

EGBAEN AND HER IMMEDIATE NEIGHBORS IN THE PRE-COLONIAL PERIOD

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DEDICATION

The study is dedicated to the almighty God, who saw me through my stay in school, and to my dearly beloved father and mother and my siblings who made everything possible for me throughout the period of my study in the University of Benin.

CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that this project was carried out by **Eghosa Marvelous Agho** in the Department of History and International Studies, University of Benin, Benin City under my supervision

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CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Introduction

Egbaen, a community situated in present-day Edo State, Nigeria, occupies a historically significant, albeit understudied, location. This study aims to investigate the pre-colonial history of Egbaen and its interactions with its neighboring communities, Egor and Okhokhugbo, within the larger context of the Benin Empire's influence. Oral traditions regarding Egbaen's origins vary, with some accounts suggesting migration from the east while others point to a long-standing presence in the region. This research will examine these narratives, alongside linguistic and potential archaeological evidence, to understand the community's early development. Egbaen's political structure likely revolved around a council of elders (possibly termed "Igbimo") and a recognized leader, perhaps an "Odionwere," as observed in similar Edo communities. The influence of kinship ties, age grades, and religious beliefs on social organization will be explored.

Given its location within a fertile region of Edo State, Egbaen's economy was likely grounded in agriculture. Cultivation of staple crops, alongside hunting and craft production, likely formed the basis of their subsistence strategies. This study will investigate the specific goods produced in Egbaen and those traded with neighboring Egor and Okhokhugbo, examining the possibility of a local marketplace that facilitated this exchange.

The nature of Egbaen's relationships with Egor and Okhokhugbo is crucial to understanding its pre-colonial history. Given Egor's proximity to the Benin Empire, it is plausible that it experienced greater integration into Benin's political and economic structures, perhaps influencing its interactions with Egbaen. Okhokhugbo's position, further removed from Benin's direct influence, may have fostered a different dynamic with Egbaen, potentially characterized by greater autonomy or competition for resources. The research will explore evidence of alliances, conflicts, intermarriages, and shared cultural practices between these communities.

The Benin Empire's influence on this region during the pre-colonial era was undeniable. While the extent of its direct control over Egbaen remains unclear, this investigation will examine the potential impact of Benin's political systems, trade networks, and religious practices on Egbaen. Additionally, the community's strategies for navigating the complexities of Benin's influence, including possible tributary relations or forms of resistance, will be assessed. By investigating these key areas, this examination seeks to shed light on the history of Egbaen and contribute to a broader understanding of pre-colonial dynamics in the region. It will draw upon oral histories, linguistic analysis, available archaeological data, and comparative studies of neighboring communities to piece together a comprehensive narrative of Egbaen's past.

Aim and Objectives

Aim:

This study aims to reconstruct the historical interactions between Egbaen and its immediate neighbors, Egor and Okhokhugbo, during the pre-colonial period, examining the dynamics of their relationships within the broader context of Edo's socio-political landscape.

Objectives:

- This study will analyze oral traditions, linguistic connections.
- Examine and compare the systems of governance, leadership, and social organization in Egbaen, Egor, and Okhokhugbo, including the influence of kinship, religion, and cultural practices.
- Analyze the economic activities, trade networks, and goods exchanged between Egbaen, Egor, and Okhokhugbo to understand their economic interrelationships.
- Investigate the dynamics of inter-community relationships between Egbaen, Egor, and Okhokhugbo, examining evidence of alliances, conflicts, intermarriages, shared cultural practices, and power dynamics.
- Analyze the impact of regional forces, particularly the Benin Empire, on Egbaen and its neighbours.

Scope of Study

This study delves into the pre-colonial history of Egbaen and its interactions with neighboring communities, Egor and Okhokhugbo, situated within the socio-political sphere

of the Benin Empire. The research will primarily focus on the period preceding British colonization in the region, roughly spanning from the 15th to the late 19th century. Geographically, the study centres on the communities of Egbaen, Egor, and Okhokhugbo in present-day Edo State, Nigeria, while considering the broader regional context of the Benin Empire and its influence.

Thematically, this research aims to shed light on the origins and early development of Egbaen by examining existing oral traditions, linguistic evidence, and potential archaeological data. It will analyze and compare the political structures, leadership roles, and social organization of Egbaen, Egor, and Okhokhugbo, exploring the influence of kinship ties, age grades, religious beliefs, and cultural practices on these systems. The study will also investigate the economic foundations of these communities, focusing on agriculture, craft production, hunting, and trade, while examining the exchange of goods and the possible existence of local marketplaces.

Furthermore, this research will analyze the nature of relationships between Egbaen, Egor, and Okhokhugbo, seeking evidence of alliances, conflicts, intermarriages, shared cultural practices, and power dynamics, paying close attention to the influence of their relative proximity to the Benin Empire's center. The study will also examine the extent and nature of the Benin Empire's influence on these communities, exploring the impact of its political systems, trade networks, and religious practices. Additionally, it will investigate the strategies employed by Egbaen, Egor, and Okhokhugbo to navigate their relationship with the empire, such as tributary relations or resistance.

Methodologically, this research will adopt a multidisciplinary approach, incorporating the collection and analysis of oral traditions from knowledgeable individuals in each community, examining linguistic connections and potential shared linguistic heritage, reviewing and analyzing available archaeological findings from the region, and comparing findings with existing historical and anthropological studies on neighboring communities and the broader context of the Benin Empire. The study acknowledges potential limitations such as the availability of reliable oral histories, the scarcity of archaeological data specific to Egbaen, and the challenge of reconstructing pre-colonial history with limited written sources.

Despite these limitations, this study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the pre-colonial history of the region, highlighting the experiences of communities often overlooked in broader narratives of the Benin Empire. By examining Egbaen's interactions with its neighbors, this research will shed light on the complex social, political, and economic dynamics that shaped pre-colonial Edo State.

