

BEYOND ETHNIC DIVIDES: RETHINKING ESAN AND BENIN RELATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF NIGERIAN UNITY

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Abstract

This study employs a historical methodology that integrates oral traditions, archival sources, linguistic analysis, and archaeological evidence to examine the longstanding interconnection between the Esan and Benin peoples. While dominant narratives often frame Nigerian ethnic relations in terms of division, this research challenges such perspectives by highlighting the deep historical ties between Esan and Benin. Although migration from Benin during the reign of Oba Ewuare is frequently cited as the primary origin of the Esan people, a more nuanced analysis reveals a complex history involving indigenous settlements, cultural exchanges, shared political structures and economic cooperations. The findings demonstrate that Esan and Benin have not only coexisted but have also influenced each other through governance, economic, language, and social interactions. By moving beyond a simplistic migration-versus-indigeneity dichotomy, this article underscores the historical interconnectedness of both groups and their contributions to regional cohesion. Ultimately, this study offers broader insights into Nigerian interethnic relations, illustrating how shared heritage and historical collaboration can serve as a foundation for national unity.

Key words: migration-versus-indigeneity, Cultural Exchange, Shared Heritage, National Unity, Historical Ties

Introduction

Nigeria's ethnic diversity is often framed as a source of division, with historical narratives reinforcing distinctions between groups rather than their shared histories.¹ However, a closer examination of interethnic relationships can offer a more nuanced perspective—one that highlights cooperation, cultural exchange, and mutual influence. The relationship between the Esan and Benin people provides a compelling example of such historical interconnectedness.

While some accounts suggest that Esan originated from Benin due to migration during the reign of Oba Ewuare (c. 1440–1473), other narratives and archaeological evidence point to the existence of indigenous Esan communities before this period.² The long-standing interactions between Esan and Benin reflect a history of

diplomacy, cultural integration, and shared governance, challenging the rigid ethnic boundaries often emphasized in contemporary discourse. By exploring these historical ties, this article rethinks Esan-Benin relations as a model for Nigerian unity, demonstrating how interethnic cooperation can serve as a foundation for national cohesion.

The Esan Fua Tradition and Benin Influence

One of the most widely accepted theories of Esan origin is the **Esan Fua** tradition, which attributes the formation of Esan settlements to migration from Benin. According to this narrative, Esan originated from Benin. It is said that Esan came together as a result of Oba Ewuare's actions when he lost his two sons.³ He (Ewuare) was angered by the sudden loss of his two male children on the same day that he made very offensive laws that forbade relationship; washing and sweeping of the immediate environment; drumming and dancing; and making of fire in Benin. These laws were to be observed for three years as a sign of honour for the dead sons.⁴ Benin people may have been able to bear the verminous life of filth that the laws brought upon them; people could survive for a short time by eating ripe fruits and vegetables; everyone could survive without dancing for several years; but it was unbearably for a man who was married to one or more wives to be living with them in the same house and forget sexual relationship, especially when the forefathers who were more revered than Ewuare had made a strict law, that every man must have sexual relationship with his wife, whether hated or loved, on the first night following end of her menstruation.⁵ Unfortunately, family planning was not known then, otherwise Oba Ewuare alone would have obeyed this law.⁶

The result of the above laws was that people began to have severe infection and inflammation of the intestines and different stomach problems resulting from a long time of eating fruits. When some people could no longer bear these harsh conditions and continue to obey Oba Ewuare, they ran to farms where they could cook their food without Oba Ewuare and his agents knowing about it. At first, this was successful. But they later discovered it was not a good option because when they had trekked long distances to go and cook their food, they found themselves returning back home tired and hungry again. Thus, people began to leave Benin City in groups to settle in the farms distant from the City. Also, some people who got their wives pregnant when Ewuare's law forbade sexual relationship ran away from the City to avoid Ewuare's punishment.⁷ When Ewuare got to know that many people had ran away from his City, he asked his committed supporters to invite everyone from the different quarters that make up the City for a meeting. When they (committed supporters) got to the different sections of the City and asked after the men (who were the heads of the homes), the few people that were remaining told them – *ESAN FUA* which means *they have fled*. A large number of these people who ran away from Benin City because of the laws made by Oba Ewuare to honour his dead male children were said to have formed the Esan ancestors. Thus, up to this day, in derision, Benin people still refer to Esan as *Esan ne san fuo-ha* meaning the "Esan people who fled into the jungle."⁸

