

**SOCIO-ECONOMIC INTERACTIONS BETWEEN BENIN AND
ESAN IN PRE-COLONIAL TIMES**

BY

**ESOHE SONIA IMAYEHOR
ART1800965**

**DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
FACULTY OF ARTS
UNIVERSITY OF BENIN
BENIN CITY**

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**IMAYEHOR SONIA ESOHE
ART1800965**

**AN ORIGINAL ESSAY SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF
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CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that this project was carried out by **Imayehor Sonia Esohe** of the Department of History and International Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, under my supervision.

Dr. O. Oriakhi
Project Supervisor

Dr. Albert O. Onobhayedo
Head of Department

DATE _____

DATE _____

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to God for his continual help and protection and to my mom for always being my strength and source of inspiration.

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Throughout my time at this university, God has been merciful, providing for me, comforting me, and protecting me. He has also led me to the successful completion of my research project, and for that I am grateful.

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CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND TO STUDY

Introduction

The socio-economic interactions between Benin and Esan people in pre-colonial times are an important aspect of the history of Nigeria. The Benin Empire, which was located in present-day Edo state, was one of the most powerful states in West Africa during the 15th and 16th centuries. The Esan people, on the other hand, are an ethnic group located in present-day Edo state and some parts of Delta state in Nigeria. The relationship between the Benin Empire and the Esan people was characterized by trade, politics, and culture, which had a significant impact on the development of both societies.¹

This study will explore the socio-economic interactions between Benin and Esan people in pre-colonial times. It will examine the trade relationships between the two societies, the political interactions, and the cultural exchanges that took place. Additionally, it will analyze the impact of these interactions on the development of both societies.

One of the most significant socio-economic interactions between Benin and Esan people in pre-colonial times was trade. The Benin Empire was renowned for its trade in ivory, slaves, and pepper. The Esan people, on the other hand, were skilled in agriculture,

metalworking, and weaving. This made them ideal trading partners for the Benin Empire. The trade between the Benin Empire and the Esan people was mainly conducted through the use of middlemen. The middlemen were often traders from neighboring regions who had established relationships with both the Benin Empire and the Esan people.² They facilitated the exchange of goods between the two societies. The Benin Empire was a significant market for Esan agricultural products, such as yams, cassava, and beans. The Esan people also supplied the Benin Empire with iron products, such as hoes, axes, and knives. In exchange, the Benin Empire supplied the Esan people with luxury goods, such as beads, textiles, and brass items. The Benin Empire also traded slaves with the Esan people, which was a common practice in pre-colonial times.

The political interactions between the Benin Empire and the Esan people were complex. The Benin Empire was a centralized state, with a powerful king who had control over the surrounding regions. The Esan people, on the other hand, were organized into several small states, each with its own ruler. The Benin Empire attempted to extend its control over the Esan people, which led to several conflicts. The Benin Empire launched several military campaigns against the Esan people, with the aim of establishing its authority over the region. However, the Esan people were able to resist the Benin Empire's attempts to subjugate them. Despite the conflicts, there were also instances of cooperation between the Benin Empire and the Esan people.³ The Benin Empire often allied with the Esan people in its military campaigns against other neighboring states. The

Esan people also provided soldiers to the Benin Empire's army, which was crucial in maintaining the Empire's military dominance.

The cultural exchanges between the Benin Empire and the Esan people were significant. The Benin Empire had a rich cultural heritage, which included art, music, and religion. The Esan people also had their own unique culture, which was characterized by their music, dance, and religious practices. The Benin Empire's influence on the Esan people's culture can be seen in

their art and architecture. The Esan people adopted the Benin Empire's bronze casting techniques, which they used to create their unique art. The Esan people also incorporated elements of the Benin Empire's architecture into their buildings.⁴

AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study seeks to establish the socioeconomic interactions and relationships that existed between Benin and the Esan people in the pre-colonial era.

Objectives of this research work include;

- To establish the historical relationship between Benin and Esan people.
- To examine the economic systems of Benin and Esan people.
- To assess the impact of cultural exchange
- To identify patterns of conflict and cooperation.
-

PERIOD OF STUDY

The socio-economic interactions between Benin and Esan people in pre-colonial times are a complex and multifaceted area of study. The major scope of this study would be to examine the economic and social relationships between these two groups of people, as well as how these relationships were shaped by factors such as politics, culture, and geography.

METHODOLOGY

This research work will rely on the use of two sources of information to give an in-depth analysis of this project work.

1. Oral Sources (Unwritten Document)

This includes interviews, oral tradition, folklores, folktales and stories. This is relevant to this work as this would as and serves as a reference to already existing works.

2. Secondary Sources

Publications such books, newspapers, articles online, and seminar papers will be employed in this section. These will surely offer a thorough plan for completing the study's objective

LITERATURE REVIEW

The socio-economic interactions between Benin and Esan people in pre-colonial times played a significant role in shaping the social, political, and economic landscape of the region. Benin, a kingdom located in present-day southern Nigeria, was one of the most powerful and influential polities in West Africa during the pre-colonial era. The

Esan people, on the other hand, were a group of ethnic communities that inhabited the northern part of present-day Edo State in Nigeria. The socioeconomic interactions between these two groups were characterized by trade, migration, and cultural exchange, which led to the establishment of strong bonds between them. This literature review examines the available literature on the socio-economic interactions between Benin and Esan people in pre-colonial times.

According to Bradbury in his book "*The Benin Kingdom and Edo Speaking People of Southern Nigeria*"⁷ he emphasized that trade was one of the most significant socio-economic interactions between Benin and Esan people in pre-colonial times. The Esan people were known for their agricultural practices, particularly the cultivation of yams, which were a staple food in the region. They also produced other crops such as cassava, maize, and beans. The Benin kingdom, on the other hand, was known for its production of brass and bronze works, textiles, and ivory. The trade between the two groups was based on a barter system, whereby the Esan people exchanged their agricultural produce for the products of the Benin kingdom. The Benin Kingdom established a monopoly on the production and trade of brass and bronze works in the region. The Esan people, who were killed in the production of iron tools and weapons, were not able to produce brass and bronze works due to the lack of the necessary raw materials. This led to the establishment of a symbiotic relationship between the two groups, with the Esan people providing agricultural products to the Benin kingdom in exchange for brass and bronze works.

Abumere in his work “*Esan Long Distance Traders Before Colonial Rule*”⁸ opined that the Esan people migrated to the Benin kingdom in search of better economic opportunities, particularly in the area of trade. They established settlements on the outskirts of the Benin kingdom and engaged in trade with the kingdom. The Benin Kingdom also sent emissaries to the Esan region to establish trade relationships and alliances with the Esan people. The migration of the Esan people to the Benin kingdom was facilitated by the existence of a network of roads that connected the two regions. The Benin Kingdom had a well-developed road network that facilitated the movement of goods and people between the kingdom and neighbouring regions. This network of roads also facilitated the migration of the Esan people to the Benin kingdom.

Babatunde in his work titled “*The economic Impact of Agricultural and Commercial Activities in pre-colonial Benin and Esanlands*”⁹ said that cultural exchange was another important socio-economic interaction between Benin and Esan people in pre-colonial times. The Benin Kingdom was known for its rich cultural heritage, which included the production of brass and bronze works, textiles, and ivory. The Esan people, on the other hand, had a unique cultural heritage that included the production of traditional crafts such as pottery, weaving, and wood carving. The cultural exchange between Benin and Esan people led to the fusion of their cultural practices. The Esan people adopted some of the cultural practices of the Benin kingdom, such as the production of brass and bronze works, while the Benin kingdom adopted some of the cultural practices of the Esan people, such as the production of pottery and weaving.