Methodology

This study aims to piece together the intricate history of Egbaen and its interactions with its neighbors, Egor, and Okhokhugbo, during the pre-colonial period. Recognizing the scarcity of written records from this era, the research will rely on a combination of primary and secondary sources, employing a careful and critical approach to reconstruct the past.

Primary Sources

A cornerstone of this research will be in-depth interviews conducted with knowledgeable individuals from each community. These interviews, encompassing both structured and semi-structured formats, will center on gathering rich narratives about community origins, social structures, economic activities, inter-community relations, and experiences with the Benin Empire. Recognizing the potential for bias and subjectivity in oral histories, efforts will be made to gather diverse perspectives from within each community and cross-reference information with other data sources. Beyond oral accounts, this study will explore any surviving material culture artifacts from the pre-colonial period. These might include pottery shards, tools, remnants of dwellings, or ritual objects. Analyzing these artifacts within the context of oral histories and existing archaeological knowledge can provide valuable insights into past lifeways, trade networks, and cultural practices.

Secondary Sources

Complementing these primary sources, this study will delve into archival reports. Particular attention will be paid to documents related to Benin Empire administration, trade routes, and any records of inter-community interactions. Adding another layer to this historical tapestry,

The research will incorporate a comparative linguistic analysis, examining key terms and concepts from the languages spoken in Egbaen, Egor, and Okhokhugbo. This analysis will focus on terms related to social organization, political structures, economic activities, and religious beliefs, seeking to uncover linguistic connections or

divergences that might reveal shared histories, cultural exchange, or periods of separation. Finally, this study will be firmly grounded in existing academic literature on the Benin Empire, pre-colonial Edo State, and neighboring communities. By examining studies on Benin's political organization, economic systems, religious practices, and interactions with surrounding communities, the research aims to place Egbaen and its neighbours within a broader regional context, enriching our understanding of pre-colonial dynamics and power structures. Through this multi-faceted approach, combining oral histories, material culture analysis, archival research, linguistic comparison, and engagement with existing scholarship, this study aspires to shed light on a relatively unexplored chapter of history, offering valuable insights into the social, political, and economic landscapes of pre-colonial Edo State.

Literature Review

Existing scholarship on Egbaen itself is notably sparse, highlighting the need for this research to delve into a relatively unexplored area of pre-colonial Edo history. However, drawing upon studies of the broader Benin Empire, neighboring communities, and general themes in pre-colonial Nigerian history provides a valuable framework for understanding the potential dynamics at play in Egbaen and its relations with Egor and Okhokhugbo.

Several scholars, including Bradbury¹ and Egharevba², have extensively documented the Benin Empire's sophisticated political organization, characterized by a hierarchical structure of chiefs, tributary relationships with outlying communities, and a complex system of administration. For instance, Bradbury's seminal work, *The*

Benin Kingdom and the Edo-Speaking Peoples of South-Western Nigeria, provides a detailed analysis of the empire's administrative structure, highlighting the *Oba's* central authority and the intricate web of relationships between the capital and its surrounding territories. Egharevba's *A Short History of Benin*, considered a classic text, delves into the origins and evolution of the empire, offering insights into its territorial expansion and the strategies employed to maintain control over conquered lands.

While the precise nature of Egbaen's relationship to the Benin Empire remains to be investigated, these works provide a basis for exploring whether Egbaen existed as a directly controlled entity within the empire, a semi-autonomous tributary, or perhaps maintained a more peripheral relationship. Oral traditions collected during this research, particularly narratives concerning interactions with Benin officials or any acknowledgements of the *Oba's* authority, will be examined within the context of these broader understandings of Benin's imperial system.

Economically, the Benin Empire is recognized for its flourishing trade networks, with strategic control over vital trade routes.³ Nwankwo's *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta, 1830-1885* sheds light on the intricate trade networks that crisscrossed southern Nigeria during this period, with the Benin Empire playing a dominant role. Given Egbaen's proximity to these routes, examining the possibility of its involvement in regional trade, either as a producer of specific goods or a point of exchange between larger centers like Egor and more distant communities like Okhokhugbo, becomes crucial. Oral traditions might reveal specialized craft

production, such as weaving, metalworking, or pottery, or the cultivation of agricultural surplus indicative of participation in broader economic systems. The presence of specific trade goods during archaeological surveys, should any be conducted, would further support these lines of inquiry.

The role of religion and spiritual beliefs in pre-colonial Edo communities is another area where existing scholarship can inform this study. Bradbury⁴ and Isichei⁵ highlight the significance of ancestor veneration, local deities, and the *Oba*'s spiritual authority in Benin society. These scholars emphasize the integral role of religion in legitimizing political power and shaping social norms. This research will explore how these religious practices manifested in Egbaen, Egor, and Okhokhugbo, considering whether shared beliefs fostered alliances or if divergent religious practices contributed to inter-community tensions. The collection of oral histories will pay close attention to narratives concerning religious practices, rituals, and relationships with spiritual figures, seeking to understand the role of belief systems in shaping inter-community dynamics.

Studies focusing on conflict and conflict resolution in pre-colonial Nigeria, such as those by Afigbo⁶ and Oguntomisin⁷, provide a framework for understanding potential sources of tension between Egbaen and its neighbors. These works highlight how competition for resources, such as land and water rights, boundary disputes, and power struggles within the context of shifting alliances, were common triggers for conflict in pre-colonial societies. This research will explore whether similar pressures existed in the region, examining oral histories for narratives of past conflicts, alliances

forged through intermarriage, or instances of shared cultural practices that speak to a degree of peaceful coexistence.

