

A LECTURE PRESENTED BY:

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OF

**THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY/INTERNATIONAL
STUDIES,**

**UNIVERSITY OF CALABAR,
ON THE OCCASION OF THE FIRST CORONATION
ANNIVERSARY CEREMONY OF THE OBONG OF
CALABAR, HIS ROYAL MAJESTY,
EDIDEM (PROF.) NTA ELIJAH HENSHAW VI.**

DATE:-

WEDNESDAY, 18TH DECEMBER, 2002

TIME:-

10.00 AM

VENUE:

CULTURAL CENTRE COMPLEX, CALABAR

THE EFIK PEOPLE

This lecture is on Efik Tribe, but permit me to modify the topic little to read the Efik people.

Anyone who can trace his descent paternally or maternally to any of the two ancient patriarchs, Efiom Ekpo or Atai Iboku, or from any of the numerous branches of the Efik genealogical tree is an Efik.

God has endowed the Efik with very unique characteristics. They are hospitable, yet proud of their race, they are patient and reliable; neat and amiable. Their cultural heritage is unique, culinary sophistication is unequalled. They love comfort, the good things of life and are a civilized race.

The Efik people came into contact with Western civilization earlier than most Nigerian groups, and have contributed much to the growth of modern day Nigeria, through their sons and daughters in the various fields of endeavour. To the glory of God, they have produced for this country the first Nigerian Inspector-General of Police – Louis Edet; the famous Nigerian boxer – Kid Hogan Bassey; the indomitable woman activist- Margaret Ekpo; the celebrated “Mr. Football” – Orok Oyo; and the renowned professor of Dental Surgery and present Efik monarch – Nta Elijah Henshaw VI.

Efik or Efik Eburutu, as they are also known were a migrant group who after centuries of sojourns in several places like Ututu, Ibom and

Uruan, finally settled at Creek town in the fourteenth century. They later crossed the Calabar River and founded other settlements such as Duke town (Atakpa), Old town (Obutong), and Henshaw Town (Nsidung) and their dependencies. From the banks of the Calabar River they spread out in various directions: north, east, south and west. Today, the Efik people can be found in at least five local government areas of the present Cross River State. These include Calabar Municipality, Calabar South, Akpabuyo, Odukpani and Bakassi local governments.

At the apex of the Efik social and political structure is the Obong today, or Grand Patriarch, who in former days was Edidem, with "Etinyin" closely following. Sometimes Etinyin was equated with the Grand patriarch, e.g. King Eyo Honesty II in the nineteenth century was often addressed as "Etinyin Eyo". Now Etinyin is clan head, and the title Obong came in 1902 when the British began to rule Efik effectively. Then closely followed is the clan, the House and the family at the base.

The Edidem or Grand Patriarch is the head of the tribe and reigns over all Efik settlements. He is advised by a council of Etuboms as well as other political and economic advisers who assist him to mediate on disputes of great importance in order to ensure peace, stability and the economic and social well-being and unity of all Efik people. The Efik are also organized in clans with clan heads now known as Etinyin at the lower zenith of this structure. The jurisdiction of the clan head is quite

extensive and this makes it imperative to rule with a body of advisers or a council of clan elders. Similarly, they are organized in Houses or Ufok, with Etuboms as heads of these numerous Houses. Among the Efik people, a man had to belong to a House. No one stayed in isolation, as it is assumed that one who cannot be linked to any of the Houses remains an alien or stranger. Members of the Efik family belong to one or the other of the Houses. These include Duke, Archibong, Cobham, Eyamba, Etim Efiom, Ntiero, Ewa Ekeng, Eyo Nsa to mention a few. The Etubom, as head of his House, settles disputes and ensures peace among the members of his house. But these powers were only limited to his own House, since all Houses acted independently. He could only mediate in matters affecting other Houses when called upon to do so.

The family is at the base of Efik social structure. The head of the family or Ibuot Ufok, is the principal decision maker in the family, and like every Efik person, is supposed to trace his ancestry to any of the two ancient Efik patriarchs. The family could be polygamous or monogamous in nature. The family head cared for the well-being of his wife or wives as the case may be, children and dependents. He is usually referred to as Ete.

Besides the social organisation of the Efik people, societies, traditional marriages, dances and entertainments were also essential components of the Efik social system.