B.E. Oseghale in his work “*Pre-Colonial Esan*”¹⁰, made a comment on the language section. He said that since language was the main means of idea transmission, it is essential to examine both the Esan and Bini languages in order to pinpoint regions of cultural influence. The degree of linguistic resemblance may have inspired many people to propose: The idea of a shared ancestor and cultural legacy. For example, Emessiri divided Bendel languages into three levels. When learning a new language, one of the first things a person learns is the typical observable items in Category I. Esan and Bini were nearly equal in this category. Words of intangible items or technical terms are found under Category II. There were some words that a linguistic novice would find difficult to master. The Esan language showed a significant departure from Bini in this category. Items falling under Category III were those that Europeans, mainly the Portuguese, had brought to the area after 1485. Although both Esan and Bini had identical names in this category, the differences between the two languages were estimated to be roughly 42% in Category II and to be 80% in Category III. According to this research, the Esan language and the Bini language share a striking linguistic similarity. Despite the fact that both languages are mostly oral and have interacted for many hundred years, the variation in the technical terminology of the two languages indicates the persistence of an indigenous Esan language.

Imade made mentioned in his work titled “*Trade and Politics in 18th-19th Centuries Esanland*”¹¹ that the political structures and government of Esan and Benin throughout that time demonstrate the close cultural ties between the two tribes.

Similarities in court and ritual ceremonies, names, and symbols associated with political rulership support the idea of a pre-colonial bilateral movement of ideas between the two peoples. Both peoples have traditions endorsing the idea of monarchy and other chieftaincy, institutions on Bini being a consequence of the latter's imperialistic thrust into the Esan country. Esanland's constitution was significantly influenced by Benin, particularly by the Oba's selection of the first Esan Enijie, even though there was a chance that a centralized system of government would have developed there.

The importance of the ada and the emblems of the rulers of Esan and Benin are similar. Additionally, both peoples' political histories are significant. It is important to remember Esan thinking that the office symbol is foreign to Esan because traditions link the concept to Benin. The production of the ada and eben was refined to the point where Igueben ironsmiths were able to supply the Oba with the items in succeeding years. The Okaigun, who served similar social and political roles in both cultures, was the chief of the iron smiths in Esan and Benin. Very similar chieftaincy titles and institutional frameworks were related to the aforementioned. Hereditary titles in Esan were initially based on the line of the Uzama NIMIRON of Benin, but regional customs and, in many cases, outright authoritarianism and corruption, came about significant variances, causing several titles that are hereditary in Benin to also be so in Esan.

Otamawen, J.P “*Notes on the peoples of Southern Nigeria among Benin and Esan peoples of Southern Nigeria*”¹², highlighted that traditional stories also mention the

importance of native doctors and Esan military chiefs in shaping Benin's political culture before colonization. For instance, Okpota was a native doctor with abilities that extended beyond Esan. Osa Ozolua invited him to visit Benin. By using an oracle and divination, Okpota was able to sway the Oba's judgment and administration. Due to his significance in Benin affairs, a special quarter for him was constructed near to the Oba's palace so that the Oba could quickly consult with him. The Benin Town Hall, which was given the name Urho-Okpota in honour of the migratory doctor from Esan, presently stands where Okpota used to reside several centuries ago.

The idea that Benin had a much greater impact on her neighbours, especially Esan, is based on the historical and anthropological axiom that wherever an institution, symbol, ceremony, ritual, or idea reached the pinnacle of its development, that is where it began from where it later spread to or was imposed upon or was borrowed by other centres where it survives on a more subdued scale.

Dawson Adam, *History of Trade Routes and Commercial Activities in Ishan North East of Benin Kingdom*¹³ said that the cultural effect of Benin on Esan, however, cannot really be refuted by another explanation. Evidence points to the Bini people as being earlier adventurers than the Esan. More migrant traders and refugees undoubtedly departed Benin for Esan throughout the three hundred years from 1500 to 1800, despite the fact that this tendency seems to have reversed during and after that year. The aforementioned assertion is supported by Esan traditions and governmental institutions,

particularly for Ekekhen and Igueben. The substantial Benin contact with the Yoruba and Igbo cultures may provide another explanation for the increased Benin cultural influence in Esan. The Itsekiri, Urhobo, Isoko, Igala, Esan, and later European cultures all had a positive impact on Benin culture.

Esan's cultural influence from Benin had a political component as well. Benin cultural values were communicated to or governed in Esan by Benin chiefs. In certain cases, Esan princes were consciously instructed in the laws and traditions of Benin in order to prepare them for their dominion over Esan. For instance, Ozolua adopted Uda, the son of Oghale the Onojie of Ekpoma, and handed him "to a Benin chief to educate in the customs and institutions of Benin"; this purposeful acculturation of Esan princes and people was thought to be Benin's normal imperial strategy.

CHAPTERIZATION

The entirety of this project work is summarized below. This chapter is divided into five parts starting with the introduction down to the conclusion.

CHAPTER ONE – BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

This chapter provides an overview of the entire project, including the goals and objectives, the scope, the methodology, a literature review, and the work's historical context. The reader will be propelled and led into a thorough knowledge of the work by this chapter.

CHAPTER TWO – GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE ESAN AND BENIN PEOPLE

This chapter sets to explore the geographical background as well as the historical background of both the Benin kingdom and the Esan people. This chapter would look at similarities in origin and history.

CHAPTER THREE – SOCIO-POLITICAL RELATIONS BETWEEN THE BENIN AND ESAN PEOPLE

Chapter three of this project looks at the sociopolitical relationships that existed between the people of Benin and Esan. In this chapter, we would examine the political relationship between the two people, their style of government, and mode in which their social structure is established.

CHAPTER FOUR – ECONOMIC RELATIONS BETWEEN THE BENIN AND ESAN PEOPLE

This chapter looks at the economic relationship between the Benin people and the Esan people. What they traded on, who they traded it, and the significance of their economy to the development of their respective places.

CHAPTER FIVE – CONCLUSION

This chapter scrutinizes the general overview of the entire research work

ENDNOTES

1. C.G Okojie, *Esan Native Law and Custom with Ethnographic Studies of the People*, Jos University Press, 1994, pp. 56-60
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. R.E Bradbury, *The Benin Kingdom and Edo Speaking People of Southern Nigeria*, London: Hassell Stress Press, 1957, p.138.
6. B. Abumere, *Esan Long Distance Traders Before Colonial Rule*, Paper presented at a postgraduate seminar Dept of History, University of Benin, 2001, p.10.
7. C. D Babatunde, *The economic Impact of Agricultural and Commercial Activities in pre-colonial Benin and Esanlands* an M.A. Project, Dept of History, University of Benin 1997 pp.120-121.
8. Ibid.
9. E. S Imade, *Trade and Politics in 18th-19th Centuries Esanland Benin City*, Central Academy Publisher 1986, p.110.
10. J. P Otamawen, *Notes on the peoples of Southern Nigeria among Benin and Esan peoples of Southern Nigeria*, Calabar, New Approach Publisher, 1989, p15-19.
11. Dawson Adam, *History of Trade Routes and Commercial Activities in Ishan North East of Benin Kingdom*, Warri: Pager Publishing Co, 2010, p.79.

CHAPTER TWO

GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF ESAN AND BENIN PEOPLE

Esanland is a plateau in the modern-day Edo State, northeast of Benin City. The state capital is 80 kilometres (km) away from it. Etsako in the northeast, Owan in the northwest, Orhionwon and Ika in the southwest, Aniocha and Oshimili in the south and southeast, and the river Niger on the region's eastern frontiers are its boundaries. The area is located on a plateau that rises from the Orhiomo River and empties into the Orle River, Orbu River, Uto River, and other minor streams.¹ It is approximately 134 meters above sea level. Esanland is a tropical rainforest economic zone distinguished by high temperatures, high levels of humidity, and significant amounts of precipitation throughout most of the year. The region's frequent rainfall is responsible for the presence of towering trees such as the Iroko, Mahogany, Ebony, Okpekpe, Obeche, and Agba trees, with palm and mango trees predominating in the forest. They build a majestic forest canopy that is typically over 100 feet tall. Esan settlements with linkages to the river Niger include Ubiaja, Ohordua, Ugboha, and Ilushi. The water cycle in the area is supported by this. Through rainfall, the water cycle provided water for residential, agricultural, and industrial usage.²

Esan people of Nigeria are believed to have originated in the Benin Kingdom. However, this is a fallacy that unintentionally stereotypes Esan people as Bini. The

historical origin of the Esan people is, however, obscured by myth and customs, much like it is with other Nigerian ethnic groups. Obaro Ikime made the following claim to support his claim: If there is one area of Nigerian history about which it is impossible to make absolute claims, it is the problem of origin. We simply don't know which particular centers the various Nigerian peoples originated from.

