

Esanland, Edo State, Nigeria: An Ethnographic Study of the Origin of the Tribe and Tribal

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ABSTRACT This study re-examines the origin of the Esan tribe and tribal. It was informed by the observed problem of submersion preponderant in Edoid ethnographic studies. The mono-causal Benin hypothesis of Esan origin propagated in leading ethnographies on the Edo speaking peoples is ahistorical. It traced Esan tribal origin to the 15th century. Using the historical research methodology and the case study research design, this study debunked the “Esan fua” and other Benincentric traditions of Esan origin as distortions. The study explored linguistic and archaeological evidence to demonstrate that Esan autochthonous origin predates 1400 C.E. Linguistic study shows that the Esan language was arguably separated from the Kwa language group of the Western Sudanic language before Bini. The archaeological study of Esan moats proved that they were constructed by Esan people long before the 15th century. It concludes that tribal protectionism is critical to preserving mini tribes in Nigeria, and curbing ethnographical distortions.

INTRODUCTION

Studies on tribe and tribal in recent times have gained renewed academic currency in Nigeria and globally. The field of research explores and unpacks valid indigenous knowledge systems, tribal protectionist strategies and legal frameworks central to the continued existence of indigenous tribes. But this is not without its own challenges. Nadav Samin (2021) observed that a fundamental bane of studies in tribalism in the Middle East is that tribes did not leave their own written records. Hence, tribes were documented on the margins of records that were usually off limits and this was responsible for the poor conception of indigenous tribes in Middle Eastern scholarly studies. In Nigerian historiography, records of the mini tribes are usually documented on the margins of texts on the mega tribes. This implies that mini tribes such as Esan are either discussed in passing or misrepresented. For example, at the fringes of some of the dominant studies on Benin, the mega tribe in Edo state, Nigeria, the Esan tribe is misrepresented and completely submerged. The problem or possibility of minority tribal submersion in modern nation and state building efforts trigger not only study in tribes, but also tribal protectionism. In the United States of America, the growing efforts to protect the indigenous Indian tribe climaxed in the initiation of Tribal Treaty Rights

in the Section 106 process (Advisory Council on Historical Preservation 2018). Since 1778, the federal government of America’s relations with the Indian tribes had been defined and conducted through treaties of understanding. These treaties recognised the sovereignty of the indigenous Indian tribes in the USA and established sets of rights, benefits and conditions for them for ceding millions of acres of their homeland to the United States. The tribal rights and benefits in America include recognition of property rights in land and resources and federal protection (Advisory Council on Historical Preservation 2018: 1).

Consequently, the indigenous tribe and their tribal rights in America are secured under different statutes, regulations, executive orders and federal policies such as the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) that direct federal agencies to consult regularly with the Indian tribal leaders. Section 106 of the NHPA, 54 U.S.C.306108 and its implementing regulation 36 CFR part 800 of Section 106 mandated all federal agencies to take into account the effect of any project they carry out, license or financially sponsor on the historic properties of the indigenous tribe. Thus, tribal consultation is required for all federal undertakings, regardless of whether its Area of Potential Effect (APE) includes federal, tribal, state, and tribal or private land as long as the undertaking will affect historic properties of religious and cultural significance of the

indigenous Indian tribe (Advisory Council on Historic Preservation 2021). Therefore, in 2021 the President of USA, Joe Biden, organised the White House Tribal Nations Summit to strengthen and deepen the relationship with the Native Americans with the State. It was geared towards fostering respect for tribal sovereignty and self-governance, and honouring federal trust and treaty responsibilities with the indigenous tribes. The Summit sought to reinforce and strengthened the nation-to-nation relationship, that is, tribal and state relationship in the USA (Domestic Policy Council 2021: 5-6).

In Asia, the modern state of India that has the second largest tribal mixture in the world after Africa, has made giant strides in managing and protecting its tribes. In 1999, India established the Ministry of Tribal Affairs to promote social justice, empowerment and integration of its indigenous tribes. This Ministry coordinates the overall policy planning and programme development for Scheduled Tribes (ST) to enhance their welfare (Government of India 2021). However, despite the growing global propensities to preserve and protect indigenous tribes Mahmood Mamdani (2020) in his work *“Neither Settler nor Native: The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities”* advanced the view that in the modern colonial state in Africa, the tribe needs to die for the nation to live. This presupposes that the solution to tribalism and ethnicity as the bane of Africa’s development is the forceful extinction of the tribes, particularly the mini tribes that will submerge under the mega tribes. Psychologically, attitudinally, and in ethnographic scholarship, it can be said that Nigerians strongly subscribe to this view. This paper would demonstrate this point using the Benin hypothesis of Esan tribe and tribal origin in Nigeria that submerges the people under Benin. Beyond Esan, the Benincentric explanation of the origin of all the peoples of Edoland had created a problem of submersion and mono-causal historical writing that is ahistorical.

It is this problem that informed this ethnographic study in origin of the Esan tribe and tribal. Nigeria is a pluralist society with over 350 tribes. But the country’s mini tribes have been largely under-studied because of the problem of submersion in Nigerian historiography and ethnography. Ethnographic literatures preponderant in the country were hitherto majorly focused on its majority tribes. In Edoid studies, for example, Jacob Egharevba

authoritatively claimed that, *“The early people of Esan were Bini emigrants from the first and second periods of the Benin Empire. Esan is the name of the first man who migrated from the City of Benin and became the founder and progenitor of Esan. Their first Enijie were mostly princes of Benin who founded the various towns”* (Egharevba 1968: 84).

