of areas of commercial influence, each dominated by a loose organisation of commercial interest, usually described as middlemen (Afigbo, 1972;

Erim, 1990). According to Uya (2005), any meaningful retelling of how the disparate nationalities of the Cross River region were moulded into a cultural and economic community since the slave trade period must accord the Efik a prominent place because the Efik played a prominent role in the economic affairs of the region due primarily to their historical and geographical antecedents. It is a generally acknowledged historical fact that the Efik arrived at their present settlement by the second half of the 17th Century. Being typical coastal settlers, the Efik established a sustained relationship with the new set of European adventurers and fortune seekers that came after the Portuguese who by the 17th Century had come to reckon with the Cross River region as one of the most fertile havens for slaves. At the turn of the 18th Century, especially during the first half of the 19th century, when the dynamics of global political economy shifted in favour of “legitimate” commerce, the area was still found to be equally useful being very rich in such highly valuable items as palm oil, kernel, gum, ebony and rubber among others (Onor, 1992).

The strategic location of the Efik at the estuary of the Cross River and their early contact with the Europeans had implications beyond economic considerations. Through this, the Efik traders, their sons and children, were able to learn European manners and customs; their sons were sent abroad to acquire Western education, a development that contributed immensely to their control of the commerce of the region (Abasiattai, 1987, Onor, 1992; Aye, 2000, Uya, 2005).

... the Efik revolutionised their social and political organisation, grew wealthy on the slave trade and won for themselves immense economic power in the interior. The Efik flaunted their wealth; they were also able copy European modes in dress and social manners. For these reasons they became the objects of uncritical imitation by neighbouring groups. Their language spread throughout the entire basin of the Cross and Calabar rivers becoming the language of commerce (Afigbo, 1972: 28).

Throughout this period, the Efik through sheer tact entrenched themselves firmly as middlemen in all the transactions involving Europeans on the one hand, and the hinterland peoples, on the other. As a logical consequence, a completely new class of Efik elite skilled in the art of middlemanship emerged. Largely deriving its strength from the confidence reposed in them by the Europeans, the Efik succeeded in attracting to itself tremendous respect from hinterland dwellers who saw it essentially as a kind of club whose membership comprised only “men of civilization” who had a lot to offer those they came in contact with (Onor, 1992). These “men of civilization” charted the course and dictated the tempo of business dealings between European slavers and supercargoes at the coast and the raw material producers of the hinterland. They it was, who served as a conduit through which phoney, meretricious products from Europe were exchanged for valuable and highly demanded raw materials and commodities from the interior. They also partially dictated the terms of trade, the mode of commodity exchanges and the general pattern of relations and its attendant security network, especially during the 18th and 19th centuries (Onor, 1992).

Available evidence shows that the Efik traders of Old Calabar had extensive relations with the people of middle section of the Cross River region such as Umon, Ikun, Agwagune of modern Biase Local Government Area of Cross River State, the Aro of present-day Abia State as well as the Mbembe, the Yakurr, Yala, the Nde/Oluluma, Ikom and with the Ibibio of present-day Akwa Ibom State. The pattern of economic transaction was through the relay process involving the use of middlemen who can be described as economic diplomats. One of the most significant centres in the process was Umon. However, as noted earlier, three spheres of influence, namely: Efik, Umon and Agwagune spheres would be discussed.