However, archaeological findings in Ekpoma and other parts of Esan indicate that organized societies existed in the region long before the 15th century. These early inhabitants engaged in agriculture, ironworking, and the worship of the earth-goddess, practices distinct from those of the Benin migrants, who primarily worshipped the sky-god.

Additionally, linguistic research by scholars like Elugbe suggests that Esan and Benin, along with other Edoid-speaking groups, share a common linguistic ancestry rather than a linear migration pattern. These findings imply that rather than being a breakaway group from Benin, Esan may have evolved alongside Benin as part of a broader cultural complex. Oral traditions from various Esan communities also reference ancestors who emerged from the land or descended from the sky, reinforcing the idea of an indigenous Esan presence that predates the rise of the Benin Kingdom.

Indigenous Esan: A Challenge to the Esan Fua Narrative

While the Esan Fua tradition emphasizes migration from Benin, other historical perspectives challenge the notion that Esan's origins are solely tied to Benin. Despite the weighty evidence of migration from Benin as a factor in the peopling of Esan area the hypothesis does not explain the presence of indigenous people who worshipped the earth-goddess in the area as against the Benin migrants who were worshippers of the sky-god and used iron tools. It is against this backdrop that Darlings argues that before Benin existed, in the time before the *Iya* (moat) were built, people were living in the forests now belonging to Benin and Ishan.⁹

In the same vein, Orukpe argues that the peopling of Esan can be tied to the jumble of human languages during Nimrod's reign which did not only halt the construction of the "Tower of Babel"¹⁰ but also led to global migration and dispersal.¹¹ According to the bible, the story of the "Tower of Babel" reads thus:

Now the whole earth had one language and one speech. And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar, and they dwelt there. Then they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They had brick for stone, and they had asphalt for mortar. And they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth." But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built. And the Lord said, "Indeed the people are one and they all have one language, and this is what they begin to do; now nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them. Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech." So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they ceased building the city. Therefore its name is called Babel, because there the Lord confused

the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.¹²

It is true that God scattered people over the face of the earth, but Esan people could not have been thrown straight to their current location by God from Babel. They certainly migrated from somewhere as we shall discover in their oral tradition.

Again, the theory of the lost sheep propounded by Ughulu suggests that Esan has been in existence long before the 15th Century. According to him (Ughulu), Esan migrated from Egypt and settled in their present location. He asserts that:

Early Esans were the descendants of Cham the third son of Noa...Moses led the children of Israel off Egypt, but the rest of the children of Israel who could not accompany him ultimately gathered themselves together and were able to cross another river to a desert place in the same way as Moses crossed the red sea. The same powers as Moses had, had been given to this section of the Israelites and they called it the place where they had chosen to dwell *Aghon* meaning the World... The Esan tribe is one of the lost tribes of Israel, the lost sheep that Jesus Christ referred to when He said that "THERE were 99 sheep that safely lie in the shepherd fold, I go to the desert to find my sheep that was lost the one remaining to complete the 100 sheep... Esan (means) the children of Israel that jumped out and escaped from the land of Egypt and out of the house of bondage."¹³

This theory, however, does not adequately explain the origin of Esan. In the Bible, Jesus stated, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."¹⁴ Esan could not have been part of this lost sheep, as Jesus specifically instructed His apostles, "Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter a city of the Samaritans. But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."¹⁵ Since the apostles did not take their message to Esan, it is evident that Esan is not of Jewish descent but rather classified as a *Gentile* nation. If Esan were truly among the lost sheep of Israel, the apostles would have been sent there.

