

AGBOKIM WATERFALL (AGBOKIM-Obi) AND NON-INDIGENE RELATIONS, 1900-2020

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Abstract

This paper examines “Agbokim-Obi and the Non-Indigenes Relationship between 1900 and 2020”. It examines the historical dynamics of interaction between the indigenous people of Agbokim-Obi, Agbokim Waterfall in Etung Local Government Area of Cross River State, and non-indigenous populations. While scholarly attention has often focused on major ethnic groups and conflict-driven narratives in Nigeria, the patterns of coexistence, cooperation and tension between minority communities and the non-indigenous population in local settings such as Agbokim remain underexplored. This study seeks to fill this gap by interrogating the economic, political, and socio-cultural dimensions of these relationships since the colonial period. Adopting a qualitative research approach, data were generated from both primary and secondary sources. The study is anchored in Intergroup Contact Theory, which posits that sustained interactions between different groups, under appropriate conditions, can reduce prejudice and foster mutual understanding. Findings reveal that relations between Agbokim indigenes and non-indigenes have evolved, shaped by colonial administrative policies, migration, economic opportunities (including informal ones), and changing political structures, while also acknowledging periods of peaceful coexistence and tension. The study concludes that the nature of indigene–non-indigene relations in Agbokim reflects broader challenges of identity, belonging, and integration in Nigeria. It underscores the relevance of sustained intergroup engagement in promoting social cohesion and peaceful coexistence. Ultimately, the research contributes to ongoing discussions on nation-building, minority experiences, and inter-ethnic relations in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Agbokim-Obi, indigenes, non-indigenes, intergroup relations, Intergroup Contact Theory*

Introduction

In relation to human contacts, intergroup relations have, from time immemorial, constituted a fundamental aspect of human existence. Broadly defined, intergroup relations refer to the interactions, connections, and exchanges that occur among distinct ethnic, cultural, or social groups within a given geographical space. In many parts of Africa, particularly in borderland regions, such relations have historically been shaped by migration, trade, kinship ties, and constantly evolving political structures. Consequently, these intergroup relations remain central to understanding the formation, transformation, and development of communities, especially within a culturally diverse region like the Cross River Basin¹. Generally, these interactions give rise to both positive and negative outcomes, thereby re-emphasizing the fact that “everything with advantages has its disadvantages”. In both pre-colonial and colonial Nigeria, neighbouring communities depended on each other for agricultural produce, forest resources, and craft goods, thereby fostering systems of mutual interdependence.² One of the most significant advantages of such relations is economic cooperation, which facilitates trade, the stimulation of local economies and by extension, peaceful co-existence.

Additionally, intergroup relations promote cultural exchanges and integration through intermarriage, festivals, and shared traditions. For instance, the shared Ejagham heritage across communities in Nigeria and Cameroon exemplifies how intergroup interactions can sustain a common cultural identity despite political divisions³. Furthermore, these interactions often

¹ S. O Onor. *Cultural Connections Between Some Anglophone Cameroon Ethnic Groups and Nigeria*. Nexdim Empire, 2023, p.56.

² A. Teriba. “Economic Activities in Border Communities of Nigeria.” *Nigerian Journal of Economic History*, vol. 8, 2003, p. 140.

³ S. O Onor. *Cultural Connections Between Some Anglophone Cameroon Ethnic Groups and Nigeria*. Nexdim Empire, 2023, p. 70.

contribute to political and social stability. During the colonial period, British indirect rule relied heavily on pre-existing intergroup networks for administration and governance⁴. These relations also encouraged political and social stability by creating alliances between neighbouring groups, which can reduce the likelihood of conflict and foster collective security.

This study seeks to examine the dynamics of Agbokim–Obi–Non-Indigene relations between 1900 and 2020 by mirroring the historical foundations of intergroup relations in Agbokim, the economic, cultural, and political dimensions of interactions between Agbokim indigenes and non-indigenes, identification of major sources of cooperation and conflict within these relationships, assess the impact of international boundary issues, on intergroup relations in the area and evaluating the implications of these relations for social cohesion, cultural and economic preservation. Despite the numerous benefits associated with co-existence, such interactions are not without challenges. Competition over land (as is the case with the Obudu and Ogoja groups residing in the Agbokim area), natural resources, and political authority frequently generates tensions, particularly in regions where boundaries are unclear or resources and political authority are contested. In some instances, these disputes have led to prolonged conflicts that undermine cooperation and peaceful coexistence.⁵ External factors, such as artificial colonial boundaries and international borders, further complicate intergroup relations. The partitioning of culturally related communities between Nigeria and Cameroon, for example, has introduced political and territorial complexities into otherwise longstanding relationships.⁶