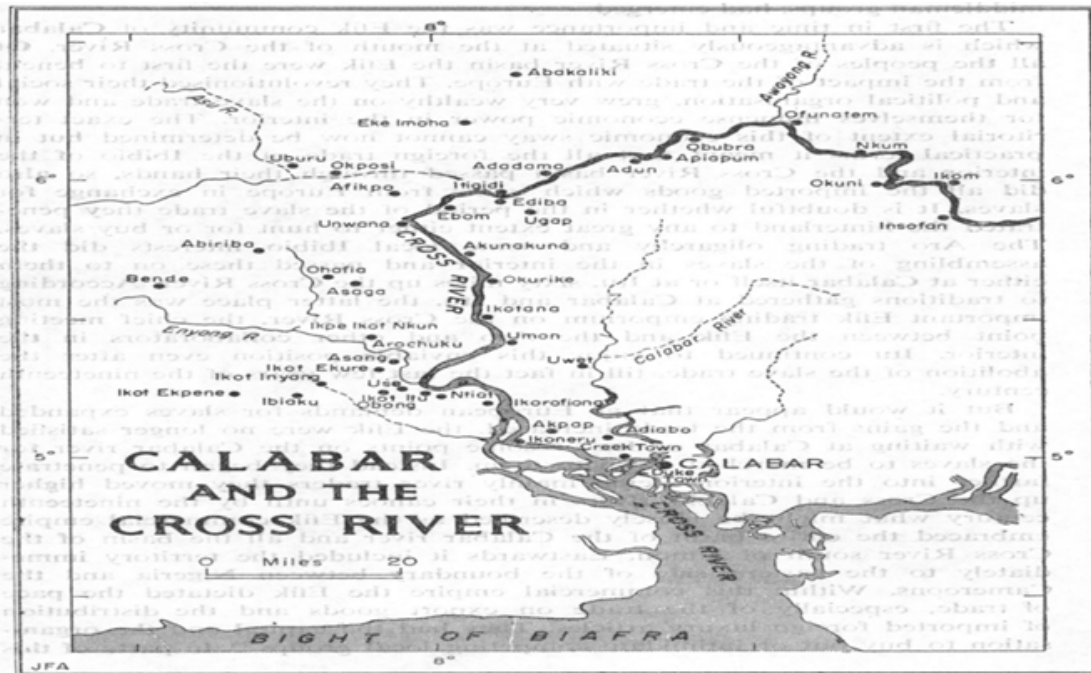


Figure 1: Adapted from: Afigbo, A.E. (1972). "Trade and Politics in the Cross River Basin, 1895-1903". *Transaction of Historical Society of Ghana*. Vol. 12, No. 1. p. 25.

Umon, a commercial town, occupied a strategic location on the East bank of the Cross River. In the early 19th century, its market was remarkably the richest in the middle section of the Cross River basin. Its citizens were sturdy lovers of political independence. They engaged in some trading themselves, mainly in the upper regions of the river, but the importance of their area lay in the fact that it was the meeting place - an emporium, for the trade of Efik merchants from the southern, and of Agwagune traders from the northern portions of the Cross River. Here the Efik exchanged the luxury goods imported from Europe for articles collected by the Agwagune from the interior. This trade not only made Umon an important commercial centre, it also generated extensive revenue as the visiting traders were made to pay tolls before they were allowed to trade. Any attempt by either the Efik or Agwagune traders to undermine this lucrative position of Umon was stoutly resisted, in some cases, canoes of violators were attacked and either sunk or kidnapped for ransom (Afigbo, 1972). It is believed that after the 1850s, trade in the middle Cross River area, north of Umon began to expand rapidly. It is also reported that Umon traders moved in quickly to settle on the river front for proper trading purposes and the larger trading families moved to open up the entire area for trade with the hinterland. Also, some Aro traders as well as Agwagune traders came to join North of Umon (Erim, 2005).