Christopher Okojie’s writing in 1994 upheld this view. He argued along Egharevba’s line that all Esan people originated directly or indirectly from Benin (Okojie 1994:17). Hence, N.O. Omozusi in his study identified submersion as one of the problems plaguing the historiography of Edoland. He observed that the history of the peoples is usually written as a macro or block history of the Binis (Omozusi 2008:1). Although Joseph Osagie (2004: 4) and Simon Ehiabhi (2007: 34-36) (2017: 34-36) partly disagreed with the Benincentric explanation of Esan origin, they were not assertive on the subject. Therefore, this paper would survey the existing traditions, mythology and legend of the origin Esan people with a view to providing fresh perspective on the issue. It would expand the frontier of existing knowledge on the Edo people by demonstrating that the Esan people, as one of its tribes, had an independent origin like other societies in sub-Saharan Africa. Because the claim that the Esan people as a tribe in Nigeria originated from Benin is a misconception, it stereotypes the people as *Binis*. It also promotes the idea that the history of Esanland is the history of Bini people in Esan.

Therefore, using oral tradition and written evidence, the paper would trace the historical origin of Esan people beyond the fifteenth century when it is commonly claimed that the people seceded from Benin Kingdom during the reign of Oba Ewuare. The thrust of the paper is that the origin of tribe and tribal of Esanland dates back to the division of human languages at Babel that halted Nimrod’s gigantic Tower construction of the Sahara. It argued that the arrival of Benin emigrants into their forest settlement region in the fifteenth century only increased the demography of Esanland. The Benin migrants met and integrated with the Esan people (tribe) already settled in the forest (their present location) and thriving as autonomous communities. Consequently, this paper opined that the fifteenth century emigrants from Benin Kingdom did not in any way found Esanland nor began the peopling of the region. This contention is anchored on generally

accepted conceptual and theoretical understanding of the origin, distinctiveness, and constitution of tribe and tribal.

Tribe: Conceptual and Nation Building Framework

The concept of a tribe originated from the Roman word *tribus*. It is generally used by anthropologists to distinguish societies according to types and to identify specific social organisations (Godelier n.d.). In Biblical historiography, the concept of tribe was used or employed to categorise and distinguish the Jews into twelve socio-cultural groups. The scriptures in Genesis chapter 49 employed the word tribe to identify Jacob's ten sons Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Zebulun, Dan, Gad, Asher, Naphtali, Benjamin and Joseph's two sons Ephraim and Manasseh as the foundation of the nation of Israel. Tribe was used in this context to demarcate the Jewish society according to types and social organisations. The modern usage of the term tribe developed as an Euro-American analytical term used to describe social units of people considered to be primitive and uncivilised (Sneath 2016). Furthermore, in the nineteenth century, the concept of tribe was woven into the theories of primitive societies governed by the principle of Kinship (Sneath 2021 2016). Following the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, the concept of tribe took on a new meaning. European partitioning of African territories altered pre-existing boundaries and forged divergent peoples into one new fold. Thus, Mahmood Mamdani conceived of the tribe as a colonial creation through the instrumentality of law, which imposed new identities on people and institutionalised new group life (Mamdani 2012: 4). Hence, Africa followed by India contextually has the largest concentration of tribal populations in the world. These tribes are geographically attached, culturally homogenous, possess a common dialect, socially stratified and hierarchic, have strong bond among kinship, practice communalism and have a distinct worldview (Singh n.d.: 1-2). However, in the twenty-first century the term tribe experienced a marked departure from its pre-existing conceptualisation. It became more of an ethnographic concept than an analytical term used by cultural anthropologists. Thus, Ajeet Kumar Pankaj conceptualised the term tribe as a territorial community of people living in isolation in foothills and forests (Pankaj n.d.: 3).

Majumadar described it thus, "*A tribe is a social group with territorial affiliation, endogamous, with no specialisation of function ruled by tribal officers hereditary or otherwise, united in language or dialect, recognising social distance with other tribes, caste, without any social obloquy attaching to them as it does in the caste structure following tribal traditions, beliefs and customs illiberal*" (Majumadar cited in Pankaj n.d.: 4).

The understanding of a tribe as a distinct social territorial group is what gives the concept of tribal its distinctive conceptual meaning. This makes the tribal a bona-fide member of a tribe. Therefore, tribals are the demographic foundation and builders of territorial social communities. They are the building blocks of a tribe. Hence, tribal or tribalism can be said to be the identity consciousness of an individual that he or she belongs to a tribe. Tribalism in modern multi-ethnic societies such as Nigeria had been whipped up in national dialogue and contestations in the form of identity and ethnic politics. Identity politics can best be conceptualised as a struggle to preserve distinctive identity of members of a tribe and protect them from undue marginalisation and stereotypes capable of resulting in tribals being short-changed in resource distribution. Thus, the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy explained that identity politics seeks to secure the political freedom of a specific constituency or tribe marginalised within a larger social context (Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy 2020 n.d.). Identity politics is the general catalyst firing secessionism and self-determination movement such as Biafra and Yoruba nation in Nigeria. Ethnic politics as conceptualised by Okwudiba Nnoli (1978: 35-39) is the appeal to ethnic or tribal sentiments as a basis for obtaining political support and patronage in Nigeria. Onwuka Njoku (2001: 244) also conceived ethnic politics as the use of ethnic or tribal factor to determine who gets what, when and how in Nigerian resource distribution.

The foregoing conceptualisation of the tribe, tribal and identity and ethnic politics is anchored on the historical or evolutionary theory of state origin. This theory considers the tribe and by extension the State as neither a product of divine nor deliberate human contrivance, but a product of natural evolution (Appadorai 1975: 36). It is a collection of people united by common ties historically forged over time and space. J.W. Burgess, one of the proponents of

the historical or evolutionary theory, argued that the development of human societies was a gradual and continuous historical process that enabled humanity's move from an imperfect beginning towards a perfect and universal organisation of mankind (Burgess cited in Appadorai 1975: 36). Therefore, the historical theorisation of social groups such as tribes and states traced their origin beyond the environment and geography of a people. It identified forces such as kinship, religion, war and political consciousness as the historical triggers of nation or tribe building. From earliest times, kinship (blood relationship) established the foundation of tribe and tribalism. It was the strongest bond that first bound people together as first families, kindred and then tribes.