⁴ A. E Afigbo. *The Warrant Chiefs: Indirect Rule in Southeastern Nigeria 1891–1929*. Longman, 1972, p.50

⁵ J. B Ekanem. “Cross-Border Relations in the Nigeria–Cameroon Region.” *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2005, p.70.

⁶ V. G Fanzo. *Cameroon History for Secondary Schools and Colleges*. Macmillan, 1989. P. 122

Within this broader context, the case of Agbokim presents a compelling example. Although the Agbokim people are widely regarded as hospitable and accommodating, their interactions with non-indigenous groups such as the Obudu and Ogoja settlers have occasionally involved tensions over land and resource control, unlike their relations with Ikom. Moreover, Agbokim's location near an international boundary exposes it to territorial and jurisdictional issues, thereby complicating its intergroup dynamics⁷. These realities raise critical questions about how intergroup relations in Agbokim-Obi have evolved (1900-2020) and how to sustain their benefits while mitigating associated challenges. Significantly, this study, though focused on Agbokim, contributes to the broader historiography of intergroup relations in Nigeria, offering insights into the complexities of borderland interactions, particularly in regions affected by colonial boundary demarcations, and into how communities relate to their immediate neighbours. It also enhances understanding of how economic cooperation, cultural exchange, and political alliances can coexist with conflict and competition and, by extension, provides valuable lessons for policymakers, scholars, and community leaders on managing intergroup relations in culturally diverse societies.

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology, focusing on the collection and analysis of non-numerical data to gain insights into people's experiences. It relies on both primary and secondary sources. Primary data are derived from oral interviews with community elders, residents, and other knowledgeable informants. Secondary sources include scholarly books, journal articles, and previously published works relevant to intergroup relations in the Cross River region and beyond. It emphasizes the historical interpretation and contextualization of events

⁷ V. Ndoma-Egba. *Boundary Politics and the Agbokim Axis*. National Assembly Debates (Nigeria), 2014, p. 23.

between 1900 and 2020 (a period during which the earliest recorded external migration of non-indigenes coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic).

The study adopts the intergroup contact theory. The core value of this theory lies in positive interactions between groups that reduce prejudice and improve relations, especially when conditions of equal status, common goals, cooperation, and institutional support are met. This theory provides a clearer picture of the topic under discussion; this is so because of its usefulness in contexts where integration or peaceful coexistence is the focus, as is the case here. Contact Theory, initially proposed by Gordon Allport (1954), argues that intergroup contact, under appropriate conditions, can reduce prejudice and improve relations between groups.⁸ The theory posits that positive interactions foster greater understanding, empathy, and the breakdown of stereotypes. Contact Theory is a useful lens for analyzing how the Agbokim community navigates its relations (through trade, employment, marriages, or migration, even in times of conflict) with non-indigenes in its community. It emphasizes that positive, cooperative, and equal-status interactions can transform diversity into social cohesion.

Land and People of Agbokim-Obi

Agbokim-Obi is situated within Etung Local Government Area of Cross River State, part of the South-South (Niger Delta) region of Nigeria. The community shares an international boundary with the Republic of Cameroon to the east. At the same time, it is bounded by other Ejagham groups, viz, *Etomi* to the West, *Ajassor* to the south, and *Abia* to the North. With an estimated small population, Agbokim lies within a dense tropical rainforest zone that significantly shapes its ecology, subsistence patterns, and cultural life. This area comprises several settlements,

⁸ G. Allport. *The Nature of Prejudice*. Addison-Wesley, 1954. P. 5

including *Agbokim Karabot*, *Akim-Akim*, *Osere-etek* (downtown), and *Osor-obut* (uptown), with most non-indigenes found in the *Karabot* area⁹. Oral traditions trace the origin of Agbokim to the Ejagham-speaking region around *Eyumojok (Elephant Voice)* in the area of *Lake Ejagham* in present-day Cameroon. According to oral accounts, early settlers initially occupied mountainous areas before migrating to the fertile lowlands of present-day Agbokim after a hunter discovered abundant natural resources during a period of food scarcity¹⁰. This migration narrative underscores the enduring connection between the people and their environment.