Attoe (1990) notes that the immediate impact of Umon trade with the Europeans was demonstrated mainly in the increasing demand for slaves by Efik traders, who in turn procured these slaves from the hinterland. As a result of the increasing demand for slaves and other products such as: yam, vegetables and later, palm-produce by Efik and European traders at the coast, trade in Umon gradually began to disentangle itself from the shackles of an "immediate exchange" of local trade and gradually developed into a "market oriented" one. The transition of trade in Umon generated a number of significant economic changes. Gradually, the trade in the area disengaged itself from the realm of the ordinary small-scale farmers, who constituted the cornerstone of the local trade, and fell into the hands of professional merchants such as Onun Obiekari Ana, who operated in Umon during the early decades of the 19th Century. Another trader of note was Ete Oyom. It must be noted that these new men emerged in response to the increasing demand, first for slaves, and later, for palm produce, at the Old Calabar estuary. (Attoe, 1990). During the era described by Attoe (1990) as "market oriented trade", Umon was the meeting place for trade transactions. At Umon, Efik merchants from the Cross River estuary and traders from Ikun, Agwagune, Etoni I, Etoni II, Erei, Ediba, Ikum, Okuni within the Upper reaches of the Cross River, met for exchange of goods. Also, at Umon, the Efik exchanged imported European

luxury goods – cloths, soap, powder, gin for slaves and later, palm produce, collected from the hinterland.

Patridge cited in Attoe (1990), reports that, “Umon town had a large weekly market which was frequented by people from many places, both up and down river, so that approaching Umon by canoe on a market day, one finds the place engirdled with quite a fleet of canoes”. Attoe (1990) further states that:

All the tribes (sic.) living in the upper reaches of the Cross River, brought their merchandise to Umon town and all the tribes (sic.), that lived South of Umon town brought their wares to Umon...Umon people acted as middlemen and they allowed no trader to by-pass them... (Attoe, 1990: 71).

Trading activities witnessed the intensification of economic rivalry in the lower and the middle section of the Cross River regions revolving around the desire by the Efik and the Umon to control trade in these areas. During this period, it was a common practice for influential men in Umon to demand regular presents from visiting traders in order to guarantee them safe passage through their territory. The British colonial officials, however, later accused the Umon of imposing tolls on passing traders and therefore, considered it as a hindrance to the expansion of trade along the Cross River. However, Attoe (1990) has also stressed that by instituting tolls along the Cross River, the Umon were, in fact not retarding trade expansion in the area. She adds that in modern times, traders are usually forced to pay custom duties at a country's border, before importing their wares into that country, to check the indiscriminate movement of traders in and out of that country. Thus, the imposition of tolls by the Umon should be seen as a necessary stride towards commercial development rather than as an impediment to trade expansion. Following the imposition of tolls by the Umon in their territory, the hitherto haphazard movement of traders in and out of the area, was curtailed. This restriction eventually brought about the development of a properly organised commercial system in the area. Commenting on the above issue, Erim (1990) states that:

Since it was the duty of leading men in each community to maintain the security of visiting traders and their goods, it was these men who, as of right, demanded regular presents or gifts to guarantee the former free passage. Similarly, it was also customary for certain age-grades to police their settlements or keep guard on all entries to their settlements. The *raison d'être* for the above policy duty varied from one settlement to another. Whatever the original motive, the young men involved often took the opportunity to exact enormous payment from visiting traders (Erim, 1990: 172).

It has been confirmed that economic activities between the Efik and Agwagune pre-date the advent of the Europeans to the area thus:

Before the first Europeans appeared in Efik land (Calabar), we (Agwagune) had had a regular pattern of trade already well established. Our great grand fathers would go up the river (Cross River villages), with smoked meat and smoked fish to exchange for yams, plantain, goats and cows. Some of these items of goods they took through the river (Cross) to Efik land for sale. In return they will bring from Efik land, salt and shrimps. This trade had existed for a long time. But what gave us (Agwagune) wealth and prestige was the trade in slaves and later palm produce. Some of our men such as Inyang Inyang Eko Efime and Obago Egbai made their wealth from trade in slaves and palm produce (Ubi, 1985: 9).