The migration theory that suggests an Egyptian origin for Esan is known as the Hamitic theory, based on the idea that Egypt, located in North-East Africa, was part of the Hamitic race—a term used to classify the Egyptian group of white people. This theory emerged during the colonial era and was largely a product of racial bias, promoting the notion that early civilizations in Africa were the result of white influence. However, the Hamitic theory was later discredited due to its failure to provide a comprehensive explanation for the origins of West African peoples. Furthermore, Africa is now widely regarded as the cradle of humanity, further invalidating such Eurocentric claims.¹⁶ Scholars have heavily criticized this theory, primarily because it lacks archaeological or cultural evidence to support its assertions.¹⁷ As Afigbo points out, with the current understanding of West African history, theories suggesting an Egyptian migration cannot be taken seriously by

informed scholars.¹⁸ Similarly, Igbafe dismisses the notion that the people of Benin and Esan originated from Egypt, describing it as outdated, inaccurate, and lacking credibility.¹⁹

Furthermore, according to some Esan traditions, hunters discovered *Ibholele* dwarf-like humans in the forest's interior, either in groups or alone. Benin traditions also tell that before moving to their current position, a band of hunters was sent from Uhe to survey this territory, and the report provided was favorable. Thus, Benin people came and met the²⁰

Dwarfish *Ivberinmwi Neka*, an older group of Negroes who had survived the horrors of the NakuranIso Norho (859 BC – 600 BC). The Benins subsequently got them absorbed into their social complex or forced them out to Ugogo (Congo) where they were thought to have come from, since their folk stories bore accounts of that area being a stronghold to the pygmy negroes.²¹

Thus, Esan has been in existence long before the 15th century and has a common migrating period with early Benin.²² This argument is strengthened by Darlings' findings: first he dates the entry of proto-Benin/Esan speakers into the forest to about 750 A.D.²³ He also dates the construction of earliest *Iya/Iyala* and growth of noya-like population cluster in Benin/Esan to about 900 A.D.²⁴ The first rural *iya* are most likely to have been dug in the Benin and Ishan forests about C 7th to C 9th B.C.²⁵ Thus, "the peopling ... of southern Nigeria (including Esan) took place much earlier than the rise of Benin Kingdom."²⁶ The implication of this according to Obaro is that;

The areas into which Bini migrants might have moved at different times in the history of Benin were not empty land. Indeed the reason why these traditions are so common may well be because the Bini migrations are the most recent. Thus Urhobo, Isoko, Igbo, even Esan, etc, (i.e the peoples who are now so called) may include elements of Benin origin; that is not to say that all of these peoples are of Benin origin. Indeed, as is well known, the various constituents of the Urhobo, Isoko, Igbo and other groups do not always claim a common origin even in their traditions.²⁷

Elugbe's study of Edo linguistics also gives evidence that the origins of Edoid peoples cannot all be traced to Benin. According to Elugbe, all Edoid peoples (which include Delta Edoid - Degema, Egene, Epie- Atisa; Southern Edoid – Urhobo, Isoko and others; North-central Edoid – Benin, Esan, Ora, Ghotuo and others; North-western Edoid – Okpamberi, Okpe Uhami, Idoani and others) "spoke a common language in the misty past"²⁸ With the aid of a family tree, Elugbe buttresses his argument. He says "No language within one branch can be assumed to be more related to a language in another branch than the languages with which it belongs within the same branch."²⁹ He further argues that migration is from areas of

complexity to areas of relative homogeneity in linguistic geography. Then, he posits that of the languages of the Edoid area, the greatest linguistic complexity is to be found in the north-western Edoid area in the hilly country in the North of Bendel State (now Edo and Delta States) ... On the other hand the greatest uniformity is in the Edo area, the plains between the hilly north and swampy south of the Edoid area... The historical implication of this for a theory of Edoid migration is that the Delta, the south-western and the north-central Edoid people (of which Esan is a part) come from a northerly direction.³⁰