Kinship was followed by religion in early nation building because it united people under the worship of a common deity. Subsequently, war and migration caused people from different stocks, families and kindred to bond as one for security and safety. These three factors paved the way for political consciousness to emerge as the icing on the cake of nation (tribe) or state building either through social contract or any other means. Political conscious facilitated the formation of government to hold and keep people together as one tribe, nation or state. This implies that families and tribes are the basic unites of the Nigerian federation its government must protect. Thus, the national unity of the country can best be achieved through the protection and satisfaction of the need of all tribal identities. Hence, it is a development imperative for tribal differences to be respected and preserved. This would aid unity in diversity, and the fair distribution of political and economic resources to all tribes and tribal in Nigeria. The tribe must not die for the nation to live. Conversely, knowledge of tribe and tribal peculiarities and dissimilarities keep the nation alive by guiding policymakers in development planning and social services delivery in a way that no tribe is left behind.

Geography and Tribe and Tribal of Esanland

The geography of a people, over time, remains a significant factor that continues to shape and condition the life of the people and their level of development (Njoku 2001: 5). It suffices to state here that, this claim is very much true of the Esan people. Hence, the researchers' reconstruction

of the tribe and tribal origin of Esanland hang on understanding the interplay between the Esan people and their environment, and how this interface conditioned and forged their independent political and socio-economic life (Njoku 2001). Esanland (*Oto Esan*) occupies a total land mass of 2,814.347 square kilometres out of Edo state's 19,794 square kilometres and Nigeria's 923,763 square kilometres territory (Edo State Statistical Year Book 2013: 1).

Esanland is a plateau located in the northeast of Benin City, in the present day Edo State. It is eighty kilometres (80km) away from the state capital. The region is bounded in the northeast by Etsako, in the northwest by Owan, in the southwest by Orhiomwon and Ika, and in the south and southeast by Aniocha and Oshimili, and on the eastern frontiers, Esanland is bounded by the River Niger (Okoduwa 2018: 1). The region is about 134 meters above sea level and situated on a plateau that rises from the Orhiomo River and drains into the Orle River, Orbu River, Uto River, and other small streams (National Archives of Nigeria 1982: xiii). Esanland is a tropical rainforest economic zone characterised by high temperatures, high humidity, and heavy rainfall in most parts of the year. The constant rainfall in the region accounts for presence of tall tress such as the Iroko trees, Mahogany tree, Ebony tree, *Okpekepe* tree, *Obeche* tree and *Agba* tree, with palm trees and mango trees being the most dominant in the forest. They create a magnificent forest canopy, usually over 100 feet in height. Below the forest canopy are small tress, woody plants, creepers, and the usually difficult to penetrate tangle of lianas (Oboli 1971: 35). Esan communities such as Ubiaja, Ohordua, Ugboha and Ilushi have links to the River Niger. This contributes to sustaining the region's water cycle. The water cycle made water available for domestic, agricultural and industrial use through rainfall. Kelvin Shillington observed that the seasonal rainfall that is experienced in tropical areas of Africa like Esanland naturally occurs when the sun is out at mid-day, causing heat, and water to evaporate from the oceans at their highest levels. This, in turn, triggers onshore winds from the Indian and Atlantic Oceans that carry moist air over Esanland and other tropical areas in Africa, where it later falls as heavy rain (Shillington 2012: 3-4).

The abundance of rainfall in Esan accounts for the fertility of its lands, which makes the region suitable for farming. Its green and lush vegetation

and bushes make Esanland a safe haven for a bio-diversity of herbivorous and carnivorous wildlife such as monkeys, snakes, rodents, antelopes, deer, grass-cutters, insects, snails and birds, among other predatory and non-predatory animals, to thrive on the forest floor under the forest canopy (Okoduwa 2016). Thus, the forest, wildlife, and the humanoid in Esan were yoked in a mutually beneficial trinity of relationship. The Esan forest provides homeland and sustenance for its human and animal inhabitants, while the forest on the other hand depends on the Esan peoples (Esanland.org), who occupy the pinnacle of the food chain, to maintain the delicate balance of life in the forested ecosystem. As a collective, the Esan people according to Nigeria's 2006 population census numbers 591,534 (Citypopulation.de 2019; Edo Statistical Year Book 2013) and have the propensity for a steady projected annual population increase. However, the slow population growth of Esan as at 2006 does not in any way suggest that the region experienced a decline in birth and an increase in death rate during the period. Rather it is a clear demonstration of the impact of rural-urban drift and illegal trans-border migrations in search of greener pastures bedeviling Esan. They are rapidly depopulating the rural area. For instance, as of 1949, the population of Esanland was 111,000 (McCall 1949: 15), and when compared with the cumulative projected 2015 population figure of 754,244, sixty-six (66) years after, the difference of 643,244 (National Population Commission cited in Edo Statistical Year Book 2013) makes the slow population growth and overall demographic decline of Esanland crystal clear.

In modern Nigeria, Esanland is made up of thirty-five (35) tribal clans. They are *Amalu, Egoro, Ewohimi, Emu, Ekpoma, Ewossa, Ebelle, Ewu, Ewatto, Igueben, Irrua, Ido, Ifeku, Illushi, Irukepen, Iyenlen, Ogwa, Okalo, Opoji, Orowa, Oria, Ohordua, Okhuesan, Onogholo, Udo, Ubiaja, Ugboha, Ujiogba, Ugbegun, Ugun, Uromi, Urohi, Ukhun, Uroh, and Uzea* (Esanland.org 2022). These consanguineous tribals are federated into Nigeria as five Local Government Areas and one Senatorial District for administrative convenience. They are Esan North, Esan South-East, Esan Central, Esan West, and Igueben LGAs, and the Edo Central Senatorial District. The people of Esanland are culturally homogenous, and they are tied together by the Esan language. According to R.E. Bradbury, the Esan language belongs to the Edoid

language of the Kwa language group of Western Sudanic language just like Benin, Yoruba, Igbira, Igala, Igbo, and Ijaw (Bradbury 1957: 13-14). But as a cultural area, the Esan peoples exhibit significant degrees of cultural similarities not only with one another, but also with the Benin people and even with their Niger Delta neighbours (particularly with the Isoko and Urhobo people). They also exhibit a significant degree of cultural dissimilarities with other Nigerian cultures (Onwuejeogwu 1992: 9).