Commenting further of the Agwagune economic exploits, Ubi (1985) opines that the specialisation in trade and enterprise in paddling canoes may have induced them to undertake long distance trade with their neighbours. It was through commercial interaction between the Agwagune on the one hand and the various Upper Cross River peoples on the other hand in the buying and selling (barter) of goods produced in the Upper Cross River that Agwagune influence became felt by the Upper Cross Riverians. In the process of commercial

development, their sphere of influence included the Cross River estuary (Ubi, 1985). In this respect, Afigbo observes that:

The rest of the Cross River basin beyond Umon was the economic preserve of the Agwagune people who occupied the western bank of the river below the Yakuur. Their ascendancy derived not only from the fact that they were keen traders, but also from the fact that the large Igbo groups on the right bank of the Cross River such as the Afikpo and Ikwo were not interested in long distance, or in any case, in river trade. In the event, this whole portion of the river basin, covering not only all of Ogoja area but also pertaining the territory of the Tiv and Idoma in search of trade goods. Their influence in this region was not based on ordinary trade alone. They were also great purveyors of native medicine and charms and had sold to many of their neighbours dances and social clubs for which they were famous. By local standards, they were considered very rich and became reputed for money-lending (Afigbo, 1972: 29).

According to Ubi (1985), the increased demand for the Upper Cross River products at the estuary probably transformed the Agwagune into prosperous middlemen. They, therefore, did not have to rely on the smoked meat and smoked fish alone to obtain products from the Upper Cross River peoples, but merely exchanged Upper Cross River products such as yams, and others. with coastal products such as salt; shrimps and others, and appropriated the profits to themselves. It is believed that it was Agwagune's involvement as the middlemen in the prosperous trade which enabled them to exert a measure of control on the Upper Cross River peoples. At the height of their commercial prosperity, the Agwagune appointed agents in major villages in the Upper Cross River area who bought various items for them. They employed the trust credit system to obtain goods. The trust system being an economic diplomatic strategy involved a trader from Agwagune giving his agent some European goods in the understanding that the agent would supply him with yams, palm produce etc. to the value of the goods delivered. The trust system was not however peculiar to the Agwagune. In fact, it was widely practised throughout the West African coast. The Agwagune traders directed and restrained the purchase of goods in the Upper Cross River through the granting of trusts to their agents who were located in all the major villages in the Upper Cross River. It was partly through these economic diplomatic principles as well as their friendly and peaceful disposition that they were able to sustain their influence in the Upper Cross River basin (Ubi 1985).

The success of the Efik among other factors was hinged on their ability to suppress competing local peoples. The people south of Umon, the Ikot Offiong, Itu, Eniong and Ukwa seemed to have tolerated the Efik economic domination of the area. The rivalry in the Cross River could therefore be attributed to the monopolistic and stubborn nature of the Umon, which the Efik abhorred. Consequently, the Efik came to regard the Umon as a serious threat to their commercial expansion into the upper reaches of the Cross River. At the same time, the Umon were bent on maintaining their strategic and lucrative position as middlemen between the Efik at the coast and the hinterland merchants. The Umon regarded themselves as "lords of the middle Cross River basin". They therefore devised means of protecting their economic preserves in this area. One of these was by sinking canoes belonging to "foreign" traders, who tried to by-pass them to trade directly with the Efik (Attoe, 1990). Trust was an integral part of Efik trading system. The Efik were monopolistic middlemen, as noted, stood between the Europeans and the producers, receiving credit from the former, and using it to buy goods from the latter. The exclusion of the local rivals from the European trade had been pursued during the 19th century, and completed by an Efik monarch, King Duke Ephraim. The Efik suppressed attempts by the Europeans and hinterland people to contact each other. Eyamba V viewed with concern Consul Beecroft's up-river explorations in 1841, fearing lest the oil markets be discovered and the missionaries also felt Efik disapproval when they attempted to explore inland. Beecroft's Treaty of 1852 attempted to open trade to all local people, but was not successful. So determined were the Efik to keep the Europeans from the inland markets that, as a result of Rev. W.C. Thompson's evangelistic tour inland, in about

1860, a meeting known as Mbre Iduke ke Esuk Urua (no joke in the market place) was called to discuss the ejection of the mission, lest its activities deprive the Efik of their role as middlemen. Although the meeting was dispersed by a tornado, and the mission remained, the Efik continued their monopoly (Aye, 2001).