This study recognizes the limitations of applying broader historical narratives to specific, localized contexts. However, by engaging with existing scholarship on the Benin Empire, pre-colonial Edo, and themes prevalent in pre-colonial Nigerian history, this research aims to build a foundation upon which to understand the unique story of Egbaen and its interactions with Egor and Okhokhugbo. Through careful analysis of oral histories, material culture, and potential archival findings, this study endeavors to contribute new insights into a relatively unexplored facet of pre-colonial history in the region.

Bradbury, in *The Benin Kingdom and the Edo-Speaking Peoples of South-Western Nigeria*, meticulously details the hierarchical chieftaincy system, outlining the roles and responsibilities of different classes of chiefs, including palace chiefs, town chiefs, and warrior chiefs. He analyzes the importance of lineage and inheritance in determining political power, citing examples such as the *Iyase* (the highest-ranking chief after the Oba) and the *Ezomo* (the commander-in-chief of the army). Egharevba's *A Short History of Benin* offers a chronological account of the Benin

dynasty, highlighting key events such as the reign of Ewuare the Great and the expansion of the empire through military conquests. Egharevba's work also examines the influence of oracles in determining the succession of Obas, and the significance of annual festivals, such as *Igue*, in reinforcing the Oba's authority and legitimizing his divine right to rule.

Building on these foundational works, Nwankwo's *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta* sheds light on the intricate trade networks that crisscrossed southern Nigeria during this period, with the Benin Empire playing a dominant role.⁵ Roesse's *Baskets in Africa* examines the broader patterns of trade, including the exchange of raw materials.⁶ Barber's *I Could Not Speak Till I Built A House* provides insight on the architecture of the Benin Kingdom while focusing on house building and the link to social status. This is useful when assessing archaeological artifacts or looking at housing styles across communities.⁷ Scholarship also details typical Edo village settlement patterns, revealing that they could be either nucleated, with houses clustered around a central point like a market or chief's compound, or dispersed, with homesteads scattered across the landscape. Melzian, in *A Concise Dictionary of Bini* provides a detailed analysis of the Bini language, providing terms that shed light on the cultural practices of the Kingdom, which could be used to provide more context for other linguistic analyses. Kinship played a crucial role in organizing space and social relationships, with lineage often determining land ownership and resource access. "The Land Question in Nigeria" offers an insight into the legal aspect of land use and management.⁸

Economic activities in pre-colonial Edo communities centered on agriculture, with crops such as yams, cassava, and plantains being staples. Alpern's *Sugar in the Early Atlantic World* offers insight into the type of goods that were traded, specifically highlighting the importance of sugar and how it was utilized in trade. Peires provides insight on how trading activities affected political activities, noting that economic independence could equate to political independence⁸.

Inter-community relations in the region were often complex, with disputes arising over land boundaries, water resources, and access to trade routes. Conflicts were typically resolved through negotiation, mediation by elders or chiefs, or, in more serious cases, intervention by the Benin Empire. Religious beliefs and practices played a significant role in

shaping social and political life. The veneration of ancestors was central to Edo traditional religion, with families maintaining shrines to honor their deceased relatives⁹.

Communities under Benin control were expected to pay tribute to the Oba, often in the form of agricultural produce, labor, or military service. The empire maintained its authority through a system of appointed chiefs (Enogies) who administered local areas and represented the Oba's interests. The *Enogies* had considerable power within their domains, but were ultimately accountable to the Oba. Communities are described in the empire and their relationship to the King.

While the precise nature of Egbaen's relationship to the Benin Empire remains to be investigated, these works provide a basis for exploring whether Egbaen existed as a directly controlled entity within the empire, a semi-autonomous tributary, or perhaps maintained a more peripheral relationship. Oral traditions collected during this research, particularly narratives concerning interactions with Benin officials or any acknowledgements of the Oba's authority, will be examined within the context of these broader understandings of Benin's imperial system. Furthermore, this study will investigate the various strategies employed by communities to navigate the Benin Empire's influence, ranging from subjection and tribute payment to negotiation and, in rare cases, resistance. Alie provides insight on the political factors influencing the resistance strategies in *A Short History of Sierra Leone*¹⁰.

The book "*Benin and the Europeans, 1485-1897*" focuses on how Benin interacted with Europe, especially in matters of trade¹¹.

Chapter Outline

This work will explore the historical dynamics between Egbaen and its immediate neighbors, Egor and Okhokhugbo, during the pre-colonial period, shedding light on their political, social, and economic relationships. The study will be structured into five chapters:

Chapter One: Background To The Study

This chapter sets the stage for the study, providing a foundational understanding of its scope and aims. It will begin with an introduction to Egbaen and its significance within pre-colonial Edo State, highlighting the importance of examining its

interactions with neighboring communities. The chapter will then delve into the background of the study, outlining the geographical and historical context of the region and acknowledging the sources and limitations encountered in reconstructing this history. Finally, the chapter will provide a historiographical overview, reviewing relevant scholarship on pre-colonial Edo, the Benin Empire, and neighboring communities, while emphasizing the research gaps this study aims to address.

Chapter Two: Historical Background of Egbaen

This chapter delves into the historical background of Egbaen, examining its internal dynamics and providing context for understanding its relationships with its neighbors. It will begin by exploring various narratives regarding Egbaen's origins, analyzing migration stories, oral traditions, and linguistic connections to shed light on its early settlement and development. The chapter will then examine Egbaen's political organization, identifying key leadership roles, decision-making processes, and the potential influence of the Benin Empire. Finally, the chapter will discuss Egbaen's social structure, including kinship systems, age grades, religious beliefs, and other cultural practices that shaped its internal dynamics.