However, over time and space the Benin superiority complex over the Edoid peoples bred the distorted Benin hypothesis of Esan origin, and that of all Edoid peoples. Benin traditional knowledge systems that underscored the Benin the superiority complex over other tribes in the region include Benin proverbial sayings such as "*Edo a suwa wan, Edo Odion; wa suwa Edo, Edo Odion*" meaning when a Bini man comes to the house of other tribal members in Edo state, the Bini man is the senior, and when people of other tribes comes to the house of a Bini man, the Bini man is the senior. There is also the view that "*Oba yan oto se ewebo*" meaning that the Benin monarchy owns and rules all lands in Edo and beyond. These epistemologies are arguably the anchorage of the Benin hypothesis of Esan origin, which this study seeks to reposition.

Linguistic evidence debunks the Benin hypothesis of Esan origin and proved that the Esan people arguably emerged in Edoland before the Bini people. Patrick Darling (1998: 151) observed that related languages such as the Esan and Bini languages are relic forms of a single protolanguage modified over time. But the Esan language arguably came into spoken existence before the Bini language. It is estimated that 800 to over 1000 years separated the Bini and Esan language (Darling 1998: 153). Furthermore, archaeological studies carried out by Darling on the Esan earthenware (moat) showed that the earliest was constructed sometime in the mid-first millennium A.D., and the age of these moats debunks claims that the Esan tribe emerged from Benin in the 15th century (Darling 1998: 178). Therefore, Darling (1998) concludes that founders of the Esan tribe came from all around Edoland, not just Benin. Since their earliest tribal existence, Okoduwa (2018: 1) asserts that the Esan language had been the generic name given to the varieties of linguistic patterns (dialects) spoken by the people of Esanland.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are to unblock the ethnography of Esan historical origin, and to debunk the 15th century Benin hypothesis of Esan origin. It seeks to trace the origin of the Esan tribe in pre-colonial Nigeria beyond the 15th century. The study would demonstrate that the Esan people had distinct autochthonous tribal existence. The study would also establish that the ethnographies that packaged and portrayed Benin history as the history of every tribe and tribal in Edoland is ahistorical. Lastly, the study seeks to make a case for tribal protectionism in Nigeria through statutory and legal frameworks as obtainable in more developed climes.

METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out using the historical research methodology and case study research design. The method entailed using the past to explain the present and to make futuristic projections. It also involved the adoption of the Esan tribe as a representative study population for other mini tribes in Nigeria. Being an ethnographic and social research, field works and communications were central to achieving the objectives of the study. It engaged both primary and secondary materials as its sources of history. Primary materials such as archival materials, intelligence report and oral traditions retrieved through unstructured interview were collated and interpreted. The oral evidence was extracted from elderly members of the Esan tribe. The researcher employed the random sampling method in determining the interviewed informants. To achieve objectivity and reduce subjectivity and bias, the primary data were corroborated with secondary materials such as books, articles in learned journals, Edo state statistical yearbook and online materials. The method of data analysis utilised in this study was mainly the qualitative method of data analysis. This made the research essentially a descriptive ethnography.

RESULTS

This study finds that the Esan tribe of Edo state, Nigeria had an autochthonous origin that stretches beyond the 15th century Benin migration hypothesis of the tribal origin. The *Esan-fua*

tradition and the Ijiesan legend do not accurately historicise the origin of the tribes and tribal of Esanland. Linguistic evidence proves them to be unreliable. The Esan language was believed to have been in spoken existence before the Bini language. The Esan language was found to have been separated from their common stock thousands of years ago before the Bini language. This study traced the origin of the Esan language to the division of human languages at the Tower of Babel. Therefore, the Benincentric hypothesis of Esan origin was found to be ahistorical and a misconstruction of the Esan tribe and tribal. Archaeological study conducted in Esanland by Patrick Darling proved that the Esan moat constructed by the Esan people had been in existence longer than the 15th century. Therefore, some of the fault-lines of the Benin hypothesis of Esan origin are that it is consistent with hamitic hypothesis, and it stereotypes the Esan people as Binis.

The study also found that in a multi-ethnic society like Nigeria with over 350 tribes, securing the distinct tribal identity of the people could go a long way in aiding national development planning and achieving unity in diversity. This study in tribes and tribal is also invaluable for resource allocation and social services delivery. The historical data provided could help regularise and normalise resource allocation in the Nigerian federation, where mini tribes are usually merged or overshadowed by the mega tribes. When scarce political and economic resources are being distributed in the country, mini tribes usually end up being sidelined and marginalised. This is because the mega tribes overshadowing mini tribes are usually treated as one and the same with them. Hence, by highlighting the tribe and tribal peculiarity and dissimilarity between Esan and Benin, the study asserts that unity in diversity begins with studies in tribes and tribal. This is because the survival of the Nigerian nation is inextricably tied to the survival and protection of its tribes. Lastly, it finds that tribal protectionism measures are critical to securing the future of mini tribes in the Nigerian federation, and for dispelling ethnographic distortions of historical truth. More so, it finds it to be germane for engendering peaceful nation-to-nation or tribe-to-tribe relationships in Nigeria, and for consolidating Nigeria's unity and sovereignty.