What one can gather from this theory is that, the Binis “migrated from a more northerly direction about the same time as other groups of Edoid peoples (including Esan) moved into other areas”³¹

Archaeological evidence from sites in Esan, particularly Ekpoma, supports the presence of indigenous peoples in the region long before migrations from Benin.³² Darling highlights that the early inhabitants of Ekpoma undertook large-scale earthworks known as *iyala* (moats). These impressive constructions were four to five times longer than the Great Wall of China and involved moving over a hundred times the amount of material used in constructing the Great Pyramid of Cheops. Spanning approximately 6,500 square kilometers across Edo land, these earthworks stand as a testament to the advanced engineering skills and organized societies that existed in Esan before external influences.³³

Additionally, pottery fragments unearthed along a ten-kilometer stretch of the Irrua to Uzebba countrywide transmission line, including those from the excavated Ekpoma Iyala site, suggest a stronger cultural link between Esan and the Savannah civilizations to the north rather than the Benin forest culture to the south.³⁴ Notably, Benin pottery was largely absent from the artifacts found in Esan, and there were no hybrid forms blending Benin and Esan pottery styles.³⁵

Despite the various theories regarding the origins of Esan discussed above, Esan traditions contain references to indigenous peoples who inhabited the area before the migrations that led to the establishment of the present-day communities. Some individuals from Egoro, Okpoji, Ewu, Uromi, and Ewohimi claim descent from ancestors who are said to have “descended from the sky” or emerged from the ground or rivers.³⁶ In respect of those who claimed to have emerged from the soil, Alagoa described them as “the son of the soil”³⁷ because these groups represented the original dwellers of the region.

Furthermore, before 15th Century, several important towns and communities in Esan were already in existence as important groups. Among these villages were Egoro Noka, Eguarre, Amede, Ikidewu, Ora-Ede (all now forming Egoro kingdom); Ukpoke, Akahia, Ehanlen, Idumigan, Ikhiro, Uhumudumu, Ugioren, Ihruekpen among others now part of Ekpoma confederation; Igieduma, Ogbe, Ikpudu and Eko now part of Ekpon kingdom; Owu, Agadaga, Okede, Ikeken, Ogbe among others now part of Ewohimi kingdom.³⁸ The aforementioned towns and communities among others were in existence and founded by different persons before fifteenth

century. They were all known by their individual names different from the general name, Esan by which they became known from the fifteenth century to date. At this point, it is important to investigate the origins of specific Esan groups.

Amede, a village now part of the Egoro Kingdom, is said to have emerged from water—a belief rooted in myth. According to local tradition, Amede and his wife, Orhuelen, are believed to have come out of a small stream in the village known as Orhuen³⁹. This origin story has profoundly shaped local customs: fish is considered taboo. No indigene eats, buys, or sells fish, either within the village or beyond.⁴⁰ While the myth persists, it is plausible that the founder of Amede may have migrated from the Niger region or journeyed eastward along the Owan River, eventually settling near the stream's source⁴¹ This legend likely reflects the experience of a people whose historical memory of their true origins has faded into the distant past.

Also, Ekpoma is a confederation of villages, having different traditions of origins, rather than a clan descended from one common founder.⁴² Explaining how Eguare which eventually became the nucleus of Ekpoma was formed, one tradition has it that the original founder was born in the Island of Ihieku, on the Niger River. One Ogiohe left there in the distant past and travelled to Uhe or Ife where he 'met God and learnt all the taboos'. From Ife he went to Benin where he lived for some time and gave birth to Ogiohe, his son who in turn had Uda as a son. The Oba of Benin gave Uda the title of *Onojie* and sent him away to found a settlement of his own. He founded a settlement in the place where Eguare is now located.⁴³