The founding stories of the many chiefdoms vary from community to community throughout Esanland. However, the fact that they have their roots in legends and storied traditions cannot be disputed. Esan's Egoro, Okpoji, Ewu, Uromi, and Ewohimi peoples all have heavenly origins. Oral traditions in certain countries claim that their founders came from the earth's crust, whereas in other areas, it is claimed that their founders dropped from the sky. The Oba of Benin reportedly took the Esan ancestor to Benin and gave him a bride and followers (perhaps in an effort to establish Benin's suzerainty over him) before sending him back to Esanland with a new title, Onojie, according to R.E. Bradbury.³ The highly popularized Benin-centric narrative of Esan origin was made possible by the forefathers of the Esans' conquest and dominance of Benin. Jacob U. Egharevba and Christopher G. Okojie, who championed this school of thought in their landmark work "A Short History of Benin" and "Esan Native Laws and Custom with Ethnographic Studies of the Esan People," respectively, are key proponents of the Benin-centric tradition of Esan origin.

THE ESAN-FUA TRADITION

The Esan-fua story maintains that the Esan people may be traced back to the fourteenth century, when they left Benin under the rule of Oba Ewuare in order to defend their freedom and human rights and as a protest against the oppressive laws of Benin. In order to support the Esan-fua school of thought, Okojie emphasized the linguistic similarity between the Esan language and customs and those of the Bini people. The pre-colonial Nigerian Esan secession from Benin, which led to the demographic and geographic separation of Esan from Benin as it is now, was caused by the avarice of the Benin dynasty under Oba Ewuare. On the same day, Oba Ewuare lost both Ezuwarha, his second son and the chief of Iyowa, and Kuoboyuwa, his first son and the Edaiken of Uselu.⁴ The tragic incident made the King sorrowful and led the grieving king to pass, at best, draconian laws throughout his kingdom. He established a three (3) year period of mandatory mourning for all of his subjects. He forbade the following actions among his subjects throughout this period of mourning:

1. Interacting sexually with their wives
2. cleaning their homes or compounds and sweeping
3. Lighting a fire and consuming prepared food.

The ancestors of Esanland therefore fled Benin into the Bush (forests), where they established their own autonomous communities, thus first creating Irrua, to avoid the

impending starvation and pestilence that threaten to strike Benin as a result of the consumption of uncooked meals and poor hygiene. However, before the entire Esan population left Benin, their forefathers used to travel for kilometres through the bush to prepare their food, dine in secrecy, and then travel back to Benin City. But when they (the forefathers of Esanland) had enough of this, they (along with others whose women were already pregnant and wanted to avoid the painful repercussions) permanently left Benin.⁵

In due course, Honest Uwague, a Benin official, informed Oba Ewuare that his subjects were escaping the city and that the majority of the residences were now empty. Oba Ewuare sent his stalwarts to the affected quarters to gather their own information on the residents, skeptical of the veracity of the report and knowing that his subjects would not dare disobey him. The few remaining locals informed the King's emissaries that "Esan fua"—which means they have fled away—was what they had been told when they inquired about the location of the people in the impacted areas. Scholars say that the Esan people's name, which was later anglicized by the British as Ishan, was derived from this remark.⁶

THE IJIESAN LEGEND

The second branch of the Esan-derived Benin-centric tradition is the Ijiesan legend. Oral history relates that Prince Ijiesan had a repugnant sexual relationship with Queen Ekpen, one of the wives of a very powerful Oba of Benin and that the Esan people are the progeny of this relationship. As a result, the King had him seized, imprisoned, and

ready for his death. It was said that the Queen, who opposed Ijiesan receiving the death penalty for his crime, used her mystical abilities to rescue him from jail. According to legend, Queen Ekpen took her "azuwa" (hair clip) out of her hair and ordered her to change into a rabbit.⁷ The azuwa changed into 201 rabbits after that, and under the cover of night, they built a lengthy subterranean passageway from the back of the prison wall to Ijiesan's cell. This tunnel was used by Prince Ijiesan to break out of jail and elope with the Queen during the night. The Oba of Benin dispatched a search party to find Ijiesan, dead or alive, after learning of the prisoner's escape before dawn. At Oregbeme, where they planned to put Ijiesan to death, the search party caught up with the fugitives.

The Queen, however, once more came to his aid. She utilized her mystical abilities to put a spell on the palace guards, telling them to go back to the King and inform him that, while they had caught up with the fleeing party, Ijiesan had leaped into a bush and fled just as they were about to kill him. As a result, when the search party arrived back at the palace, they followed directions. The King was informed by Prince Ijiesan and the Queen that they had "Esan fua," or fled by leaping into a bush.⁸

They proceeded farther into the forest in search of a settlement before arriving at Ehor. But because the area was too close to Benin, as noted by Ijiesan, they had to abandon Ehor and move further into the jungle. Ijiesan also claimed that if he lived in Ehor, the Oba of Benin would be able to learn about his activities because of the area's close proximity to Benin. This is what inspired him to give the location the name "Ehor,"

which is Hebrew for "they will hear." They kept moving forward until they arrived at a location in the bush where, according to legend, tigers had gathered to greet and welcome Ijiesan and the Queen by waving their tails at them. The migrants responded by playing with the tigers and massaging the tigers' heads. Ijiesan gave the location the name "Iruokpen," which means "where tigers gathered," as a result. They moved on from Iruokpen till they arrived at a location called Ekpoma beside the Ijiesan. Because he thought that they were suddenly free people and no longer Benin's slaves at that point. He claims that as a result, they will no longer be producing or harvesting for Benin but rather for themselves. By calling the location "Ekpoma," which means "for our own pocket," he makes this extremely apparent.⁹

Ijiesan traveled further up from Ekpoma until they reached Irrua. Prince Ijiesan and the Queen made their permanent abode in Irrua. Ijiesan, who spoke Esan, erected his home at Irrua under a "big tree" and declared, "Here I build my house," which translates to "Irrua" in English. This name has stuck ever since. Prince Ijiesan afterwards succeeded as the first Onojie of Irrua. From Irrua, it's thought that Ijiesan extended the boundaries of Esanland to Egbehi, where his wife gave birth to their first child, and from Egbehi to Uromi, where he asserted his ownership of the entire region by stating, "Urhomen nan khin," which means he can move wherever he pleases. As a result, the location became known as Uromi. But as soon as the Oba of Benin learned Ijiesan's position, he sent his men to apprehend him. However, after locating Ijiesan, he employed mystical abilities to cast a spell on the Benin warriors, converting them into his disciples and giving them

territory to occupy. As a result, Esan settlements were expanded by Benin army construction. According to reports, Benin warriors founded Ubiaja, Igueben, and Ewohimi. Up till the current number, successively new Esan settlements were founded over time.¹⁰

THE BENIN PEOPLE

The Benin Empire, also called the Kingdom of Benin, the Edo Kingdom, or simply Benin, was a monarchy that ruled over what is now southern Nigeria. The contemporary republic of Benin, which was known as Dahomey from the 17th century until 1975, has no historical ties to it. Edo, in present-day Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria, served as the capital of the Kingdom of Benin. In the coastal hinterland of West Africa, the Benin Kingdom was "one of the oldest and most developed states." It sprang from the former Edo Kingdom of Igodomigodo and flourished until the British Empire seized it in 1897.¹¹