DISCUSSION

The Benin Hypotheses of Esan Origin

The origin of the Esan people of Nigeria is generally traced to Benin Kingdom. But this is a misconception that inadvertently stereotypes Esan people as Bini. However, as it is true of other peoples of Nigeria, so it is true that the historical origin of Esan people is shrouded in myth and traditions. To this end, Obaro Ikime argued that, “*If there is any one aspect of Nigerian history about which it is impossible to make definitive statements, it is the issue of origin. We just do not know from which specific centres the various Nigerian peoples came*” (Ikime 2018: 54).

Hence, over the years, there has come to be several recurrent and novel debates on this issue, as part of the never-ending quest of the peoples of Nigeria for a distinct national identity and place in the modern Nigerian state. The growing efforts to chronicle and reconstruct the origin of the Esan people within the broader Nigerian context, is no exception. Most especially as Fred Burke and Michael Kublin have pointed out that the history and contribution of the more than eight hundred (800) ethnic groups of Africa, particularly that of its mini states, has not been adequately incorporated into the extant literatures on African studies (Burke and Kublin 1991: ix).

However, previous studies on Esan aimed at bridging this burgeoning gap, as obtainable in other societies, have paradoxically produced a plethora of conflicting and at times complementary debates on the question of Esan origin. Generally, in reconstructing the origin of African societies, it is customary for African historians to rely on myths, traditions, and migration accounts, and even on linguistic and archaeological evidences to probe far beneath the layers of the pre-historic times. Therefore, in Esan studies, it is also common and historically appropriate for Esan historians to employ these same sources of history in reconstructing the origin of the Esan people, most especially when they intend to probe beyond the fifteenth century, when it is popularly claimed that the Esan people emerged from Benin.

Mythology and Legendary Traditions

Across Esanland, the traditions of origin of the individual chiefdoms differ from one com-

munity to another. But what is not debatable is the fact that they are rooted in myths and legendary traditions. The Egoro, Okpoji, Ewu, Uromi and Ewohimi peoples of Esan trace their origin to the high heavens. Oral traditions in these lands hold that their ancestors descended from the sky, while in some quarters here, it is believed that their founders emerged from underneath the ground (National Archives of Nigeria 1982: xiii). According to Ewu traditions, R.E. Bradbury writes that the Esan ancestor was subsequently conquered by the Oba of Benin, who took him to Benin and gave him a wife and followers (in an apparent attempt to establish Benin’s suzerainty over him) before sending him back to Esanland with a new title, *Onojie* (Bradbury 1957: 63).

The Benin conquest and domination of the ancestors of Esan laid the foundation for the emergence of the highly popularised Benin-centric tradition of Esan origin. Key proponents of the Benin-centric tradition of Esan origin are Jacob U. Egharevba and Christopher G. Okojie, who in their respective seminal work, “*A Short History of Benin*” and “*Esan Native Laws and Custom with Ethnographic Studies of the Esan People*”, championed this school of thought. Today, in Esan studies, the Benin-centric tradition of Esan origin is very strong and has two strands, that is, the Esanfua tradition and the Ijiesan legend.

The Esan-Fua Tradition

The Esan-fua tradition holds that the origin of the Esan people is traceable to the fifteenth century, when they dispersed from Benin during the reign of Oba Ewuare, to protect their human right and freedom, and as an expression of their rejection of the Benin draconian legislation. Okojie used the linguistic uniformity between the Esan language and customs with that of the Bini people to support the Esan-fua school of thought” of Esan people origin (Okojie 1994: 17). Providing further insight into this tradition of Esan origin, Okojie opines that, it was the selfishness of the Benin monarchy under Oba Ewuare that triggered the Esan secession from Benin in pre-colonial Nigeria, that is, the demographic and geographical separation of Esan from Benin, as it is today.

During the period, Okojie (1994) and Egharevba (1968) reveal that Oba Ewuare lost Kuoboyuwa, his first son and the Edaiken of Uselu, and Ezuwarha,

his second son and chief of Iyowa, the same day. The tragic event saddened the King and prompted the bereaved monarch to enact, what is at best, a draconian legislation in his kingdom. He decreed a compulsory mourning period for all his subjects to last for three (3) years. During this mourning period, he prohibited his subjects from engaging in the following activities:

1. Having sexual relations with their wives
2. Sweeping and washing their houses or compounds
3. Making fire and eating cooked food

Consequently, to escape from the impending starvation and pestilence, which hang in the balance in Benin as a result of consumption of uncooked meals and poor hygiene, the ancestors of Esanland fled Benin into the Bush (forests), where they established their own autonomous communities, thereby first establishing Irrua. However, prior to the total exodus of Esan people from Benin, their ancestors hitherto trekked for miles into the Bush to cook their food and eat in secret, and then return to Benin City. But when they got tired of this, they (ancestors of Esanland), along with others whose wives were already pregnant and wanted to escape the bitter consequences, fled Benin for good (Okojie 1994: 21-22).

In time, a Benin official, Honest Uwague, brought information to Oba Ewuare that his subjects were fleeing the city, and that most quarters have become empty. Oba Ewuare unsure of the truthfulness of the information, confident that his subjects could not dare to defy his orders, sent his stalwarts to the affected quarters to make independent findings about the residents. When the King's messengers arrived and made enquiry about the whereabouts of the people in the affected quarters, they were told by the remaining few residents that "Esan fua" meaning they have fled away (Okojie 1994). It is from this response Okojie and Egharevba claim that the Esan people got their name, which was in time Anglicised by the British as Ishan.

The Ijiesan Legend

The Ijiesan legend is the second strand of the Benin-centric tradition of Esan origin. It claims that the Esan people are the descendants of a Benin Prince named Ijiesan. According to Pa

Amedu Bennedith Ehimen (Personal Interview with Ehimen 2019), oral tradition holds that Prince Ijiesan had an abominable sexual relation with Queen Ekpen, one of the wives of a very powerful Oba of Benin. Consequently, he was arrested and imprisoned by the King, and awaiting execution. The Queen, who opposed the death penalty levelled on Ijiesan for his crime, was reported to have used her mystical powers to break him free from prison.