This development had earlier in 1848 resulted in a war. King Eyamba of Duke Town led an Efik naval group for a battle with the Umon. This was because King Eyamba came to realise that the Umon were becoming very uncompromising in their hostility toward Efik traders. However, the immediate cause of the show down was that the Umon attacked and destroyed some Agwuagune canoes, which tried to by-pass the Umon and trade with the Efik. Following this incident, the Efik came to believe that the Umon were being insolent, and as a result, the Efik declared war on them. Unfortunately for Eyamba, the Umon were fully prepared for the attack. Their soldiers went into an ambush for the Efik expedition along the river (Aye, 2001). Erim comments further on the episode thus:

All preparation being made, Eyamba (King of Duke Town) left his town with as much as of the pomp and circumstances of war as possible. His great canoe was gaily decked out with several ensigns streaming in the wind. As side...sat two men beating drums with might and main. In the bars a large gun pointed forward, and before it stood a man with a bundle of reeds, which he kept shaking at arm's length, to excise every obstacle and danger out of the way. A train of smaller canoes...were in the wake....Thus, they made a grand show, with colours waving, guns firing, drums beating, and men singing and shouting, while the women, crowding the beach, admired and applauded by their peculiar animating cheers with all their might (Erim, 1990: 179).

In the end, the Efik lost the day and the war, as the Umon, fighting in their own ground, gave good account of themselves thus forcing the Efik military machine to return without firing a single shot (Attoe, 1990; Aye, 2001; Erim 2005). Subsequently, the parties resorted to diplomacy, peace was made between the Efik and the Umon and the latter dictated the terms of peace. In the peace treaty, it was agreed that Efik traders should continue to pay tolls to the Umon. Also, each Efik trader was to give Umon chief an annual “dash” i.e. tribute as gift, consisting of goods such as gin, cloths valued at about £20. The Efik also agreed to dip their flags whenever they arrived Umon territory. In furtherance of their diplomatic engagement, King Eyo of Old Calabar also married an Umon girl and accepted sponsoring two Umon youths in schools in Calabar Thus, for sometime, Umon continued to maintain supremacy in the middle section of the Lower Cross River region (Noah 1978; Attoe, 1990). Again in 1870, the Efik sovereigns attempted to impose their political power on a nearby settlement of Okoyong and met with another disaster. It is reported that the Efik had a loud and prolonged military preparation. Again, they were completely defeated in a local ambush. Not long after the Efik invading army left Calabar, it returned in hot flight, broken and discomfited. This was because the Okoyong people were able to defend themselves and their independence thereby forcing the Efik to reach obvious conclusion that peace with both Okoyong and Umon as well as other hinterland groups, was necessary for mutual trading interests (Anene, 1970). From the last two decades of the 19th century, up to the early decades of the 20th century, these rivalries were reduced to their barest minimum, following the increasing British interference in the politics and trade of the Cross River region. The British were determined to destroy the whole issue of middlemanship and local disputes along the Cross River. This was because they felt that those factors hindered the easy flow and expansion of trade in the region. For instance, in 1896, the British bombarded Ediba and Umon and stationed their presence there. This was the traditional pattern of trade with which the Cross River basin emerged into the 19th century and which British merchants, administrators and missionaries who operated in this area had to deal with. It was an extremely complicated one. At one level, and quite vigorous and important, was the earlier system of trade based on the village state with its shifting alliances and alignments, petty wars, struggles and jealousies, obstruction to the movement of trade etc. then there was the later development of extensive economic spheres each dominated by a small but powerful clan of traders (Afigbo, 1972).