According to Edo legend, Benin is where the world originated. Edo orisiagbon, which translates as "Edo is the cradle of the world," is a Benin tradition. Because the Oba of Benin (King of Benin) possesses the land as a gift from God Almighty, it is thought that Edoland was where all other people first began their lives. This might be inferred from the fact that their kings are Benin natives. The Edo mythology continues, saying that when God was creating, he made many kings who were appointed from heaven to rule or administer the earth, but before the kings descended to this world, the Almighty

God asked them to choose which gift they wanted God to bestow upon them. A bird by the name of Owonwon advised the King of Benin to choose what was inside the snail shell (Ze mwin no r'ughughon) as he was about to make his decision. Some chose money, while others chose material possessions¹². After the bird repeated these remarks multiple times, the King (Oba) ultimately decided to take the snail shell (Ughughon), which contained sand. The king of Benin is said to have created land wherever he went, making him the owner of land all the way up to Europe, or as the Edo say, "Oba yan oto se Evbuebo." The late Oba of Benin, the Omo N'Oba Uku Akpolopo, Erediauwa I, stated the following in a lecture titled, "The Evolution of Traditional Rulership in Nigeria," which he gave at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, on September 11, 1984.

There were 31 of these Ogiso monarchs, and their reign lasted for about a thousand years before an interregnum allowed for the appointment of two republican rulers in Evian and Ogamien prior to the arrival of Oranmiyan. When translated into Edo, the name Ogiso's expanded form, Ogie-Iso, means "King from Heaven" or "King of the Sky." Ogie means "king," while Iso means "sky" or "Heaven." As a result, the Edo people hold the belief that God, Heaven, or their kings come from the sky. This notion explains why the Oba is seen as the personification of the Edo people's culture. It is impossible to tell the story of the people without mentioning their king or Oba.¹³

ENDNOTES

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2. Ibid.
3. R.E Bradbury, *The Benin Kingdom and the Edo-Speaking Peoples of South-Western Nigeria* London: Hassell Stress Press, 1957, p.69.
4. A.I Okoduwa, *Harnessing the Origin and Economic History of Esanland: A Dialysis for Autarky in Nigeria*, Benin City: Independent Concept, 2018, pp.100-101.
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6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. S.O Ehiabhi, Ilobekemhen Folktale as a Source of Historical Data on Esan Women, *The Nigerian Journal of Economic History*, 16, 2017, 34-36.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Interview with Elder Emmanuel Okunbor, 86 years old, Farmer, Benin City, August 10th, 2023.
12. Ibid.
13. E. B Eweka, *Evolution of Benin Chieftaincy Titles*, Uniben Press: Benin City, Edo State, 1972, p.2.

CHAPTER THREE

SOCIO-POLITICAL RELATIONS BETWEEN THE BENIN AND ESAN PEOPLE

Strong cultural linkages between Esan and Benin are attested to by the political institutions and governance of the time. The idea of the monarchy and other chieftaincy institutions is shared by both peoples, with Bini being the result of subsequent imperialistic incursions into the Esan nation. Additionally, the pre-colonial bilateral transfer of ideas between the two peoples is supported by the similarities in court and ceremonial rites, names, and symbols linked with political rulership. Esanland may have developed a centralized system of administration, but Benin had a significant influence on it, particularly through the Oba's selection of the first Esau Enijie, king. The relevance of the ada and eben, symbols of authority in the political histories of both peoples, as well as the emblems of office of both Esan and Benin, are significant. Since Benin is where history places the notion, it is important to remember Esan thinking that the office sign is foreign to Esan. Ironworkers from Igueben were able to produce the ada and eben to such an advanced level that they were able to supply the Oba with the items in succeeding years. In both Esan and Benin, the leader of the iron workers, known as the Okaigun, served comparable social and political roles. Chieftaincy titles like the Oliha, Lyase, Ezomo, Edohen, Olofon, Uwangue, Ero, Isekhure, and others that were in Benin were also present in Esan. Many of these titles in Esan were not inherited, and the rank order

occasionally changed to match the political climate in Esan. In any event, the Oniha in Esan was roughly next to the king, much like the Oliha in Benin. During burials and the installation of the Esan Onojie, or Oba of Benin, he carried out ritual and ceremonial duties. Like his counterpart in Benin, the Iyasele in Esan advocated for and defended the rights of the underclass in society.¹

The payment that the various Onojie were required to pay to the Oba of Benin was another significant link between Esan and Benin. This needed to be organized in each Onojie's chiefdom. The tributes were given in a variety of ways, including cash gifts, labour, and military services. Every male adult was required to contribute in some capacity. Every male was required to send a bundle of yams to the Onojie of his chiefdom if the tribute was paid annually. For this purpose, some send livestock and palm oil to their Onojie. Part of this was kept by the Onojie, while the rest was sent to the Oba through the chiefdom's middleman in Benin. The Oba occasionally asked for labor assistance. In such a situation, middle-aged young men were dispatched to assist the Oba in his task. The same applied to military services; all members of the middle-aged, physically fit group participated. The Esan people were, in actuality, always at war when the Oba was. For instance, in 1818, the Onojie of Uronmon, Uromi, dispatched troops to support the Oba in a conflict with Akure. The Oba gave the Onojie of Uromi the exclusive right to inherit any chiefdom member's property who passed away without issue as payment for sending soldiers to aid in this fight. Before the British colonists

overthrew the kingdom in 1897, the Oba received such offerings and services. Additionally, the village, along with the Edion council, served as the fundamental unit of government in both locations. The oldest man, known as Odionwere or Odionwele, presided over the council in Esan and Benin, respectively. Esan and Benin societies both used dualism in the way that sociopolitical life was organized. Benin had both a central government and a government at the village level. This dichotomy was particularly pronounced in Esan since the native village organization was forced under a derived rulership system.²

It is only in the scale and the individuals that might be involved on the side of Benin that one might identify differences. The numerous traditions and practices of both the Benin and Esan communities stay the same in both worship and celebration. These are not implausible explanations. When compared to expectations in Esan, any of these rituals in Benin tend to draw more people and resources. Esan is only a small state within the Benin monarchy, although Benin City continues to be the location of the royal family and the government. However, neither the tradition nor the custom is omitted in full. Any group's religion will reflect the traditions that make up that group. The Benin believe that God is the universe's ultimate creator. They also held the view that God possesses angels, demons, and other divine beings who serve as His ministers, agents, and messengers and assist God in running the cosmos on a daily basis. They have been taken to their various offices or ministries by him. But in any clearly defined geographical boundary, the

authority of the divinities is constrained and completely subordinated to the authority of God the creator himself. These deities are known by various names, including Ohonmila, the god of divination, Olokun, the god and goddess of high water, Ogun, the deity of iron, and Osun, the god of sorcery. Because the Benin people believe they were created by God, they understand their dependence on God and other spiritual beings who are more advanced than they are.³ Actions specifically oriented toward God and other spiritual creatures in whatever context constitute worship to them, and more so to the Esan. The actions, which include prayers, hymns, rituals, and sacrifices, are intended to reestablish communication between God and man as well as between the visible and invisible worlds. The Bun has the view that worshipping certain natural phenomena leads to harmony between them and God. They, therefore, find merit in worshipping things like rivers, stones, streams, the sky, trees, rain, and the sun, among others. In Benin and among the Esan people, these religious convictions and subsequent worship have the same dimensions; any slight variations shouldn't be more significant. Religious practice in Benin is frequently more elaborate, whereas Esan migrants typically practice less elaborate religion, which is reflected in the worship materials. For instance, the Oba has the exclusive authority to offer human sacrifices to the gods in order to placate them when it rains excessively or when it refuses to fall when it should. When a grave offence is committed against the gods of the land, the Oba can also make offerings of human sacrifice to the numerous deities.⁴ In Esanland, no ruler has this authority. The main

causes were attributed to population growth and an abundance of unusual and large animals wandering the expansive forest of Esan.