The Efik people had a glorious past. Before the arrival of European administrators, they had an organized system of government. The Etinyin, Ekpe and Ndem, in a tripartite arrangement formed the basis of administration. From the eighteenth century when trade with the Europeans was at its peak, more powers were vested in the Ekpe fraternity, and based on this, Ekpe became adopted as the only form of government in Calabar. It performed executive, judicial and legislative functions such as enacting laws for the community, enforcing trade boycotts on erring European traders, organising labour force, and serving as a competent debt collecting machinery, amongst other functions. More interesting was the fact that the Efik people used Ekpe as a tool to bring the people of the hinterland who lived in the Cross River region within the ambit of Calabar influence. They did so by selling Ekpe grades to those who were non-Efik. Since these grades were bought from Calabar, the buyers always remained culturally attached to Ekpe in Calabar.

Economically, the geographical location of Calabar on the banks of the Calabar River influenced the traditional occupation of the Efik people. Hence, they were engaged in fishing and trading activities, which took place in the various beach markets. Being situated in the forest zone where rainfall is high, the Efik people were also "big-time" farmers. As farmers, many Efik owned plantations especially at

Akpabuyo and Creek town. There is no gainsaying that the plantation was the main source of Efik economic strength, hence the Efik adage, "Mutoho inwang, utoho Efik", meaning one who does not hail from a plantation is not an Efik.

Another important traditional occupation of the Efik, whose participants were mainly woman, was craftwork. This occupation largely illustrates their love for beauty and the arts. Traditional Efik crafts are of three different kinds namely, Appliqué, locally known as Mbufari, Brass tray industry or metal engraving which is known to the Efik as ukon Akpangkpang, and Bead embroidery or utom nkwa, as well as chewing stick carving or ukap-økøk.

From the seventeenth century, the Efik people came into closer contact with the British traders through the Calabar River which acted as the link between Calabar and the Atlantic Ocean. They became involved for the first time in international trade with the Europeans. Articles of trade included slaves, initially and from the early nineteenth century, palm oil and other products. This trade brought much prosperity to Efik towns and people. Hence, Efik kings of the nineteenth century like Eyo II, Eyamba V, and the Great Duke Ephraim (Efiom Edem) had extensive influence and attracted wealth beyond the shores of Calabar. The Great Duke Ephraim, at the zenith of his power in the early nineteenth century

had acquired and colonized the area now known as Akpabuyo for the various Efik Houses.

Aside from exposing the Efik people economically, the Calabar River served as a bridge along which Western influences and Christianity arrived Calabar. The interaction between Calabar and the Europeans brought positive impact on the Efik people educationally and socially. Accordingly, some of the earliest schools in Nigeria were established in Calabar. The Duke Town School (1846) and the Hope Waddell Training Institution (1895) are gratifying examples of such schools. With the enrollment of Efik children in them many graduated as teachers, and during the protectorate era, assisted the British government in establishing new schools in the remote areas like Ididep, Ikot Ekpene, Ogoja, Asutan Ekpe, Uruan, Victoria in the Cameroon and so on.

In the words of Efiang Ukpong Aye, the renowned Efik historian, "it was seldom to find a school outside Old Calabar, the history of whose development can be discussed without mention being made of a Calabar trained teacher or head master". M. E. Noah another historian, further reiterated that, "it was the practice, once a village or community had decided to open a new school in their area, to send a team of searchers to Calabar to recruit Efik teachers because they were the ones with the highest qualification". With these illustrations, one can clearly state that

the contribution of the Efik people to the educational advancement of modern day Nigeria cannot be over emphasized and deserves to be applauded. Socially, the knowledge of the game of football and cricket first came to the Efik people through their esteemed institution, Hope Waddell Training Institution in 1902 and 1903 respectively.

As early as the 1920's, football was known as "Calabar game", and it was only in the 1930's that it was officially recognized as Nigeria's national game. Perhaps, it is in recognition of the historical antecedents of the game and his contributions to the game of football that the illustrious Efik son, Orok Oyo is known as Mr. Football.

In spite of the long interaction with Europeans, however, the Efik people cherish their culture dearly, and are proud to be identified with it. The men in their traditional *Ofon* *Isin*, *Okpomkpom*, complete with beaded shoes and cap, while the women in their *Onyonyo* and their charming hair-do clearly distinguish them from other Nigerian ethnic groups. Similarly their various local cuisines such as *Ekpangnkukwo*, *Edikang Ikong*, *Afang* and *Afia-efere* displays their sophisticated culinary skills over most groups. Not to forget their grace and charm in the various Efik dances where they display beautiful dance steps during ceremonial occasions.

On this note, I would like to conclude by saying that the Efik people have come a long way. Although labeled a minority ethnic group in modern day Nigeria, they have established their identity in various areas. We have identified some of these areas in this lecture. As a historian, I stand to say that the study of a people's past helps them to forge ahead in order to create a better future.

The Efik people have had a glorious past, it is only hoped that they will make their future even more glorious.