Tradition holds that Queen Ekpen removed her "azuwa" (hair clip) from her hair and commanded it to turn into a rabbit. Then, the *azuwa* turned into two hundred and one (201) rabbits, which subsequently dug a long underground tunnel under the cover of darkness from the back of the prison wall to the cell of Ijiesan. Prince Ijiesan escaped from prison using this tunnel, and he eloped with the Queen in the night. At daybreak, when it was gathered that the prisoner had escaped, the Oba of Benin sent a search party after them, to bring back Ijiesan dead or alive. The search party caught up with the runaways at *Oregbeme* where they wanted to execute Ijiesan. However, the Queen came to his rescue once again. She used her mystical powers and cast a spell on the palace guards and she ordered them to return to the King and tell him that, they indeed caught up with the fleeing party, but as they were about to strike down Ijiesan, he jumped into the Bush and fled. Consequently, when the search party returned to the palace, they did as instructed. Regarding Prince Ijiesan and the Queen, they reported to the King as "*Esan fua*" meaning they jumped into the bush and escaped (Personal Interview with Ehimen 2019).

They migrated farther into the forest in search of a place of settlement until they got to *Ehor*. But they had to leave *Ehor* and migrate farther into the bush, because as observed by Ijiesan, the region was too close to Benin. More so, because of the close proximity between *Ehor* and Benin, Ijiesan believed that the Oba of Benin would easily hear of his activities if he settled there. It is this that informed his naming the place '*Ehor*', which literally means, "they will hear". They continued their migration until they got to a place in the bush, where tradition holds that tigers gathered to warmly receive and welcome Ijiesan and the Queen by wagging their tails at them and the migrants responded by playing with the tigers and rubbing their hands on the head of the tigers.

Consequently, Ijiesan named the place ‘*Iruokpen*’ meaning, “where tigers gathered”. From Iruokpen, they migrated further until they got to a place Ijiesan named *Ekpoma*. Because he believed that from there onward, they were now free people, who are no more slaves of Benin. Hence, he asserts that they will henceforth be producing and gathering for themselves and no more for Benin. This is made very clear in his christening of the place ‘*Ekpoma*’, which literally means “for our own pocket” (Personal Interview with Ehimen 2019).

From Ekpoma, Ijiesan moved farther up until they got to *Irrua*. Upon reaching Irrua, Prince Ijiesan and the Queen settled down permanently. In Irrua, Ijiesan built his house under a “big tree” and said: “Here I build my house”, which means ‘*Irrua*’ in Esan language, and this has ever since remained the name of the place (Personal Interview with Ehimen 2019). Subsequently, Prince Ijiesan became the first Onojie of Irrua. From Irrua, it is believed that Ijiesan expanded the boundary of Esanland to *Egbehi* where his wife gave birth to his first child, and from Egbehi to *Uromi*, where he claimed all of Esanland saying, “*Urhomen nan khin*” meaning he is the owner of all the land and can move anywhere he wanted. Hence, that place came to be known as Uromi.

However, when the Oba of Benin got news of the whereabouts of Ijiesan, he dispatched his soldiers to arrest him. But on finding Ijiesan, he used mystical powers to cast a spell on the Benin soldiers and turned them to his followers and gave them land to settle on. Thus, Benin soldiers ended up building more Esan communities. Benin soldiers were reported to have established *Ubiaja*, *Igueben*, and *Ewohimi* (Personal Interview with Ehimen 2019). Gradually other Esan communities were formed one after the other until the present number was reached. Corroborating this oral evidence, Christopher Okojie observes, “*Long before 1460... Often an offending Chief, Warrior or Prince (who have erred against the Oba of Benin), to escape a sure and fatal punishment, fled often, followed by a few of his servants and sympathizers. In such cases, they had to trek far into unhealthy jungle with nothing but fruits for food, living under circumstances equal to the Oba taking them as dead... They had to live in tiny repressed state, so that no one would know or suspect the existence of living people in the area*” (Okojie 1994: 23).

Independent/Autochthonous Origin of Esan People

The confusion and division of human languages in the days of Nimrod did not only bring the building of the “Tower of Babel” to a halt, but it also triggered human migration and dispersal across the globe. Consequently, Samir Amin observes, “The displacement of peoples and individuals is not peculiar to West Africa... Migratory population... Built up in newly colonised areas and organised societies, which were both structured and complete (Amin 1974: 65). This argument supports the peopling of Esanland before the 15th century, and debunks the Benin-centric hypothesis of Esan people’s origin.

Historical records reveal that over 10,000 years ago, most of the people of West Africa, lived and thrived in the Sahara, which was then a fertile grassland with large rocks and mountains, as well as vast rolling stretches of sand (Oyebade 2000: 9), before climate change caused the desertification of the Sahara and forced migration of people into the sub-Saharan region of Africa. Therefore, the people of Esan like other inhabitants of sub-Saharan Africa through a long historical process of migration and settlement arguably got to their present location in Edoland, Nigeria. Understandably, H.O.B. Oboli writes, “*Very little is known of the earliest inhabitants of Nigeria (Esan people inclusive). The present peoples comprise many different groups, who arrived at one time or another; usually from the east or northeast*” (Oboli 1971: 114).

Consequently, Anthony Okoduwa contends that the second stage in the peopling of Esanland began with the influx of Savannah dwellers into the forest-Savannah zone, who as deductible from the argument of Samir Amin, settled in, build-up in Esan as elsewhere, and integrated with its aborigines and first settlers called the *Ihoholele* (Okoduwa 2018: 3-9). These Ihoholele people were small quick moving humanoids, adept tree climbers, and usually ate their food and drank water while squatting. They were mainly hunters and gatherers, whose staple food was wild yam (Okoduwa 2018).