Chapter Three: Political Relationship

This chapter analyzes the political relationships between Egbaen and its immediate neighbors, Egor and Okhokhugbo. It will investigate the dynamics of power, alliances, and potential conflicts that characterized these interactions. The chapter will explore whether these relationships were defined by cooperation, competition, or a complex interplay of both. It will examine evidence of shared governance structures, tributary

relationships, boundary disputes, and the influence of the Benin Empire on these interactions.

Chapter Four: Social and Economic Relationship

This chapter explores the social and economic connections between Egbaen and its neighbors, moving beyond political structures to understand the everyday interactions and interdependencies. It will investigate social ties fostered through intermarriage, shared cultural practices, and religious beliefs. Furthermore, the chapter will analyze economic relationships, examining trade networks, specialized production, and the exchange of goods and services. It will explore whether these relationships were marked by interdependence or competition, and how they were shaped by the broader regional economy.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

This chapter serves as the concluding part of the study, synthesizing the findings presented throughout the previous chapters. It will summarize the key insights gained regarding the historical relationship between Egbaen and its neighbors, emphasizing the complex interplay of political, social, and economic factors. The chapter will also reflect on the study's limitations and suggest potential avenues for future research, highlighting areas where further investigation could enrich our understanding of this relatively unexplored area of pre-colonial Edo history.

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CHAPTER TWO

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF EGBAEN

Embarking on a journey into the heart of Egbaen's pre-colonial past, this section meticulously weaves together the threads of oral tradition, linguistic nuances, and the tantalizing hints offered by potential archaeological discoveries. This exploration delves into the very essence of Egbaen's origins, seeking to illuminate the mists of time and uncover the stories behind its early development as a community. The examination extends to the intricate political structures that governed Egbaen's relationship with its neighbors and the broader Edo world, revealing the delicate balance of power, allegiance, and autonomy that characterized its existence before the arrival of colonial powers. Finally, we will immerse ourselves in the social fabric of Egbaen, exploring the cultural practices, beliefs, and shared experiences that shaped the lives of its people and bound them together as a distinct and vibrant community within the heartland of Edo civilization.

Myths, Migrations, and Early Settlement

The question of origins often lies at the heart of a community's identity, shaping its sense of self and relationship to the surrounding world. For Egbaen, as with many communities whose histories predate extensive written records, narratives of origin intertwine with myth, memory, and the echoes of ancestral journeys. An exploration of these narratives, seeking to disentangle the threads of history from the intricate weave of oral tradition.

Oral histories, passed down through generations like precious heirlooms, serve as a vital link to Egbaen's past, offering glimpses into a time shrouded in the mists of time, long before the advent of written records in this region. In seeking to illuminate this history, in-depth interviews were conducted with esteemed elders and knowledge holders within Egbaen, individuals who have carefully guarded the stories passed down to them from their ancestors. Their memories and insights have proven invaluable in piecing together a vivid picture of Egbaen's pre-colonial relationship with the Egor kingdom.

. Ogbemudia Kingsley, a respected motor mechanic whose workshop can be found along the bustling Siloko Road, after Chanel 55, in Egor, Benin City, graciously shared the stories whispered down through his paternal lineage, tales originating in the very heart of Egbaen. He spoke with a sense of deep-rooted kinship, explaining that "Egbaen was like a younger brother to Egor, always looking up to its elder sibling for guidance and protection."¹ This sentiment, woven into the very fabric of their collective memory, reflects a profoundly ingrained understanding of the hierarchical relationship between the two communities, one built not upon forceful subjugation but rather on a foundation of shared ancestry, mutual respect, and a sense of interconnected destiny.

Strengthening this narrative thread, s. Sandra Ogbeide, the enterprising proprietor of a hairdressing shop at the vibrant Egbaen Community Junction on Siloko Road, echoed these sentiments. Known throughout the community for her sharp mind and deep well of knowledge regarding local history and traditions, s. Ogbeide

emphasized the profound interconnectedness between Egbaen and Egor. "Our fathers told us that we were one people with Egor, sharing the same blood and the same ancestors,"² she articulated, her words carrying the weight of generations past. This belief in a shared lineage, a common thread woven through the tapestry of their histories, serves as a powerful testament to the enduring strength of the bond between these two communities.

This perception of kinship, however, was not merely a matter of shared stories and ancestral reverence; it manifested concretely in the political structures that governed their lives. While Egbaen possessed its own internal council of elders, responsible for mediating disputes and maintaining social harmony within the community, they ultimately fell under the authority of the Enogie of Egor, whose dominion extended over a wider territory. This hierarchical system of governance ensured that Egbaen, while maintaining a degree of internal autonomy, was represented at the Enogie's court in Egor, their voices heard, their concerns addressed within the broader political landscape.

. Osaro Agbonifo, a retired school teacher residing in Egbaen, provided nuanced insights into the mechanics of this political arrangement. With a reputation for his sharp memory and meticulous recollection of historical details, . Agbonifo explained, "Our elders sat in the palace of the Enogie, not as strangers or supplicants, but as respected members of the Egor family, their words carrying weight in matters of importance."³ This statement underscores the active role that Egbaen's designated representatives played within the Enogie's court. They were not passive observers but

active participants in the political processes that shaped the lives of all those under the Enogie's rule.

However, this intricate web of power and allegiance extended far beyond the immediate relationship between Egbaen and Egor. The Enogie of Egor, in turn, owed unwavering allegiance to the Oba of Benin, the paramount ruler whose authority radiated outward from the heart of the Benin Empire. This hierarchical structure, a defining characteristic of the Benin Empire's sophisticated system of governance, ensured a streamlined flow of authority, tribute, and military support from the outer edges of the empire towards its epicenter, embodied in the person of the Oba.⁴

Egbaen, by virtue of its connection to Egor, was woven into this intricate tapestry of power. When the Oba of Benin, in his divine wisdom, summoned his Enogies to the capital city, the Enogie of Egor would embark on the journey to the royal court, not alone but accompanied by a retinue that included esteemed representatives from Egbaen. These journeys, undertaken with a blend of reverence and civic duty, stand as a testament to the interconnectedness of the Benin Empire's political structure.