The time of state mourning is another feature that ties Esan traditions to those of Benin. In this way, their relationship is similar to that of a father and his children living abroad. Male Bini who are both at home and abroad all shave their hair as an expression of sadness. Esan adds to this custom by dressing in all-black at the time of mourning. When the kingdom suffers a catastrophe, there is a state of mourning. This could happen if the Oba loses a child, as happened to Oba Ewuare (1442–1473). State mourning is also announced if an Oba joins his ancestors. On the Bini's, such grieving can occasionally grow so severe or prolonged that sanctuary is typically sought in a near neighbour. The sociopolitical relationship extended beyond what we have so far studied and included the provision of a safe haven for the populace.⁵ The Benin-Idah War in 1515–1516 was the catalyst for this, which led to a mass exodus from the conflict area. As a result, there was an upsurge in the Esan region, particularly among immigrants from the Benin towns close to Esanland. Settlements in Igalaland were also driven further south by the battle, particularly those around the well-watered Illushi, Ebu, Oria, Ugboha, and Uzea regions. According to oral histories, the development of the Benin-Iwogun group, which is now settled in various areas of Esan, is the result of this drive from the Beriin and Igala kingdoms. Due to the introduction of ruminants from the expanding and politically turbulent country that had sought refuge among the hospitable Ishan people because of an

abundance of natural resources, the few scattered settlements on the northeastern border of the Benin kingdom started to exhibit some degree of heterogeneity. The Uzebu, Ovia, and Ogan clans were created as a result of intermarriages between these people, particularly the Benin soldiers and the Ishan women. Esanland served as a home for descendants as well as a haven for criminals who opposed the Oba and other people who were unhappy with the Benin kingdom's government.⁶

The relationship between Benin and European countries began in the second half of the fifteenth century. This dates back to the Portuguese invasion in 1485. By the second part of the 17th century, Portuguese influence in West Africa was generally waning. Prior to this, by the middle of the 16th century, the Portuguese were dealing with relentless French encroachment and piracy. The French challenge began to wane in the 1570s, and by the end of the century, the Dutch were launching a more significant assault. In search of slaves and later raw materials, the ultimate conquerors of Benin, the English, and the Esan arrived in West Africa last. These Benin-European relations were generally recognized as being related to trade, and attempts to satisfy these demands led to significant resource exploitation in Esanland because the Benins were unable to satisfy European wants and market European products. People's mobility increased as a result of the rise of the commerce in palm oil and other items. Trade centers in Europe saw a higher influx of traders and their agents into the hinterland. To guarantee consistent supplies of palm oil, kernels, and other items, new kinds of ties between Esan and Benin

were created. Due to intense competition among the traders, each one made a valiant effort to gain the respect of the hinterland producers. From Benin, Aboh, Asaba, and the Igala area on the Niger, traders and their operatives infiltrated the Esan hinterland.⁷ The population moved in a direction that was not random. In order to interact directly with the traders, the interior makers likewise relocated to the commercial hubs of Europe. Non-palm oil producers also flocked to the activity hubs of Benin, Uromi, Agbor, Onitsha, and Asaba to take advantage of the expanding prospects. The economic importance of the centers and gateways grew over time. For instance, Benin's economy grew to the point where the nearby hinterland towns were affected by whatever occurred to it. As a result, in 1897, the Esan warriors and some other people in the hinterland wanted to band together to defend Benin against the British invaders. Esanland gave those who opposed the British government shelter and protection during the height of Benin's rebellion against the British forces. Along with using troops, the British invaders also used Maxim guns, shells, and rockets for this reason. With these, they were able to demolish homes, crops, and cattle while also fining the inhabitants of Benin and Esan severely.⁸

After the conquest of the British over the Benin kingdom in 1897, there were a number of changes that followed in the sociopolitical relation between the Benin and Esan people. The construction of economic infrastructures including highways, bridges, and maternity hospitals was the first of the colonial buildings. Road building appears to be the first facility to which the colonial authorities paid substantial attention in Benin

and Esan. These are not implausible explanations. In the first place, its growth was largely dependent on the exploitation of manual labour from the neighbourhood. The process of integrating Benin-Esan into the developing political economy under colonial control was completed by the building of roads along with the construction of bridges, with a number of important ramifications for their relationships with their neighbours. In this regard, it may be stated that the establishment of the Esan Division and Benin Province strengthened the intergroup interactions between Esan and Benin. But as one scholar accurately argues, this was the factor that underpinned their political and ethnic awareness both at the time and after the nation-state's independence. A turning point in the development of Benin-Esan political and tribal identity was the creation of Benin Province and Esan Division. Both people became aware of their shared sociopolitical affinities and cultural, linguistic, and backgrounds as a result of the union. Additionally, by connecting Benin and Esan areas to those in the East, West, and Middle Belt, the construction of highways contributed to their opening up to the outside world. As a result, there was an increase in the flow of commodities, services, and ideas between Benin and Esan as well as between them and their neighbours. In addition, long voyages were now easier, safer, and more appealing than they had been prior to the conquest by Benin and the establishment of colonial control. This inspired Benin-Esan traders to overcome the constraints of their location by travelling to far-off markets for business with relative ease.⁹

In addition to numerous other Nigerian ethnic groups visiting the area and interacting with the population on an economic and social level, the Benin and Esan neighbors who had previously shared common boundaries began to progressively cross them. As a result, Igala and Nupe traders entered the Esan community while some Benin-Esan migrants and traders poured into Yorubaland, Hausaland, Onitsha, Lagos, and Warri. Additionally, Benin-Esan discovered themselves dealing with individuals they had never expected to meet, particularly those from the far north, primarily the Fulani, Arabs, and Gbagyi. The Benin-Esan were able to neither affect nor control the reality of intergroup relations under colonialism, thus this is how they learned to accept it. The flow of these ethnic groups into Benin and Esan regions, where they established and began a new life through intermarriage, the practice of crafts, and industries that were not yet common in their new homes, was another significant aspect of this evolution. However, this quick growth was to cause significant conflict between some Esan and Benin people, which presented a challenge for the colonial rulers. The point we are attempting to convey is that the growth of economic infrastructures changes a lot of cross-cultural and other exchanges that affect the people's perspective of each other in addition to increasing the scope of contact between interacting groups. This was especially pronounced in the commercial realm. Most Benin and Esan, however, don't seem to be at ease with these 'foreign' ethnic groups' entrepreneurial prowess, which seemed to have taken over their province and division's commercial and administrative life starting in the 1940s.¹⁰

In another setting, the province's metropolitan centre served as a sort of melting pot for the nation's diverse ethnic groups due to the concentration of social and political infrastructure there. This led to an intriguing development in that political consciousness in Benin and Esanland began in Benin City. This is somewhat predicted given that Benin City's cosmopolitan outlook and urban design fostered settings that tended to promote not only new social relationships and more social contact opportunities but also many conflicting value systems and social situations. For instance, as the ethnic groups of Esan and other immigrants grew more numerous in Benin City, so did the demand for social and economic amenities. The ground was already prepared for an outbreak of open hostility between Benin and these groups, especially the Esan who were then accused of being overly pushy, given the overall austerity atmosphere of the colonial political economy. By subjecting them to the whims of the global capitalist economic system on the one hand and making them exposed to the predatory practices of local capitalists on the other, the economic crisis of the 1930s worsened the misery of the Benin-Esan peasants.¹¹ Many immigrants diversified into active farming in an effort to combat the economic difficulties of the depression. With this decision, they entered into direct rivalry with the Benin and Esan farmers who had hitherto been the immigrant population's only sources of food. Over time, this condition resulted in numerous disagreements and intense rivalry between the inhabitants of Benin and Esan. However, the imposition of taxation through threat and compulsion, the adoption of a common currency, the entrenchment of the capitalist concept of profit motivation, and other changes to Benin-