Understandably, Patrick Darling in his study, “*A Legacy in Earth: Ancient Benin and Ishan, Southern Nigeria*”, made a case for the independent origin of Esan people on the grounds

that the separation of Esan language from Bini language took place over a thousand years ago, and that the earliest earthen works in Esanland constructed in the region like in other areas along the Savannah forest ecotone in the mid-first millennium A.D. (Darling 1998: 178) serve as proof. The Esan earthen works (moats) were built on a topography that is relatively flat and sloppy, with an average slope of about 1°38 on the surface with an elevation ranging from 350 to 460 metres above sea level (Darling cited in Egbefo and Ibieugbe 2016: 75). Hence, it is safe to argue that it was the environment of Esanland that gave the Esan moat its most distinguishing features from that of Benin.

The earthen works referred to by Darling, Okoduwa reveals are known as *Iyala* or moats in Esanland. The earth wall was 4-5 times longer than the Great Wall of China, and it covers about six and half thousand square kilometres of rain forest with a complicated network of enclosures, and it took over one hundred and fifty million man hours to construct them (McWhirter cited in Okoduwa 2018: 2-3) for the purpose of defence against predators, and to serve as boundaries surrounding the habitation of Esan people (Darling cited in Okoduwa 2018: 3). Thus, based on the linguistic and archaeological evidences, Okoduwa insists that the peopling of Esanland dates as far back as the Stone Age (Personal Interview with Okoduwa 2019) long before the 15th century Benin phenomenon depicted by the Esan-fua tradition and the Ijiesan legend of Esan origin. Therefore, this paper maintains that the migration of people from the Sahara coupled with the integration of Benin migrants into Esanland best explains the peopling of the region. Because they demonstrate that the Esan people had an independent origin without Benin. They clarify the misconceived Benin tradition of Esan origin that stereotypes the people as *Binis*.

Pattern of Settlement of Esan Tribals

The people of Esanland in pre-colonial times lived in close-knit communities. The demography of the different Esan tribes was uneven and randomly distributed according to the forces of population growth. It was the differentials between factors of population growth such as birth rate, death rate, infant mortality rate, maternal health and fertility levels that determined Esan communities'

sizes over time and space. They made some Chiefdoms of Esanland in pre-colonial times more densely populated than others, and they made other communities to be organised along the lines of small cottages, villages and small towns consisting an overall of about 165 people per square mile (Okojie 1994: 10). Bradbury puts it this way, "*The population is very unevenly distributed. The highest densities are found in the northern, central, and southern parts of the area (Esanland). Uromi has 621 persons per square mile, Irrua 374, and Ekpoma, Ewu, Ugbegun, Igueben, and Ewohimi group of chiefdoms 200 or more. Opoji, Ubiaja, and Ekpon have between 100 and 150 persons per square mile... and the remaining communities, less* (Bradbury 1957: 62).

Thus, the Esan people exist and thrive in compact settlements or communities called *Egbele*. The *Egbele* was made up of several quarters called *Idumu*. It was built on open land in the forest and away from rivers. In the pre-colonial period, the emergence of the *Egbele* owes its existence to the fact that the Esan people built their houses in clusters known as "*Ughele*" using mud. They used woods to construct their doors and windows, and leaves or palm-mats were used for the roofing (Bradbury 1957).

Ezekiel Inojie disclosed that building of houses during the period was a communal effort in Esanland. The Kindred (*Iwieha*), majorly the youths, usually come together to build houses for family members, especially those intending to marry and start their own families (Personal Interview with Inojie 2018). Houses are usually built very close to other family houses, and its building brings untold joy to all members of the family. The completion of a home is usually accompanied with singing, dancing and festivities. Generally, while the men dig for the clay to use in building the mud house, the women fetch the water (Personal Interview with Inojie 2018). Building a house marked the start of family life (*Uelen*) and growth of the Esan tribe. The *Uelen* (family), the basic unit of Esan society, grew to become the *Idumu* headed by the *Omigiogbe* (the oldest member of the family). The *Idumu* in turn grew to become the *Egbele* and the *Egbele* grew to become the *Igue* (Village). It is instructive to note that during this period, the pattern of settlement of the Esan people, their type of houses, and their building materials were to a

large extent determined by their environment. Hence, it is safe to assert that the environment of Esanland contributed significantly to nation or tribal building during the period. Apart from influencing housing and settlement, the heavily forested and bushy nature of Esan topography also made it difficult for the people to build a centralised political system of government. Thus, they flourished in the forest region as autochthonous tribes and politically Chiefdoms during the period of study. Therefore, it is worth stressing here that the inhabitation, settlement and peopling of Esanland before the fifteenth century demonstrate that Benin hypothesis of Esan origin such as the Esan-fua tradition and Ijjesan legend do not historically account for the origin of the tribe and tribal. What is certain in this study is the fact that the Benin emigrants, who migrated into Esanland in the 15th century, settled into an already existing and functional tribal autochthonous society.

The Imperative of Mini Tribal Protectionism in Nigeria

Modernisation through colonial political reforms such as regionalisation and federalisation of Nigeria's tribes and tribal in 1946 and 1954 respectively, were not deliberate British design to endanger its mini tribes. But they nonetheless set in motion the imperative of mini tribal protectionism in Nigeria. Ab-initio the spirit of administrative convenience that fired colonial political reforms such as the 1914 amalgamation, regionalism and federalism paradoxically obscured the sights of the colonial authorities to the danger of yoking the horse (mega tribe) and ass (mini tribe) together. Therefore, the colonial social contract was sealed without consultation and consent of Nigeria's tribe and tribal. The catastrophic consequence of the colonial political surgery to nation building in Nigeria before long started manifesting itself. It crystallised in the rise of negative tribalism and ethnic politics that stirred up unhealthy competition among the tribe and tribal of Nigeria. This tribal competition was aimed at dominating and even subsuming others, particularly the mini tribes. It culminated in political marginalisation and economic exclusionism of tribal minorities, and even marginalisation in the pages of ethnographic texts. Mini tribal history was glossed over, subsumed, or consigned to

the fringes of few pages in literatures on the mega tribe. Mini tribal marginalisation in colonial Nigeria gave impetus to tribal emancipation movements such as the Calabar-Ogoja-Rivers Movement, the Benin-Delta Movement, the "Otu Edo" Movement, and the United Middle Belt Movement. They generated so much heat that the colonial authorities were forced to look into the issue of tribal minorities in Nigeria.