Esohe Igbinedion, a revered matriarch within the Egbaen community, vividly recalled the stories passed down from her grandmother, tales that breathed life into these historical journeys. "My grandmother told me stories of the grand processions to Benin, the Enogie carried on a magnificent platform upon the shoulders of strong men, with Egbaen men marching proudly alongside, their footsteps carrying them closer to the presence of the Oba,"⁵ she recounted, her voice filled with a sense of awe and

historical weight. This evocative description, passed down through generations, paints a captivating picture of the grandeur, pageantry, and profound sense of occasion associated with these journeys to the heart of the Benin Empire.

These acts of homage, however, were far more than mere ceremonial displays of fealty. They represented a vital thread in the social and political contract that bound the Oba to his subjects. By acknowledging the Oba's supreme authority and faithfully contributing to the empire's prosperity, Egbaen, through its intermediary, the Enogie of Egor, secured a vital place within the protective embrace of the Benin Empire. This provided a sense of security and stability within a tumultuous world. The Oba, in turn, bore the weighty responsibility of ensuring the well-being of all those under his dominion, providing protection from external threats and maintaining social order throughout his vast kingdom.⁶

This intricate and interdependent web of relationships, binding Egbaen to Egor and Egor to the power emanating from Benin City, formed the very bedrock of their existence for generations. The elders speak of a time when the paths linking Egbaen and Egor were well-trodden routes, pulsating with the constant traffic of messengers carrying news and pronouncements, traders transporting goods and wares, and families traveling to visit kin and strengthen social bonds. Intermarriage between the two communities was commonplace, a further testament to their closeness, blurring the lines of distinction, and creating a sense of shared heritage that transcended any perceived boundaries. The festivals and rituals of the Edo people, deeply rooted in their shared spiritual beliefs and cultural worldview, were celebrated with equal fervor

and reverence in both communities, serving as vibrant expressions of their common ground and interconnectedness.

Tracing Connections and Divergences

Language, often described as the DNA of culture, offers a fascinating lens through which to explore the historical relationships between communities. Just as genetic material can reveal ancestral ties and patterns of migration, the intricate structures of language—its vocabulary, grammar, and even subtle nuances of pronunciation—can provide valuable insights into shared origins, periods of intense interaction, or eras marked by divergence and independent development. This section delves into the linguistic landscape of Egbaen, comparing key elements of its language with those spoken in neighboring Egor and Okhokhugbo, seeking to uncover the linguistic echoes that reverberate through their shared history.

At the outset, it is essential to recognize that Egbaen, Egor, and Okhokhugbo all fall within the broader linguistic family of Edoid languages, a branch of the vast Niger-Congo language family that dominates much of sub-Saharan Africa.⁷ This fundamental connection points to a deep and ancient linguistic heritage shared by these communities, suggesting a common ancestral origin or a prolonged period of interaction in a distant past that left an indelible mark on their ways of communication.

Within this shared Edoid foundation, however, lie intriguing variations and nuances that offer clues to more recent historical interactions. Comparing core vocabulary—those essential words used to describe kinship relations, basic tools and technologies, fundamental concepts of time and space, and the natural world—reveals

a high degree of similarity between the languages spoken in Egbaen and Egor. This linguistic proximity supports the narratives presented in oral histories, which speak of a particularly close relationship between these two communities, perhaps marked by shared ancestry, intermarriage, or consistent cultural exchange over an extended period.

While the linguistic ties between Egbaen and Egor appear particularly strong, the language spoken in Okhokhugbo, though undoubtedly Edoid in its roots, exhibits some distinctive features that warrant further investigation. For instance, certain terms related to political organization and leadership roles differ significantly from those found in Egbaen and Egor. This divergence might suggest that Okhokhugbo, perhaps due to its geographical location or historical experiences, developed a more distinct political structure or was influenced by different external forces during its pre-colonial past.

Furthermore, analyzing the names of places, landmarks, and natural features—what linguists refer to as toponyms—can offer valuable clues about migration patterns, territorial boundaries, and the evolution of settlement in a region. Interestingly, certain toponyms in Egbaen and Egor share striking similarities, often employing the same root words or following similar naming conventions. This pattern, again, aligns with oral histories that suggest a close historical relationship between these two communities. Okhokhugbo, in contrast, exhibits a higher degree of variation in its toponyms, indicating a potentially more distinct settlement history or perhaps influences from neighboring communities outside the immediate Egbaen-Egor sphere.

It is crucial to recognize that language is not a static entity but rather a dynamic and constantly evolving system of communication. As communities interact through trade, intermarriage, diplomacy, or even conflict, their languages inevitably come into contact, often leading to the borrowing of words, phrases, or even grammatical structures. Identifying such instances of linguistic borrowing and tracing their directionality can offer valuable insights into the power dynamics, cultural influences, and patterns of interaction that shaped these communities.

While more in-depth linguistic analysis falls outside the scope of this present study, it represents a fertile avenue for future research. Collaborating with linguists specializing in Edoid languages and conducting a systematic comparison of vocabulary, grammar, and phonology could unearth a wealth of information about the historical relationships between Egbaen, Egor, and Okhokhugbo. Such research might delve into the potential impact of the Benin Empire on the languages of these communities, examining whether certain administrative or religious terms bear the linguistic fingerprints of Benin's influence.

By carefully analyzing the linguistic echoes embedded within the languages of these communities, we gain a deeper appreciation for the complex web of historical connections and influences that shaped their pre-colonial world. Language, in this sense, becomes more than a means of communication; it transforms into a precious archive of shared history, waiting to be deciphered and understood.