The people of Agbokim-Obi belong to the Ejagham-speaking ethnic group, which is shared across communities in both Nigeria and Cameroon. This cross-border linguistic affinity reinforces kinship ties, intermarriages, and socio-cultural exchanges across the Nigeria–Cameroon boundary.¹¹ Traditionally, kinship has remained the central organizing principle of social life, determining inheritance, leadership, and patterns of cooperation within extended family systems. Also, it has to be said that these ties cut across both the local non-indigenous population and international neighbours like Cameroon.

Religious beliefs in pre-colonial Agbokim tilted towards ancestor veneration, nature worship, and the reverence of spiritual forces associated with forests, rivers, sacred groves, and shrines, which were integral to community spirituality. Be that as it may, the advent of Christian missionary activities in the early twentieth century led to the spread of Christianity with the Catholic and Presbyterian missions as main actors. Socially, these people are said to be highly

⁹ W. A. Assam. “Agbokim-Obi and The Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970”. *Calabar Historical Journal*. Vol. 12, No. 1, June 2023, p. 149.

¹⁰ A Attali 50+, Male, Business man, Personal interview, Agbokim, 06/01/2026.

¹¹ E. Ojong. *Five Communities Lament Cross River Govt's Non-Payment of N20 m Royalty*. Daily Post Nigeria, 19 May 2021. P. 56

communal and structured around age-grade systems known locally as *Nkan*. These groups function as mechanisms for social control, labour mobilization, and cultural transmission. Communal activities such as road clearing and farming, the construction of community buildings, the enforcement of norms, and the conduct of initiation rites that reinforce collective identity were carried out by these groups. Cultural festivals, including the New Yam Festival, serve both religious and social purposes, celebrating agricultural fertility and communal unity¹². Economically, Agbokim benefits from fertile soils and high rainfall, supporting the cultivation of crops such as cocoa, oil palm, cassava, yam, plantain, and banana. Cocoa production, introduced in the mid-twentieth century, became a major source of income, enhancing local livelihoods and further encouraging non-indigenes to migrate to the area for economic purposes. In addition to agriculture, hunting, fishing, and the gathering of forest products such as bush mango and kola contribute to the subsistence economy¹³. Its location on the border also facilitates cross-border trade with towns in Cameroon, such as Akwaya and Mamfe, fostering economic exchange while occasionally posing challenges related to smuggling and border insecurity.

Politically, pre-colonial Agbokim operated a decentralized system based on lineage and village councils. Authority resided in the village head (*Ntufam*), supported by elders and family heads, with decisions reached through consensus. Disputes were settled through customary institutions such as the *Okwa* (the judicial council), grounded in kinship values and spiritual legitimacy. Age grades also played quasi-military roles in community defense and enforcement of order. With the advent of British colonial rule, Agbokim was incorporated into the administrative

¹² E. Ojong. *Five Communities Lament Cross River Govt's Non-Payment of N20 m Royalty*. Daily Post Nigeria, 19 May 2021, p. 61.

¹³ E. Aye. *A History of the Ejagham People of Cross River State*. Calabar University Press, 1998.P. 81

framework of the Eastern Region under indirect rule. While colonial authorities recognized local chiefs, they subordinated them to district officers, thereby reshaping indigenous governance structures and introducing new administrative hierarchies that sometimes conflicted with traditional systems.¹⁴

While defining the geographical and cultural features of Agbokim-Obi, Attali thought that the waterfalls stand out as a major natural landmark symbolizing the people's closeness to their environment.¹⁵ Decades later, the waterfalls have attracted tourists, generating revenue and enhancing global image.