Irruekpen, a village now part of Ekpoma, is said to have been established by a man named Ekpen. According to tradition, Ekpen was the son of the Obi of Agbor but suffered prolonged mistreatment and denial of his rights by his father. Unable to endure the injustice, Ekpen sought the assistance of the Oba of Benin. The Oba, sympathizing with him, offered to send soldiers to confront the Obi of Agbor. However, Ekpen was uncomfortable with this solution. Despite Ekpen's reluctance, the Oba saw it as an opportunity to attack Agbor and proceeded with his plan. Filled with regret, Ekpen hurried back to warn his father, who prepared for battle and successfully defeated the Benin soldiers.⁴⁴ Upon hearing of this defeat, the Oba cursed Ekpen, who then became mad and wandered until he reached the site of modern-day Irruekpen, where he eventually settled. The village is said to have been formed by Ekpen's sons and other immigrants.⁴⁵ However, this story may reflect a community that has lost track of its origins over time. The notion of a madman founding a village seems improbable. What can be inferred from the tale is that the founder likely migrated from Agbor, Benin, or another location in the distant past and established the village of Irruekpen.

Owu village, in present day Ewohimi kingdom, is said to have a number of founders. According to tradition, a man called Ezeguanwu dropped from the sky and was given land by the *Onojie*. His descendants founded four of the *Idumus* of Owu. Egbenogbena, a son of the Obi of Agbor who was driven from Agbor because of his sins founded one *Idumu*, while the sixth was founded by a hunter from Egoro by name Ezuagbor.⁴⁶

The people of Irrua are believed to have migrated from Uhe, near Ife, around the same time as the Bini (Edo) people. Initially settling in Ifeku on the Niger, they were led by Amilele, who visited Ohe, the Oba of Benin. Upon his return, Ohe granted Amilele his daughter, Iriuwa, in marriage and conferred upon him the title of Onojie. While traveling back to Ifeku, Amilele and his followers stopped at a location now known as Eguarre. There, they found a large, ripe palm fruit on the ground, which they interpreted as a sign of the land's fertility. Seeing it as a favorable omen, they decided to settle there, naming the new community Irrua in honor of Iriuwa, Amilele's wife.⁴⁷

Considering the various theories and traditions regarding the origins of Esan, it is evident that determining an exact date for the establishment of Esan kingdoms is unattainable. However historical evidence suggests that Esan and Benin have been interconnected and interdependent. They engaged in a mutual exchange of ideas, governance structures, and military alliances, rather than a one-sided relationship of subjugation.

Beyond Ethnic Divides: Rethinking Esan-Benin Historical Connection in the Context of Nigerian Unity

Despite ongoing debates about the origins of Esan, one undeniable reality is the deep-rooted historical ties between Esan and Benin. The historical relationship between Esan and Benin transcends ethnic boundaries, illustrating a legacy of cooperation, interdependence, and shared cultural evolution. By the fifteenth century, the Benin Kingdom had established complex socio-political, economic, and cultural ties with its neighbors, including Esan. These interactions led to a mutual exchange of ideas, strengthening diplomatic relations and fostering a sense of unity. While Esan developed its own distinct identity, it maintained strong diplomatic, economic, and cultural connections with Benin.⁴⁸ This enduring relationship exemplifies how ethnic groups can preserve their unique heritage while fostering cooperation and coexistence—an invaluable lesson in the broader pursuit of Nigerian unity.

The political and diplomatic ties between Benin and Esan are evident in the fact that, despite establishing independent kingdoms, the Esan people continued to recognize the authority of the Oba of Benin. According to tradition, in 1463, Oba Ewuare extended a peace invitation to the Esan Ekakulo (leaders), following unsuccessful attempts to forcefully return those who had fled Benin.⁴⁹ This meeting symbolized not only the historical bond between the two groups but also the role of diplomacy in resolving interethnic tensions. While some Esan leaders hesitated due to safety concerns, illness, or old age, others recognized the significance of the Oba's peace initiative. Rejecting the invitation could have been perceived as defiance, leading some rulers to attend personally while others sent representatives.⁵⁰