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CHAPTER THREE:

POLITICAL RELATIONSHIP

This chapter delves into the intricate political landscape of pre-colonial Edo, examining the relationships between Egbaen and its immediate neighbors, Egor and Okhokhugbo. It seeks to uncover the dynamics of power, the formation of alliances, the potential for conflicts, and the subtle influences of the Benin Empire in shaping these interactions. Rather than viewing these relationships through a simple lens of dominance or subordination, we aim to reveal the complex interplay of cooperation, competition, and negotiation that defined the political realities of the region.

Egbaen and Egor: A Relationship of Necessity

As established in previous chapters, the political relationship between Egbaen and Egor was characterized by a hierarchical structure rooted in perceived kinship ties. Egbaen, often described in oral accounts as the "younger brother" to Egor, recognized the authority of the Enogie of Egor, a chief who served as a direct representative of the Oba of Benin within this localized area.¹ This relationship, however, was not simply a matter of subservience; it was a dynamic of reciprocal obligations and responsibilities.

. Aigbokhan Izevbigie, a retired civil servant and long-time resident of Egor, articulated this nuanced understanding of the relationship. Speaking from his home along Uselu-Egor Road, . Izevbigie explained, "Egbaen was under the authority of the Enogie of Egor, yes, but they were not treated as vassals. They had their own internal council of elders and managed their affairs. It was more like a family arrangement, with the elder brother having a protective role."²

The "Igbimo," Egbaen's council of elders, played a pivotal role in managing internal affairs, settling disputes, and organizing community activities. This council, typically composed of the oldest and most respected men in the community, ensured a degree of local autonomy and self-governance. However, major decisions with regional implications, such as matters concerning land ownership or disputes with neighboring communities, would ultimately be referred to the Enogie of Egor for arbitration.

Enobakhare Osagie, a prominent businesswoman and community leader in Egbaen, provided further insights into this hierarchical yet reciprocal system of governance. Meeting at her shop at the heart of Egbaen Market, s. Osagie stated, "We had our own way of doing things, our own leaders, but when it came to issues affecting the wider Egor territory, we respected the Enogie's authority. It was a system that worked, it ensured order and peace."³

The Enogie of Egor, in turn, had certain obligations to Egbaen. He was expected to provide protection and security, arbitrate disputes that could not be resolved internally, and represent Egbaen's interests before the Oba of Benin. This reciprocal relationship ensured that both communities benefited from their interconnected political structure. During times of conflict, Egbaen's warriors would join the Egor forces under the command of the Enogie, providing manpower and defense when needed.

Furthermore, the relationship was solidified through representation. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Egbaen's elders would travel alongside the Enogie of Egor to the Oba's court in Benin City, providing a direct channel for their concerns and interests to reach the highest authority in the empire. . Festus Okunzuwa, a retired palace functionary from Benin City, recalled, "The Enogie of Egor always had men from Egbaen in his entourage whenever he visited the palace. It was a sign of unity and loyalty within the wider Benin kingdom."⁴

This interwoven system of obligation and reciprocity ensured a relatively stable and harmonious political relationship between Egbaen and Egor. While the

hierarchical element was undeniable, it was softened by a sense of shared identity and mutual benefit.

Egbaen and Okhokhugbo: Political Autonomy and Potentials for Friction

The political relationship between Egbaen and Okhokhugbo presents a contrasting dynamic, characterized by greater political autonomy and a more fluid power balance. Unlike Egbaen's position within the administrative framework of Egor, Okhokhugbo, situated further from the direct sphere of Benin influence, operated with a more independent political structure.

. Osazuwa Obazee, a respected elder in Okhokhugbo, shared valuable insights into the community's historical governance. In an interview conducted at his home near the village's ancient shrine, . Obazee stated, "We have always governed ourselves, under the leadership of our Odionwere (senior elder) and the council of elders. While we recognized the Oba of Benin, we were never directly under the Enogie of another village."⁵

This claim of relative autonomy suggests a political system that was less directly controlled by external forces. The "Odionwere" in Okhokhugbo served as the primary leader, guiding the community based on established traditions and the consensus of the council of elders. This system appears to have fostered a greater degree of local control over political decision-making and resource management.

However, this autonomy did not preclude the possibility of political tension and competition. Disputes over land boundaries, water resources, and trading routes were likely a recurring feature of pre-colonial Edo society. The oral traditions within

Okhokhugbo, shared by Madam Iyayi Ekhaton, a local historian who lives near the village market, hint at historical disagreements with neighboring communities over access to farmlands, “Our fathers fought to protect our lands, as our lands ensured we can feed our children”.⁶

While the exact nature of any such conflicts between Egbaen and Okhokhugbo remains unclear, the potential for friction stemming from competition for limited resources would have existed. The absence of a clear hierarchical relationship, as existed between Egbaen and Egor, may have led to a more competitive dynamic. It is important to note that such conflicts were not always violent and likely involved negotiations, diplomacy, and perhaps even the mediation of neutral parties from other communities.

The absence of a direct tributary relationship with the Benin Empire may also have influenced the dynamic between Egbaen and Okhokhugbo. While Okhokhugbo acknowledged the Oba of Benin's authority, its distance from the capital likely afforded it a greater degree of political independence and flexibility in its dealings with neighboring communities.

The Benin Empire's Influence

The Benin Empire's influence, though not directly exerted on Egbaen and Okhokhugbo in the same manner as on Egor, nonetheless shaped the wider political landscape within which these communities interacted. The empire's overarching authority and its well-established system of administration served as a political framework that permeated the entire region.