Agbokim-Obi Non-Indigene Relations, 1900–2020

As a culturally rich and historically significant community located in Cross River State of Nigeria, Agbokim, in the years before 1900, had contact with non-indigenes. However, the tempo of migration increased significantly from 1900 onward. In the words of Okorn, the tempo of migration into Agbokim-Obi followed the government-established cocoa plantation with Agbokim-Obi as its general office, where farmers (workers) and supervisors reside, hence the Karabot settlement¹⁶. As a subgroup of the Ejagham, the Agbokim are usually hospitable people; the area is rich in various forms of interaction with various groups, including 'non-indigenous' groups (a term referring to outsiders or non-indigenous groups that have settled, traded, or interacted with the local population). From the earliest time, the area was inhabited by indigenous peoples whose cultural practices and social systems have been shaped over generations. The

¹⁴ A. E Afigbo. *The Warrant Chiefs: Indirect Rule in Southeastern Nigeria 1891–1929*. Longman, 1972, p. 54.

¹⁵ Ayuk, Attali 50+, Male, Business man, Personal interview, Agbokim, 06/01/2026.

¹⁶ Okorn, Felix, 50+, Lecturer, Personal interview, Calabar, 03/06/2026

increasing presence of non-indigenes or strangers who migrated for work and eventually settled in the community has, over time, introduced new dynamics that impact both social cohesion and behavioural patterns (in some cases).

Understanding these relations is essential for grasping the social, economic, and cultural dynamics within Agbokim, as well as the challenges and opportunities presented by such interactions. These non-indigenes (including tourists, migrants, refugees, and foreigners), often attracted by economic opportunities linked to tourism, agriculture, and resource exploitation, contribute to the local economy but also pose challenges related to land ownership, cultural integration, and resource management¹⁷. The arrival of non-indigenes sometimes led to tensions over cultural preservation, as their different customs and worldviews conflicted with indigenous traditions¹⁸.

Migrations (Late 19th Century – Early 20th Century)

Non-Indigenous Impact

As trade and farming expanded, non-indigenous local groups (Ibibio, Efik, and Igbo traders, as well as the neighboring Boki and Mbembe peoples) began to move into the Agbokim area. The Cross River trade routes, especially those linking Nigeria and Cameroon, encouraged settlement by traders seeking palm produce, bush Mango (Ogbono), and cash crops like camwood and, later, cocoa. It should be noted that Agbokim-Obi and the Southern part of Cameroon were part of Nigeria under British control. During this period, cotton Plantations were established in Southern Cameroon, and a lot of Nigerians had to migrate to that region for work, especially those

¹⁷ S. Ibrahim. "Economic Migration and Rural Communities in Nigeria." *Nigerian Journal of Migration Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2020, p. 75.

¹⁸ P. Okon and M. Udoh. "Cultural Identity and the Impact of Outsiders in Cross River Communities." *International Journal of Nigerian Studies*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2018, p. 98.

of the Eastern Region, until the plebiscite that took Southern Cameroon away from Nigeria.¹⁹ The estimated time frame for these developments was between the 1880s and 1920s, during which Local Nigerian migrants (Efik, Igbo, Boki) came, with trade and agriculture as major drivers. This was also accompanied by the colonial era and the entry of foreigners up to the 1960s²⁰.

Most of the non-indigenes from Ogoja, Obudu, Obubra, and Igbo-mabana came as casual workers. They worked either as farmers or in cocoa plantations; the migration process significantly altered the demographic composition of Agbokim-Obi. Beyond providing labour for government and private cocoa plantations, migrant populations contributed to the expansion of settlement areas, the growth of local commerce, and the diversification of social relations. The increasing interaction between indigenous inhabitants and migrant communities encouraged intermarriage, cultural adaptation and the formation of new social networks that extended beyond the traditional Ejagham kinship structure. While these developments stimulated economic growth, they also introduced new challenges relating to land access, cultural accommodation, and political representation within the community.²¹

They worked on both government and private farms, with effects on intermarriages as well, and this (casual work) is believed to be the actual reason for the migration into Agbokim-obi. This intermarriage is evident in Agbokim-Obi, which has the highest percentage of Obudu children. Still on the impact of these inter-group relations, most of the political mercenaries and major cultists are children who were adopted by secondary parents (a situation in which one who already has a child gets into a new marriage, bringing along the child into the marriage)²². On the positive

¹⁹ Okorn, Felix, 50+, Lecturer, Personal interview, Calabar, 03/06/2026

²⁰ Ayuk, Tiku. 54, male, Farmer, personal interview, Etomi, 17/10/2025

²¹ Ayuk, Tiku. 54, male, Farmer, personal interview, Etomi, 17/10/2025

²² Okorn, Felix, 50+, Lecturer, Personal interview, Calabar, 03/06/2026

impact of the presence of non-indigenes, it may have led to more crops production and trade, in most cases bringing capital, new trade links, external labour and different business experience, thus; stimulating local economic activity, it also led to creation of job opportunities for non-indigenes on farmlands belonging to indigenes and also a change from local economic goals to include neighbouring local government and cross-border trade for the indigenes.