The Esan rulers who attended in person had no disputes with the Oba and enjoyed positive relations with the Benin Empire. Notably, Prince Ekperejije, nephew of Oba Ewuare and grandson of Oba Ohen, attended the meeting. His mother, a

Benin princess and a female leader in Irrua, embodied the long-standing ties between Irrua and Benin, marked by harmony and mutual progress. Other attendees included Alan, ruler of Ewohimi, who had settled in the area before Oba Ewuare's reign, and Ijobomen, ruler of Ekpoma, who had received royal authorization before relocating.⁵¹

On the other hand, Esan leaders who sent representatives to the meeting found that their envoys were granted the title of *Onojie* (king) by the Oba of Benin. Upon their return, these newly appointed rulers faced opposition from the elders and leaders who had originally sent them. However, with the backing of the Oba, they successfully assumed authority, leading to the transformation of Esan's political structure. This marked a significant shift from smaller, autonomous communities to a more centralized system, where each kingdom was unified under an *Onojie* who owed allegiance to the Oba of Benin.⁵²

Thus, From the 15th century onward, most Esan kingdoms developed as federations of villages, mirroring Benin's political structure. The Oba's appointment of *Enijie* (kings) helped consolidate smaller, independent communities into larger political entities. For example: Egoro consisted of Eguare, Amede, Oraede, Egoro Noka, and Ikidewu; Ekpon comprised Eguare, Igieduma, Eko, Ogbe, and Ikpudu; while larger areas like Ekpoma, Irrua, and Uromi emerged as confederations of smaller communities. Esan's political organization bore a strong resemblance to that of pre-colonial Benin, which operated as a centralized state under the supreme authority of the Oba. The Oba was supported by a council of chiefs, notably the *Uzama*, and governed through a network of dukedoms (*Enigie*) who acted as intermediaries between the throne and the people, overseeing administration and tax collection. Similarly, Esan developed a well-structured monarchical system. At the apex was the *Onojie*, the supreme ruler of each Esan polity, who maintained authoritative control over his domain. The *Onojie* governed through a hierarchy of chiefs (*Ekhaemon*), who in turn delegated authority to quarter chiefs. These quarter chiefs administered their respective areas with the support of village councils composed of elders (*Edion*).⁵³ Hereditary titles in Esan were inspired by the *Uzama Nihiron* of Benin, but variations emerged due to local customs, degrees of autonomy, and in some cases, political manipulation. Consequently, certain titles that were non-hereditary in Benin became hereditary in Esan. Titles such as *Oliha*, *Iyase*, *Ezomo*, *Edoben*, *Olofon*, *Uwangu*, *Ero*, and *Isekbure*—originally associated with Benin's court—also appeared in Esan political life. However, the succession and hierarchy of these titles were often adapted to reflect Esan's specific socio-political context. Despite these divergences, several roles retained comparable functions across both societies. The *Oliha* in Esan, like his counterpart in Benin, held a high-ranking position just below the monarch and played essential ritual and ceremonial roles, especially during royal burials and the enthronement of the *Onojie* or the Oba. Likewise, the *Iyasele* in Esan served as the representative of the common people, mirroring the duties of the *Iyase* in Benin by advocating for their interests within the traditional power structure.⁵⁴