Esan relations were also brought about by the conquering of the Benin kingdom. The people were forced to resort to numerous forms of dishonesty and unconventional means of life in order to survive the new economic system. Several lawsuits involving the Esan and Benin people were heard in courtrooms before the end of the colonial era. These unconventional strategies for profit-making went beyond independence.¹²

The research makes an effort to examine intergroup relationships between the Esan and Benin, who both live in the southern region of the county, as well as how the natural environment influences intergroup connections. Even though they live in the same region, the differences in the two people's inherent makeup stimulated their relationship and served as the foundation for the solid and virulent bond that has remained between them to this day. For instance, the Benin market continues to be essential in bringing people together to trade various goods, while the Esan Forest continues to draw the majority of Benin hunters and farmers for both hunting and farming.¹³

ENDNOTES

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2. Ibid.
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4. S.N. Monday, “*The Pre-Colonial Political Organization of Benin Kingdom c1500 — 1800AD*” M.A. Thesis, University of Part Harcourt, 2001, p. 53.
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6. R.N. Okojie, *Trade and Politics in the Bright of Benin, 1890-1914*, Oxford Press, 1956 pp. 150.
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12. Interview with Mrs. Eunice Itohan, 78 years old, Trader, Benin City, August 13th, 2023.
13. Ibid.

CHAPTER FOUR

ECONOMIC RELATIONS BETWEEN THE BENIN AND ESAN PEOPLE

Through business dealings, the bond between Benin and Esan was further consolidated. Along with Ekuman, the border town of Ehor between Esan and Benin, and Ekpoma in Esanland, acting as a blending pot. Although academics believe that this trade, particularly in food crops, has existed since ancient times, the height of this relationship was between the 18th and the first decade of the 20th century. The West bank of the River Niger's market at Oria (Egga-Oria) became a very important center of exchange, bringing together people of different origins, primarily Bini long-distance traders and the Igallas, according to North Cote and Ukwedeh, who wrote between the late 16th and early 19th centuries. The nature of the economic ties took on diverse shapes and had varied connotations for Benin and Esan.¹ In Bini's eyes, Esan's region might be exploited economically. For them, Esan land was a source of wealth and a location where they could get inexpensive supplies of items for their domestic markets. When the Benins came into contact with the Portuguese and other Europeans in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, this desire increased. Benin was a location where the Esan people could purchase expensive items like cloth, jewellery, and salt. It served as a venue for selling their woven goods, particularly Ukpon Ododo, which was in high demand both domestically and abroad in Benin.²

Prior to 1897, certain groups of individuals had very limited mobility unless under the protection and consent of the Oba. A group of warriors who coordinated trade from Esan exploited criminals as slaves to transport palm oil and other goods to Benin for sale. Before 1897, long-distance trade between the two peoples was carried out by a caravan of traders known as the Ekhen-Oria that travelled through a large portion of the Esan nation and was organized to overcome the challenges of travelling between Esan and Benin and vice versa. They travelled up to Oria. Their modest depot, which is close to Igueben, is still known as Ekehken, traders' rest camp. The Oba's trade with the Esan people served as a further pillar of economic engagement between Benin and the Esans prior to 1897, which was encouraged by geographical characteristics. Trade with the Esan people under the Oba was distinct from other forms of trade. For instance, the Oba required at least 200 of each type of livestock while performing any burial ceremony, including goats, dogs, rams, cows, and birds. Another instance was when foreign dealers were more interested in a particular commodity. This was true when elephant tusks and palm oil were traded. The Oba sets pricing in all of these business dealings and occasionally compels others to sell to him. No one was supposed to complain about these prices, which were known as Oba's pricing. In Esan, the king kept the tusks from any elephant that killed an Onojie, and in exchange, he gave the hunter a title or other rewards. The Obas of Benin received one of these tusks from the Onojie as a form of tribute, and the Oba purchased the second at a price set by the two kings. The trade-in palm oil was similar to this. In the name of the Oba, the Enijie rulers were forced to buy palm oil, which a caravan of young men was

then ordered to transport to Beam. The Oba occasionally set his own pricing that was significantly less expensive than those set by the market.³

Long-distance trade also existed, as seen by the caravan of Benin and Esan traders entering the Esan nation, with Ehor serving as the main hub/terminus. This association's beginnings were tied to the prevailing unease of the time and the immeasurable hazards entailed in a lone trader's endeavour to go for large distances into other nations. The only way to ensure safety on long-distance roads was to arrange group trips through these organisations. The majority of these organizations had the Oba's approval, which was essential for their exclusive police. These organizations set the rates for their goods collectively, and non-members were not permitted to conduct business along the routes of the association that was supported by the Oba. These traders barter animals, leather, ivory, and fabric, as well as some other enduring valuables, for salt, guns, beads, chains, and necklaces made of brass. In exchange for livestock and other goods the Esan purchased from the Igala people, the people of Benin also bought dried fish, yams, and woven mats in the Oria and Ehor markets during this time. Aside from perishable goods, the Ukpon-Ododo or textiles produced by the Esan industry was a major source of income for the people of Benin. Most of the other agricultural products that were harvested were also traded. The commerce in yams was the most important. The various yam varieties that they dealt in allowed both the Benin and Esan farmers as well as the reigning dynasties to amass considerable wealth. For instance, according to colonial records, the northern region of Oto-Esan and the Benin kingdom exchanged 156,888 agricultural yams at the

beginning of the 20th century, amounting to an estimated £82,042 in total.⁴ It is also known that the two regions grew more than forty different types of yams, with the Asukhu, Ikpein, and Obhie (also known as the water yam) among the Esan and Benin people being the most well-known. By the end of the 19th century, academics generally agreed that Bini and Oto-Esan were both agriculturally prosperous nations, with yams, corn or maize, coco-yam, cassava, and various types of beans as well as pepper, groundnuts, melons, and bananas with plantains serving as the principal food crops. Esan was also credited with introducing cowries as a form of exchange to some regions of Igalaland, Nupeland, and Yorubaland in addition to exchanging agricultural products and trade materials made locally by Esan textile manufacture from cotton and Ikpowolu, which was grown by Esan farmers and traded in Egga market at Illushi and Ehor. Even the Benin who had first encounter the medium of exchange were outdone by the Esan people who had acquired it from Benin (following its importation from the Indian Ocean and Sao Tome trade in 1515). For instance, in addition to being a means of exchange, it was also employed as a tool for divination, decorating, and status-symbolizing body adornment.⁵

The success of trade between communities at the time depended on long-distance trading. There was also no conflict in trade and business, which contributed to peace and goodwill among the various communities. This made it easier to establish a number of markets in nearby countries. Before the arrival of the Europeans, the Esan people had established a wonderful cotton industry that gave rise to the well-known Esan Ukpon