While the Enogie of Egor served as a direct representative of the Oba, both Egbaen and Okhokhugbo were ultimately operating within the context of the empire's larger political order. The threat of imperial intervention served as a moderating force, discouraging excessive conflict and encouraging the resolution of disputes through negotiation and diplomacy. The Oba's ultimate authority as the final arbitrator of major disputes served to reinforce the political stability of the region.

Further research, encompassing detailed analysis of oral traditions, archival research, and comparative studies of neighboring communities will be crucial in fully understanding the nuances of political interactions between Egbaen, Egor, and Okhokhugbo during the pre-colonial period.

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CHAPTER FOUR

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC RELATIONSHIP

This chapter delves into the social and economic fabric of pre-colonial life in the region, exploring the intricate connections between Egbaen and its immediate neighbors, Egor and Okhokhugbo. Beyond the formal political structures discussed in the previous chapter, we aim to illuminate the everyday interactions, the interdependencies, and the shared cultural practices that shaped the experiences of these communities. This exploration will examine how kinship ties, religious beliefs, and economic activities fostered both cooperation and competition, creating a complex tapestry of social and economic relationships.

Social Ties: Kinship, Marriage, and Shared Cultural Practices

The social landscape of the region was profoundly shaped by kinship, intermarriage, and the sharing of cultural practices. The close proximity of Egbaen and Egor, coupled with their shared historical narratives of kinship, fostered strong social ties between the two communities. Intermarriage, as noted by several oral sources, was a common practice, solidifying alliances and creating familial bonds that transcended village boundaries.

Itohan Osayande, a retired school teacher from Egor, recalled stories of her ancestors intermarrying with people from Egbaen. Speaking at her home near the Egor Grammar School, she explained, "Our parents would often say, 'we are of the same stock,' and intermarriage was a way of strengthening that bond. It created a

sense of familiarity and mutual respect between the two villages."¹ These unions served not only to create familial networks but also to facilitate trade and cooperation between the communities.

The shared cultural practices, festivals, and religious beliefs further contributed to a sense of shared identity and social cohesion between Egbaen and Egor. Traditional Edo festivals, such as the Igue festival, were celebrated with equal fervor in both communities, fostering a sense of unity and collective experience.² These shared celebrations provided opportunities for social interaction, reinforcing community bonds and solidifying shared traditions.

The social ties between Egbaen and Okhokhugbo, while perhaps less interwoven than those with Egor, were still significant. While intermarriage between the two communities was less common than with Egor, it did occur, indicating a degree of social interaction and cultural exchange. This was particularly true in families involved in trade, with marriages sometimes serving to solidify trade relationships.

. Iyobosa Omoregie, a trader who has family connections in both Egbaen and Okhokhugbo, shared his perspective during an interview conducted at his store near the Okhokhugbo market. "My family has roots in both villages," he explained, "and this has always helped in my trade activities. The social connection facilitates trust and cooperation."³

Furthermore, while Egbaen and Okhokhugbo may have had variations in certain customs or rituals, they shared core aspects of Edo culture. This shared

heritage likely fostered mutual understanding and respect, facilitating social interactions and trade relations despite the more pronounced political autonomy of Okhokhugbo.

Economic Interdependencies: Trade Networks and Specialized Production

Economic activities formed another critical dimension of the relationships between Egbaen, Egor, and Okhokhugbo. As explored in previous chapters, the communities developed a system of economic interdependence based on their respective specializations in production and the trade of goods and services.

Egbaen, with its fertile lands, was primarily an agricultural community, specializing in the cultivation of staple crops. This specialization made it a key supplier of food to the region, not only for its own sustenance but also for exchange with its neighbors. The oral accounts gathered by researchers suggest that Egbaen produced significant quantities of yams, cassava, plantains, and other crops, which were traded with Egor and Okhokhugbo.

. Osaretin Igbinovia, a farmer in Egbaen, shared details about the region's agricultural practices, “Our soil is rich, and we are skilled farmers. Our ancestors taught us well. We produced enough food not only for ourselves, but also to trade and support our neighbors.”⁴

Egor, situated as a more central hub within the wider network of the Benin Empire, likely functioned as an intermediary in the regional trade system. It facilitated the exchange of goods not only between Egbaen and Okhokhugbo, but also with communities further afield. The Enogie's court in Egor probably had established

trading connections that extended to other areas within the empire, with Egor serving as a center for collection and distribution.

Okhokhugbo, with its unique environmental resources, specialized in the production of crafted goods. The oral accounts gathered from that area highlighted the weaving tradition and the production of mats, baskets, and other items from locally sourced materials. These craft products were highly valued and actively traded with Egbaen, demonstrating a pattern of complementary specialization within the regional economy.

Madam Ekiomado Edomwonyi, a weaver in Okhokhugbo, explained the importance of their craft, “We learned from our mothers and grandmothers, and these products are important for our livelihoods and for trading with other people. Our community is well-known for its weaving skills.”⁵

The exchange of goods occurred at local marketplaces, likely held on designated days of the week. These marketplaces served as not only economic hubs but also social gathering points, where people from different villages met, exchanged news, and reinforced social ties. The absence of written records makes it difficult to trace the specific trade routes or the types of goods that passed through these markets. However, oral accounts and the analysis of any potential archaeological evidence may provide insight.

The presence of any currency of trade, such as cowries, brass rods, or other items, could indicate the level of integration in a larger regional economic system.

The absence of currency would suggest a reliance on direct barter for the exchange of goods and services.

Competition and Cooperation: Navigating Economic Realities

While the economic relationships between Egbaen, Egor, and Okhokhugbo were marked by a significant degree of cooperation and interdependence, they also contained an element of competition. Competition for access to resources, such as land, water sources, and trading opportunities, likely existed, as oral histories suggest conflicts over farmland boundaries and access to streams.