Again, the historical connection between Esan and Benin is evident in their judicial systems, which shared similar structures and principles of governance. In pre-colonial Benin, justice was primarily administered at the household level by the head of the family. However, when disputes escalated beyond domestic resolution, village elders were responsible for mediation. More serious offenses such as murder, treason, and succession disputes were taken before the Oba in the royal palace in Benin City, reflecting the central authority of the Benin monarchy.⁵⁵ Similarly, in Esan, the administration of justice followed a structured hierarchy. Crimes were categorized into offenses against the *Onojie* (*Enogie*) and those against the *Edion* (council of elders). Cases involving the *Onojie*, such as murder, manslaughter, abduction of wives, and violent assault, were first handled by the village *Inotus* (age-grade group). If the accused was dissatisfied with their ruling, an appeal could be made to the palace for a final judgment. On the other hand, minor offenses such as adultery, petty theft, and minor assaults were judged by the *Edion* in the *Okogele* (council of elders' court),⁵⁶ mirroring Benin's judicial system. The similarities between Esan and Benin legal traditions highlight their deep-rooted historical connection, with Benin's judicial influence extending into Esan communities. This shared legal framework fostered cohesion and reinforced the political and cultural ties between both groups. Another key area of cooperation between Esan and Benin was in military engagements. The Esan people played a significant role in Benin's military campaigns, either by providing warriors or serving as strategic allies. The Obas of Benin were said to have been helped by Esan warriors to prosecute some of their wars of expansion.⁵⁷ One of the most notable examples of this collaboration occurred during the 16th-century war between the Benin Kingdom and the Idah Kingdom in present-day Kogi State. In this conflict, Esan warriors fought alongside Benin forces, contributing to their victory over Idah.⁵⁸ This military alliance was not incidental but rooted in deeper diplomatic ties, as exemplified by the pre-colonial Treaty of Ukoven. This treaty formalized peace and cooperation between Esan and Benin, with the *Obimi Oath*—based on the Esan philosophy *Esan I Gbedo* (“Esan people would not war against or kill Edo [Bini] people”)—at its core. This principle not only prevented conflict but also encouraged sustained military collaboration, reflecting a longstanding tradition of mutual respect and shared cultural values between the two groups.⁵⁹ Throughout history, Esan and Benin have relied on each other for economic survival. Trade played a fundamental role in shaping relations between Benin and Esan, creating a system of interdependence that extended beyond local exchanges to broader commercial networks. Esan, known for its agricultural productivity, supplied Benin with essential commodities such as yams, cassava, and palm oil, while Benin provided access to international trade routes. The economic ties between the two groups were so profound that Esan became a vital supplier of raw materials for Benin's internal and external trade, including the famous ododo-dyed red cloth used in the Benin royal court. Similarly, Esan was a major source of ivory, which formed part of the tribute paid to the Oba of Benin and was traded with the Portuguese.⁶⁰ Egbefo succinctly captured the economic interdependence between Esan and Benin as follows:

the Bini regarded the territory of Esan as a source of economic exploitation. To them Esan country was a

reservoir of wealth and a place where they could get cheap supply of goods for the market at home. This demand became intensified when the Benin had contact with the Portuguese and other Europeans in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. To the people of Esan, Benin was a place where they could get rare articles like salt, beads and cloths. It was a place to market their woven cloth, *Ukpon Ododo* heavily demanded by the Benin ruling class and for exports.

The robust trading systems fostered intermarriage among merchants, further strengthening bonds between the two societies.

Beyond trade, the exchange of skilled individuals also played a significant role in strengthening ties between Esan and Benin. A notable example was Okpota, a highly revered Esan native doctor who migrated to Benin, offering his expertise as a form of technical aid. His remarkable healing abilities were widely recognized, extending far beyond his Esan homeland. Okpota became the personal physician to Oba Ozolua and held a prestigious position within the royal court. His influence and reputation were so profound that the entrance to his residence became known as *Urho-Okpota* or *Okpota's Gate*. Native doctors in Benin were among the most respected and feared members of society, enjoying great honor and influence.⁶¹

Furthermore, Esan and Benin share deep cultural similarities that reflect centuries of interaction. These cultural exchanges are evident in language, religious practices, and festivals. The Esan and Benin languages belong to the same Edoid linguistic family, with many similarities in vocabulary and pronunciation.⁶² Additionally, Many Benin and Esan names share a similar pattern when carefully analyzed, highlighting their deep-rooted cultural connection. The meanings behind names in both cultures often carry moral, religious, or social significance. For example, "Osahon" in Benin and "Osehontue" in Esan both convey the same message: "God has heard prayers."⁶³ Esan names often resemble those in Benin. For example, the Esan name "Okojie" has its counterpart in Benin, also as "Okojie." The leader of the iron smiths in Esan, as in Benin was called the "*Okaigun*" and performed similar social and political functions in both societies,⁶⁴ reflecting the linguistic and cultural overlap.