Ododo. A large quantity of these products was exported from Esan land to locations like Benin and Agbor. One of the earliest goods of international trade between Benin and Portugal were the ododo-dyed red clothing items associated with the Benin royal court, which were originally provided by Esan manufacturers. In pre-colonial colonial Esan country, women dominated local industries that produced cloth.⁶ In Benin, these cotton components were traded for salt, iron tools, and beads. Additionally, people moved from one village to another in pursuit of better food, living conditions, and other factors. It is crucial that we realize that this is not a recent development; in fact, evidence suggests that the first Ojieogun (blacksmith) may have moved from Benin to Esanland when their services were required by other cultures. They established guilds, and apprenticeships started to prevail. Their assistance was much appreciated by many Esan sons and daughters. An example of this was the blacksmith industry that developed in the Uromi settlement of Ewoyoma, where the Uromi princes were taught the craft. These aided individuals schooled in starting their own local businesses where they created farm tools like hoes, cutlasses, etc. for both domestic and commercial usage. Pepper (capsicum), known in Esan as ASIN, was another product traded between Esan and Benin. Particularly during the external commerce between Benin and the Portuguese, it was a significant source of trade.⁷ Indian pepper was widely replaced after the discovery of the Esan pepper, subsequently known as the Benin pepper. The trade-in of ivory took place at about the same time. The ivory trade established the foundation of the Benin economy around 1486. This resource was mostly supplied to Benin by the Esan tribe. Ivory tusks

developed became a significant trade well and were included in the Enijies' yearly tribute payments to the Oba of Benin, who then sold them to Portuguese traders. Onojie (king) Agba of Uromi's reign saw the rise of merchant princes as a result of commerce with Benin. The Uromi princes established a number of wards as a result of the trade's thriving nature. For instance, Ujiagbedion, a renowned affluent prince, kept his ward in Ukoni. Similar to Iyere and Ogor, other princes had trading connections that extended over Esanland to Agbede, Ora, Abudu, and Benin.³ In pre-colonial Benin, craft and industry were significant economic drivers of cross-border commerce. Benin natives were divided into professional and craft groups that provided the Oba's palace with specific goods in exchange for the Oba's exclusive rights in their various trades and activities. As a result, Benin developed into a bustling center of economic activity that gradually grew to meet the challenges presented by the Igbo, Ika-Agbor, Igala, Nupe, and Afemai people.⁸

It is crucial to realize that the expansion of trade between Benin and Esan caused money to amass quickly and gave rise to a new social elite. Those were the traders with experience. In turn, this caused the people's level of living to change. Exchanges between these communities included agricultural products like yam in addition to basic goods like elephant tusks, gold smiting, and the like. For instance, at the beginning of the 20th century, Esan and Benin traded 156,888 yams. On the banks of the River Niger, Esan communities like Oria near Illushi, also known as Ozigono, and Ekekhen—a market settlement—were frequent stops for traders from Benin. According to legend, Benin and Esan engaged in remarkable trade throughout the 18th century, necessitating the

formation of the Ekhen-ORIA commercial union. The market at Oria (Egga-Oria), on the West bank of the river Niger, became a hub of trading for all types of people from all backgrounds, particularly the Benins, between the late 16th century and the beginning of the 19th century. Ehor in the Benin axis became the main exchange terminal in this commerce. Many people think that Benin, to a large extent, saw the Esan people as a source of wealth and a place where they could engage in trade and find cheap labour, or that these commercial activities reached their pinnacle when the Binis interacted with the Portuguese and other Europeans.⁹

The pre-colonial Esan textile industry was the one that gave the Esan people the most notoriety and propelled their civilisation into the spotlight on a global scale. The Esan people's need for clothes was met by the cotton and fabric business, which also facilitated commerce and cultural contact with the Benin people and elevated Esan women's socioeconomic status in pre-colonial Nigeria. Olulu, also known as Esan cotton, was an indigenous species of cotton that was grown by Esan women on their husbands' farms, typically in the month of May. In December and January following the planting season, dried cotton wool was typically gathered for use in industry. As a result, women controlled the Esan textile sector throughout the pre-colonial era. Women handled all aspects of cotton production, including planting, harvesting, weaving, and marketing as well as selling the finished clothing. The industry gave Esan women more authority and put them in a position to help Esanland's socioeconomic progress. The women created a variety of Esan cloths, including the Ukponododo, a thick, multicoloured cloth; the

Ukponasiso, a workcloth or farmer's bag; the Ukponagbo, a regular wrapper; and the Ukponnogian, a scarlet cloth woven for rituals. The cotton and fabric industries encouraged trade and interchange in addition to providing garments for the Esan people. Esan fabric did, in fact, fill the need for Esan textiles in foreign markets and was traded for other necessities made outside of Esanland in barter commerce with the local Esan neighbours and beyond. Additionally, the sector produced cotton seeds, which were utilized locally to make herbal treatments and boil soup. Outside Esan, the textile industry contributed to and maintained a portion of the pre-colonial Benin economy.¹⁰ Because of this, Benin traders ventured into the hinterlands in search of cloths, which greatly boosted Benin-European economic relations and encouraged consistency in trade, which eventually led to the emergence of the credit and trust system between Benin and European traders. Esanland was one of the hinterlands where Benin might find clothing during this time.

It is also asserted that commercial interactions have further solidified the relationship between Benin and Esan. Ehor, a border town between Esan and Benin, Ekpoma in Esanland, and Ekuman serve as the melting pot. Although academics believe that this trade, particularly in food crops, has existed since ancient times, the height of this relationship was between the 18th and the first decade of the 20th century. The nature of the economic ties took on diverse shapes and had varied connotations for Benin and Esan. The Esan region was seen as a potential source of economic exploitation by the Bini. For them, Esan land was a source of wealth and a location where they could get

inexpensive supplies of items for their domestic markets. When the Benins came into contact with the Portuguese and other Europeans in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, this desire increased. Benin was a location where the Esan people could purchase expensive items like cloth, jewellery, and salt. It served as a venue for selling their woven goods, particularly Ukpon Ododo, which the ruling elite of Benin strongly desired and exported. Prior to 1897, certain groups of individuals had very limited mobility unless under the protection and consent of the Oba. A group of warriors who coordinated trade from Esan exploited criminals as slaves to transport palm oil and other goods to Benin for sale. Before 1897, long-distance trade between the two peoples was carried out by a caravan of traders known as the Ekhen-Oria that travelled through a large portion of the Esan nation and was organized to overcome the challenges of travelling between Esan and Benin and vice versa. They travelled up to Oria. Their modest depot, which is close to Igueben, is still known as Ekehken, traders' rest camp. The Oba's trade with the Esan people served as a further pillar of economic engagement between Benin and the Esans prior to 1897, which was encouraged by geographical characteristics. Trade with the Esan people under the Oba was distinct from other forms of trade. For instance, the Oba required at least 200 of each type of livestock while performing any burial ceremony, including goats, dogs, rams, cows, and birds. Another instance was when foreign dealers were more interested in a particular commodity.¹¹ This was true when elephant tusks and palm oil were traded. The Oba sets pricing in all of these business dealings and occasionally compels others to sell to him. No one was supposed to complain about these

prices, known as Oba's pricing. In Esan, the king kept the tusks from any elephant that killed an Onojie, and in exchange, he gave the hunter a title or other rewards. The Obas of Benin received one of these tusks from the Onojie as a form of tribute, and the Oba purchased the second at a price set by the two kings. The trade-in palm oil was similar to this. In the name of the Oba, the Enijie rulers were forced to buy palm oil, which a caravan of young men was then ordered to transport to Beam. The Oba occasionally set his own pricing that was significantly less expensive than the going rate in the market.