In 1957, the Sir Henry Willink Commission was set up and charged with the mandate of investigating and allaying tribal minorities' fears, grievances, and agitations (The Willink Commission Report 1958). After diligent consultation and dialogue with Nigeria's tribal minorities, the commission found their fears and grievances were valid and pertinent. It found that in the three regions, north, east and west, tribal minorities' rights and privileges were been violated with impunity. But instead of agreeing to the demand of the tribal minorities for the disintegration of Nigeria through the creation of several states, the Willink Commission recommended mini tribal protectionism as a means of allaying minorities' unrest. Chapter 14 section 2 of the commission report states, "*In each region, we came to the conclusion that on its own merits a separate state would not provide a remedy for the fears expressed. We were clear all the same that even when allowance had been made for exaggeration, there remained a body of genuine fear and that the future was regarded with real apprehension... We put forward remedies, which we believe will meet the situation*" (Willink Commission Report 1958: 88).

The recommended remedies were constitutional safeguards and respect for the fundamental human rights of tribal minorities. Foremost among them were rule of law, fair hearing, independent judiciary and a strong police force (Willink Commission Report 1958: 99-100). These measures were considered expedient for engendering mini tribal protectionism and securing Nigeria's unity and sovereignty. Therefore, in keeping with twenty-first century global best practices of tribal protectionism this study argues that the establishment of a Ministry of Mini Tribal Affairs in Nigeria through acts of parliament, the creation of Mini Tribal Development Commission, National Tribal Dialogue Convention, and the signing of State-Mini Tribal Treaties would help secure the interest and welfare of mini tribes in the Nigerian federation. They will also help to protect mini

tribal identities, dispel tribal submersions in all its ramifications, and enshrine good tribe-to-tribe relationship in Nigeria. However, there is also a national security imperative for Nigeria to balance mini tribal protectionism with mini tribal criminal responsibility. Constitutional safeguards against intentional Mini Tribal menace, truancy and anomie must be put in place. This is because the perpetration of crime and criminalities in pluralistic societies is neither the exclusive problem nor divine mandate of the Mega Tribes. In the USA for example, the enactment of The Tribal Law and Order Act (TLOA) of 2010 highlights this reality. The TLOA was promulgated to make Mini Tribals good and law abiding citizens of America. To achieve this, it mandated the American Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) to establish and implement a tribal crime data collection system in consultation and conjunction with the indigenous Indian tribes (US Department of Justice 2021). Thus, in Nigeria this study insists that the recommended agencies and protocols for Mini Tribal protectionism should be saddled with a dual mandate. They should serve to protect Nigeria's Mini Tribes and keep its Mini Tribals crime free.

CONCLUSION

The historical origin of the tribe and tribal of Esanland are two parts of the same coin. It is traceable to a long process of communal and nation building that predates the 15th century propagated by the Benin hypothesis of Esan origin. Linguistic and archaeological evidences proved that the Esan people existed as an autochthonous tribe thousands of years before the rise of Oba Ewuare in Benin. Therefore, this paper argued that the tribes and tribal that make up Esanland had their own independent origin in pre-colonial Nigeria. It maintained that the migration of people from Benin Kingdom in the 15th century did not account for the origin of Esan people as one of Nigeria's tribe and tribal. Fleeing Benin migrants from the draconian legislation of Oba Ewuare only caused demographic change in Esanland through integration with its tribal aboriginals. The paper argued that the dispersal of tribes and tribal at the Tower of Babel prompted speakers of the Esan language to band together as a tribe. They migrated to their present location in Nigeria over time and space through

a long process of migration and settlement. Thus, the tribe was already established and politically functional by the time Bini migrants arrived in the 15th century. Consequently, the paper concluded that the hypothesis that the Esan people originated from Benin is ahistorical. It is a historical distortion that at best stereotypes the Esan people as Binis. Therefore, this paper concludes that tribal protectionism is critical to securing the future of mini tribes in the Nigerian federation, and for dispelling tribal historical distortions that submerges Nigeria's mini tribes. It also is good for engendering peaceful nation-to-nation or tribe-to-tribe relationships, and consolidating Nigeria's unity and sovereignty.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations of this study are that Nigeria as country and Nigerians as a people need to pay attention to the tribal composition and differences within the nation. This would help eliminate hasty generalisation and stereotyping of mini tribes in the country. For example, in southern Nigeria all the tribes and tribal in the northern part of the country are considered to be Hausa people. Outside Edo state, all the tribes and tribal in the region are generally classified as Bini people. This situation is detrimental to nation building and social harmony. To address this, the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) must be repositioned to achieve its founding objectives. Young Nigerians must be allowed to serve Nigeria after graduating from tertiary institutions of learning outside their tribal domain and catchment areas. The compulsory teaching of Nigerian indigenous languages in primary and secondary schools should be augmented with studies in the nation's tribes and tribal. The scope of Nigerian history in tertiary institutions should be expanded beyond the majority tribes. It should be a realistic study of all Nigerian peoples and culture. The writing of block historiography must be checkmated. This would ensure that the history of Benin for instance is not packaged and presented as the history of Esanland. The study also recommends the creation of the Ministry of Mini Tribal Affairs and Mini Tribal Development Commission in Nigeria through an act of parliament to safeguard the interests and welfare of Nigeria's mini tribes. Lastly, it recommends the organisation of periodic National Tribal Dialogue Conferences to renegotiate Nigeria's social contract

and establish amendable mutually beneficial binding State-Mini Tribal Treaties.

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