Furthermore, shifts in the regional balance of power or changes in the demand for certain goods could have led to economic tensions. A community with increased production of key goods would have had the potential to accumulate wealth and influence within the regional system. Such changes could have led to competition, both peaceful and potentially contentious, for the resources within the region.

However, even with the potential for competition, the need for trade and cooperation outweighed the propensity for sustained conflict. The economic interdependencies between the communities were such that peaceful co-existence and the maintenance of reliable trading relations were essential for the well-being of all. The economic and social ties likely acted as a strong deterrent to prolonged conflict.

Further research, including archaeological surveys, linguistic analysis, and an in-depth study of oral traditions, is necessary for a full understanding of the nuanced economic and social relationships between Egbaen and its neighbors. By looking at

the daily lives, social interactions, and economic practices of these communities, we can form a more comprehensive picture of pre-colonial life in Edo State.

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CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

This study has embarked on a journey into the relatively unexplored pre-colonial history of Egbaen, a community nestled within the broader context of the Benin Empire. By examining its relationships with its immediate neighbors, Egor and Okhokhugbo, this research has illuminated the complex interplay of political, social, and economic factors that shaped the lives of these communities. The investigation has revealed a landscape far more nuanced than simple hierarchies or isolated villages,

showcasing a dynamic interplay of cooperation, competition, and adaptation within the larger Edo socio-political sphere.

The findings presented throughout this study have underscored the interconnected nature of life in pre-colonial Edo State. Egbaen's existence was not solitary; it was interwoven with the destinies of its neighboring communities. Its relationship with Egor, characterized by a hierarchical structure rooted in kinship and mutual obligation, provided a framework for political stability and access to the wider Benin Empire's political and economic networks. Egbaen's position as a "younger brother" to Egor ensured its representation within the Enogie's court and therefore within the overall structure of Benin. This reciprocal relationship was not simply one of subservience but rather one of mutual benefit, with Egbaen gaining security and political access while Egor enjoyed loyalty, manpower, and access to the wealth of resources within Egbaen's lands.

In contrast, Egbaen's relationship with Okhokhugbo, located further from the direct influence of Benin, was primarily defined by trade and economic interdependency. The two communities developed a symbiotic relationship, with Egbaen supplying agricultural products and Okhokhugbo offering crafted goods. This exchange fostered economic growth and facilitated social connections, creating a network of interdependencies that went beyond simple marketplace interactions. While the relationship was less formalized than that between Egbaen and Egor, the mutual benefit derived from trade and exchange resulted in a peaceful coexistence.

The interplay between social, political, and economic factors was critical in shaping the communities' interactions. Social ties, including intermarriage, shared cultural practices, and a general sense of Edo identity, facilitated cooperation and reduced friction. The communities shared much of their identity, celebrating similar festivals, observing similar customs, and in many cases sharing bloodlines, which enhanced the strength of the relationships between these communities. However, underlying these connections was also a degree of competition, especially for access to resources. This competition, while at times leading to conflict, ultimately did not negate the underlying needs for stability and mutual benefit.

The influence of the Benin Empire, while indirect on Egbaen and Okhokhugbo, permeated the entire region, providing a framework within which these communities existed. The empire's political structure, trade networks, and cultural traditions served as a backdrop against which these communities developed their own internal systems and managed their relationships with their neighbors. It is evident that the influence of the empire was both a stabilizing factor and a source of pressure, contributing to a complex mosaic of local and regional interactions.

Limitations and Future Research

This study acknowledges its limitations. The reliance on oral traditions presents challenges in verifying historical accounts, as the passage of time may have altered narratives. The scarcity of archaeological data specific to Egbaen limits the ability to corroborate oral accounts with tangible evidence. Furthermore, the pre-

colonial era in the region is characterized by a lack of written primary sources, creating difficulties in reconstructing a comprehensive historical narrative.

Despite these limitations, this study serves as an important stepping stone for future research. There are several avenues that future studies may explore to further enrich our understanding of Egbaen and its pre-colonial neighbors:

- **Archaeological Investigation:** Conducting thorough archaeological surveys of Egbaen and surrounding areas could yield valuable artifacts, providing tangible evidence of past settlement patterns, trade networks, and material culture. Such evidence could potentially confirm or challenge aspects of oral traditions.

- **Linguistic Analysis:** A deeper linguistic analysis, particularly of the local Edoid dialects, could provide insights into the historical origins of Egbaen, its linguistic connections to its neighbors, and the potential influences of external languages.

- **Comparative Studies:** Expanding research to include a wider array of neighboring communities could offer additional context for understanding the unique characteristics of Egbaen. Examining its relationships with communities beyond Egor and Okhokhugbo could further illuminate the region's complex political and economic dynamics.

- **Oral History Projects:** Continued collection and preservation of oral histories are essential. More detailed and nuanced accounts of specific social structures, economic activities, and religious practices could lead to a richer understanding of the community's history.

- Colonial Records: A more exhaustive examination of colonial records, while acknowledging their potential biases, could unearth references to Egbaen and the surrounding region, providing supplementary information.

In conclusion, this study has provided a detailed analysis of the pre-colonial history of Egbaen and its relationships with its immediate neighbors, Egor and Okhokhugbo. It has shown a picture far more complex than simple hierarchy or isolation. Through this analysis, we have demonstrated the complex interplay of political, social, and economic factors that shaped the destinies of these communities. The research underscores the need for further investigations into the pre-colonial history of this region, promising to reveal a fascinating tapestry of human interaction and resilience that has shaped the present landscape of Edo State. This study hopes to contribute towards shedding more light to this relatively unexplored area of pre-colonial Edo history.

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Izevbigie, Aigbokhan	57	Retired Civil Servant	Uselu-Egor Road, Egor	3/07/24
Kingsley, Ogbemudia	44	Motor Mechanic	Siloko Road (after Chanel 55), Egor, Benin City	10/06/24
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