The relationship between Benin and European countries began in the second half of the fifteenth century. This dates back to the Portuguese invasion in 1485. By the second part of the 17th century, Portuguese influence in West Africa was generally waning. Prior to this, by the middle of the 16th century, the Portuguese were dealing with relentless French encroachment and piracy. The French challenge began to wane in the 1570s, and by the end of the century, the Dutch were launching a more significant assault. In search of slaves and later raw materials, the ultimate conquerors of Benin, the English, and the Esan arrived in West Africa last. These Benin-European relations were generally recognized as being related to trade, and attempts to satisfy these demands led to significant resource exploitation in Esanland because the Benin people were unable to satisfy European wants and market European products. People's mobility increased as a result of the rise of commerce in palm oil and other items. Trade centers in Europe saw a higher influx of traders and their agents into the hinterland.¹² To guarantee consistent supplies of palm oil, kernels, and other items, new kinds of ties between Esan and Benin

were created. Due to intense competition among the traders, each one made a valiant effort to gain the respect of the hinterland producers. From Benin, Aboh, Asaba, and the Igala area on the Niger, traders and their operatives infiltrated the Esan hinterland. The population did not move in an arbitrary fashion. In order to interact directly with the traders, the interior makers likewise relocated to the commercial hubs of Europe. Non-palm oil producers also flocked to the activity hubs of Benin, Uromi, Agbor, Onitsha, and Asaba to take advantage of the expanding prospects. The economic importance of the centers and gateways grew over time. For instance, Benin's economy grew to the point where whatever happened there also affected the nearby towns in the hinterland. As a result, in 1897, the Esan warriors and others in the hinterland wished to band together to defend Benin against the British invaders. Esanland gave those who opposed the British government shelter and protection during the height of Benin's rebellion against the British forces. Along with using troops, the British invaders also used Maxim guns, shells, and rockets for this reason. With these, they were able to demolish homes, crops, and cattle while also fining the inhabitants of Benin and Esan severely. The people continued to rely on one another even up until the 1930s and beyond for survival, despite the fact that colonialism and colonial actions tried to disrupt this inter-group relationship that was strongly influenced by geographical circumstances. Since not all of Oto-Esan had rivers or was situated near rivers, except for Ozigono, Ugboha, and Amaru, a fishing and trading village on the Alegbeta creek that was founded from Ugboha, fishing was done in 1960 as a subsidiary economic activity to meet up with the growing demand of the

Benins and some other neighbours. The Esan fisherman relied on a hook, Uwo, for small-scale fishing, or a fishing net, Igan, depending on the river or stream's depth, to do this. The materials required for this purpose were obtained from the locals (now in Delta state) through traders from Benin because they were not skilled fishers.¹³ Additionally, they assisted in the provision of canoes and other forms of transportation for the Esan people to engage in trade with the Igala and Aboh people in the interior from the riverside.

Conclusively, the trading activities between the Benin Kingdom and the Esan people were characterized by the exchange of various goods and commodities. Some of the notable traded items included:

Agricultural Products: The Esan people were skilled farmers, cultivating crops like yams, cassava, oil palm, and various vegetables. These agricultural products were often exchanged with the Benin Kingdom for other goods.

Craftsmanship and Artifacts: The Esan people were known for their craftsmanship, producing items such as textiles, pottery, woodcarvings, and metalwork. These artifacts were highly valued and sought after by the Benin Kingdom, which had a rich tradition of art and craftsmanship as well.

Minerals and Resources: The region inhabited by the Esan people had access to various mineral resources, such as iron ore, which could be traded with the Benin Kingdom for tools, weapons, and other metal products.

Ivory and Precious Materials: Both the Benin Kingdom and the Esan people had access to ivory, which was a highly prized material for artistic and utilitarian purposes. Ivory carvings and other luxury items were traded between the two societies.¹⁴

Salt and other Commodities: Salt was a valuable commodity that was traded across the region. The Benin Kingdom, located to the south, had access to coastal salt sources, which it could exchange with the Esan people for other goods.

These trading activities fostered cultural exchange and interaction between the Benin Kingdom and the Esan people. They not only facilitated the exchange of goods but also contributed to the spread of ideas, customs, and technologies between the two societies. Additionally, trade routes connected the Benin Kingdom to other regions, contributing to a broader network of economic and cultural exchanges across West Africa.¹⁵

ENDNOTES

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CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

In the pre-colonial era, the socioeconomic relations between the Benin Kingdom and the Esan people were characterized by a complex interplay of trade, cultural exchange, and political interactions. These interactions contributed to the development of both societies, shaping their economic structures, social hierarchies, and cultural identities. Trade played a crucial role in connecting the Benin Kingdom and the Esan people. The Benin Kingdom, known for its sophisticated metalworking, artwork, and craft industries, engaged in long-distance trade networks that extended into Esan territory. They exchanged their specialized products for valuable resources such as ivory, palm oil, and forest products from the Esan region. This trade not only facilitated economic growth but also fostered cultural exchange and technological diffusion between the two societies.¹

The socioeconomic relations also involved political dynamics. The Benin Kingdom held a significant influence over neighboring regions, including parts of Esan territory. While the Benin Kingdom was more centralized and characterized by a monarchical system, the Esan people had a more decentralized political structure composed of various autonomous clans and villages.² This difference in political organization influenced the nature of their interactions. While the Benin Kingdom sought to establish hegemony and control over neighboring territories, including parts of Esanland, the Esan people often maintained their autonomy and local governance systems.

This resulted in a mix of cooperation, alliance-building, and occasional conflicts between the two entities. The Esan people, though influenced by Benin's cultural and artistic achievements, also retained their distinct identity and cultural practices.³

Socially, the interactions between the Benin Kingdom and the Esan people contributed to the blending of cultural practices and traditions. Language, religious beliefs, and artistic expressions were areas where cultural exchange was particularly prominent. While the Benin Kingdom's royal court and urban centers influenced the Esan elites and rulers, the Esan hinterlands preserved their own cultural heritage and ways of life. Additionally, it's important to recognize the role of these socioeconomic relations in the broader context of West African history. The interactions between the Benin Kingdom and the Esan people were not isolated occurrences but were part of a larger network of trade and cultural exchange that spanned the region. This regional interconnectedness contributed to the development of trade routes, cultural diffusion, and the exchange of ideas, technologies, and innovations.⁴ The economic ties between the Benin Kingdom and the Esan people had a lasting impact on the development of both societies. The resources obtained from the Esan territory, such as palm oil and forest products, likely played a role in sustaining the economic prosperity of the Benin Kingdom. Similarly, the exposure to the advanced craft and metalworking skills of the Benin Kingdom would have influenced the technological development and artistic achievements of the Esan people. The pre-colonial era was also characterized by a dynamic equilibrium of power and influence between the two entities. The Benin Kingdom's attempts to exert control

over parts of Esanland were often met with resistance from the Esan people, who valued their autonomy and local governance. This push-and-pull dynamic reflects the complex negotiations of power and authority that were common throughout pre-colonial Africa.⁵

Furthermore, as we delve deeper into the historical context of the socioeconomic relations between the Benin Kingdom and the Esan people, it's important to recognize the resilience and adaptability of both societies in the face of changing circumstances. The pre-colonial era was not a static period; it witnessed shifts in political alliances, economic strategies, and cultural dynamics. As external influences, such as the transatlantic slave trade and later European colonialism, began to shape the course of African history, the dynamics between the Benin Kingdom and the Esan people underwent a further transformation. The arrival of European traders and later colonizers in the region had a profound impact on the existing socioeconomic relations. The power dynamics between the Benin Kingdom and the Esan people shifted as external actors sought to exploit existing divisions and establish their own control. This marked a turning point in the history of the region, ultimately leading to the colonization of both the Benin Kingdom and the broader territory that included Esanland. The colonial era disrupted the established trade routes and economic networks that had existed between the Benin Kingdom and the Esan people. European powers introduced new economic systems, administrative structures, and cultural influences that significantly altered the socioeconomic landscape. The legacy of colonialism continues to reverberate in the modern societies that emerged from this period.⁶

Conclusively, trade, cultural exchange, and varied degrees of political contact characterized the socioeconomic links between the Benin Kingdom and the Esan people in the pre-colonial era. The economic frameworks, political dynamics, and cultural identities of both nations were influenced by these relationships. The Esan region was impacted by the Benin Kingdom's centralized rule and trade networks, but the Esan people kept their independence and unique cultural practices. These historical contacts are evidence of the complexity and interdependence of pre-colonial African society.

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Elder Emmanuel Okunbor	86	Farmer	Benin City	10/08/2023
Elder Moses Anigboro	77	Farmer	Ekpoma	25/08/2023
Mr. Fred Ikate	90	Farmer	Benin City	20/08/2023
Mrs. Eunice Itohan	78	Trader	Benin City	13/08/2023

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