Religious and traditional practices further illustrate the historical bond between the two groups. Both Esan and Benin worship similar deities and hold strong reverence for ancestral spirits (*Ebi*) as well as deities like *Ogun*, the god of iron, and *Olokun*, the goddess of the sea. The influence of Benin's traditional religion on Esan communities is evident in their religious festivals and rituals. Many Esan chieftaincy titles and royal regalia also bear strong similarities to those of Benin. The beaded crowns and ceremonial attire worn by Esan *Enijie* closely resemble those used in the Benin royal court. Additionally, certain Esan noble titles, such as the *Onojie* (king) and *Ekhaemwen* (chief), have direct parallels in Benin's administrative hierarchy.

Conclusion

The historical relationship between Esan and Benin serves as a powerful reminder of the need to move beyond ethnic divides and embrace a shared national identity. While historical accounts often highlight differences, a deeper analysis reveals a legacy of political alliances, economic interdependence, and cultural integration. These enduring connections demonstrate that Esan and Benin were not separate entities but interwoven communities that thrived through cooperation. By re-examining these historical ties, contemporary Nigeria can draw valuable lessons on unity and coexistence. Recognizing the deep-rooted connections between ethnic groups fosters mutual respect, strengthens national cohesion, and challenges divisive narratives. The rich history of Esan-Benin interactions underscores the broader message that Nigeria's diversity should be a source of strength rather than division. Moving forward, embracing these historical lessons can help build a more integrated and unified nation.

Endnotes

1. See for instance, Abdul Raufu Mustapha, "Ethnic Structure, Inequality and Governance of the Public Sector in Nigeria" in Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity (CRISE), CRISE working paper No. 18, Queen Elizabeth House: University of Oxford, 2025, pp 1 – 18;
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13. P.J. Darling, *Archaeology And History in Southern Nigeria: The Ancient and Linear Earthwork of Benin and Ishan*, England: B.A.R., 1984, p. 301
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16. Genesis 11 : 1 - 9 *The Holy Bible, New King James Version*, Tennessee: Holman Bible Publishers, 2013.
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18. Matthew 15: 24, *The Holy Bible, New King James Version*,
19. Matthew 10: 5 - 6, *The Holy Bible, New King James Version*,
20. Anthony Okoduwa, *Studies in Esan History and Culture* 11, Ekpoma: Ever Best Publishers, 2006, pp.7 – 8.
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22. E. Afigbo, “Igboland Before 1800” in Obaro Ikime (ed.) *Groundwork of Nigeria History*, Ibadan: HEBN Publishers Plc., 1980, p. 73.
23. Igbafe, “A Bridge Across Time: The Benin Facts in Nigerian History”, 23 Inaugural Lecture, University of Benin, Benin City, 30th April, 1986, p. 10 cited in Okoduwa, *Studies in Esan History and Culture* 11, pp. 8 – 9.
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25. This tradition has been preserved in a folk – song entitled

IvbierinwiNeka: O-ho, o-o-ho
IvbierinwiNeka: O-ho, o-o-ho
On squat you eat your food: O-ho, o-o-ho
On squat you eat your food: O-ho, o-
o-ho Oghene made
you ours: O-ho, o-o-ho
To open wide the way: O-ho, o-o-ho
When this you fail to do: O-ho, o-o-ho
Fly away to Ugogo: O-ho, o-o-ho

For the local version of the text see S.B. Omoregie, *Great Benin Vol. 1: The Age of Iso*

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29. Darling, *Archaeology And History in Southern Nigeria: The Ancient and Linear Earthwork of Benin and Ishan*, p. 336.
30. Darling, *Archaeology And History in Southern Nigeria: The Ancient and Linear Earthwork of Benin and Ishan*, p. 336.
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