figbo (1972) concludes that the frontiers of these economic spheres or empires were not static but altered in obedience to changes in the military power of the competing groups or the state of diplomatic relations between them. When there was a war, the group that gained the upper hand could extend its area of commercial operation, while when amity reigned, one group or the other could cross the frontier without molestation to do business. Again, the weak villages along the river which were sturdily jealous of their independence and resisted permanent alignment to one monopolistic middlemen group or the other at times engaged in trade with whichever group of traders was around or had sufficient force to compel them to do so irrespective of the feelings of another rival group as well as between the commercial hegemonies which they sought to erect and the earlier system of trade and politics based on the autonomous village that largely determined the trend of events on the Cross River in the 19th century.

Conclusion

Viewed with European spectacle, the Cross River and its tributaries were seen as formidable obstacles, which hindered inter-group relations within much of the area. For them, these obstacles were largely responsible for the ethnic, social and political fragmentation which characterised the peoples of the region. This was rather a misrepresentation of the actual value of the Cross River as it concerns the peoples of the area. However, in its proper perspective, the Cross River region from historical times has been a cultural watershed (Alagoa, 1980). From the period when the Cross River was opened to the emerging European trade, the Efik in the estuary, the Umon and Agwagune, the Ibibio, the Aro etc., were not limited by the Cross River. As Afigbo (1972) has rightly observed, “the Cross River occupied very important place as a highways by which “light and civilisation” would penetrate the remotest recesses of the then terra incognita inhabited by the Igbo, the Ibibio and the Ogoja peoples”. He lamented that “while limited roles played by some rivers such as the Niger, the Senegal, the Gambia and the Nile in providing access routes into the interior have often been recognised, that of the Cross River has not yet been fully investigated and published”.

The Cross Rivers zone may have been an ethnological mosaic which was also politically fragmented, but by the middle of the 19th century, it had become a cultural area with many far-reaching bonds of unity and its political and trade patterns were not different in any great measure from what obtained in other parts of south-eastern Nigeria at the time (Afigbo, 1972). The Cross River peoples maintained strong economic contact which was effectively managed with requisite diplomatic instruments. What emerged from the exchanges was a single economic zone with the use of a common currency (Alagoa, 1987; Enor, 2005; Akpan, 2018). Like in all human societies, the intense economic contacts were lubricated by diplomacy. Diplomacy has been established as the means and process through which the business of state is conducted through appropriate methods and strategy, to enhance peace, reach compromise and agreement, where actors' interests are in conflict. As the work has shown, diplomatic instruments such as negotiation, alliances, peace treaties, “native medicine”, money-lending, inter-marriages, imposition of certain tolls, clearly defined spheres of economic influence.

Military might also featured in the relations. For instance, the Efik engaged the Umon militarily following the attack by the Umon on the Agwagune, who were Efik economic partners. At the end of the day, a peace treaty was endorsed based on certain mutually agreed conditions that facilitated trade and continued co-habitation. It was agreed that Efik traders should continue to pay tolls to the Umon. Also, each Efik trader was to pay Umon chief tribute on yearly basis. Some of the agreed items included gin, cloths etc. Also, the Efik also agreed to lower their flags whenever they arrived Umon territory. King Eyo of Old Calabar also married an Umon girl and agreed to sponsor two Umon youths in schools in Calabar.

Based on the analysis, it is obvious that quite contrary to Eurocentric opinion; diplomacy developed and was extensively used in pre-colonial Africa including the Cross River region. Economic diplomacy helped in the creation of a viable unit and the sustainability of a common economic zone. Indeed, a road-map for a speedy

economic development of the Cross River was created and sustained during the period under review. It would therefore not be out of place if modern day administrators and managers of economy tailor their development initiatives along the “ancient paths” to engender a holistic development of the Lower Cross River region. It is very clear that the interactions between the peoples of the region predate the advent of the Europeans. Finally, it can also be seen that the nature of the existing political system did not constitute any serious impediment to economic relations.

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