Socio-culturally, relations between indigenes and non-indigenes are characterized by both integration and adaptation. Cross-border marriages between Nigerian and Cameroonian Ejagham communities reinforced kinship ties, blurring rigid national identities. Christianity spread rapidly, coexisting with traditional beliefs. At the same time, new cultural influences, language, dress, and social norms emerged through sustained interaction with immediate local neighbours, sometimes giving rise to loan words in the language.²³ Despite these changes, core indigenous institutions such as age grades and festivals remained vital in preserving identity. Still on the socio-cultural view, Asu stated that social programmes that promote inclusive civic participation (community development projects that explicitly involve non-indigene residents) were prevalent and improved social cohesion, as seen in the involvement of non-indigenes and the building of local churches and community sanitation (mostly done voluntarily)²⁴.

Politically, relations between indigenes and non-indigenes in Agbokim carried several implications, largely because the community has historically been receptive to outsiders and open to interaction. Oti explained that this openness made it possible over time to incorporate non-indigenes into the local political structure. Some settlers were conferred chieftaincy titles despite

²³E. Ojong. *Five Communities Lament Cross River Govt's Non-Payment of N20 m Royalty*. Daily Post Nigeria, 19 May 2021, p.67

²⁴ Asu, Mary. 50. Female, Resident, Oral interview, Osere- etek. 15/12/2025

their non-indigenous status, and gradually, these groups gained representation through appointed leaders who spoke on their behalf in community governance. This development gave groups such as the Igbo and Ogoja settlers a measure of political voice within Agbokim²⁵. Oti further noted that non-indigenes typically had to meet certain conditions to attain political relevance. These included joining age-grade associations, maintaining an unquestionable reputation over a long period, contributing meaningfully to community development, or marrying into indigenous families. Such integration could grant access to land rights and, by extension, limited political influence within the community.

Despite all these, the non-indigenous people still felt marginalized politically, stating how the political structure left them weaker. In the post-colonial period, especially after the creation of Etung Local Government Area in 1996 from Ikom, political participation widened. However, tensions occasionally arose over land rights, chieftaincy matters, and representation between indigenes and settler groups.²⁶. Generally, the impact of non-indigenes on Agbokim-Obi was multifaceted and extended across economic, social, cultural, and political spheres. Economically, migrant populations contributed labour to agricultural production, expanded trade networks, and stimulated local commerce. Their participation in cocoa farming, transportation, petty trading, and tourism-related activities enhanced Agbokim's integration into regional markets. Socially, the presence of non-indigenes encouraged intermarriage, cultural interaction, and the formation of new community relationships, facilitating the exchange of ideas, languages, and customs. In some

²⁵ Achu, Oti. 40+. Male, Lecturer, Oral interview, Calabar. 10/09/2025

²⁶ A. E Afigbo. *The Warrant Chiefs: Indirect Rule in Southeastern Nigeria 1891–1929*. Longman, 1972, p. 136

instances, however, differences in customs, economic interests, and perceptions of belonging generated tensions between host communities and migrant populations²⁷.

The gradual incorporation of non-indigenes into local governance structures reflected the accommodating nature of Agbokim society. Through participation in age-grade associations, community development projects, and traditional institutions, some non-indigenes acquired social recognition and limited political influence. Nevertheless, concerns regarding representation, access to land, and distribution of community benefits continued to shape relations between indigenous and non-indigenous populations throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries²⁸. Be that as it may, the Agbokim-Obi people acknowledged the presence of non-indigenes in the area, as evidenced by the presence of the Igbo community, which has a leader or head, though still under the political administration of the indigenous government (Ntufam).

Foreign Influence

British interest in the region culminated in formally taking over the Cross River region in the early 1900s, after the Berlin Conference (1884–1885), which divided Africa into spheres of influence in West Africa. This period reveals how European (British) officials and missionaries entered Agbokim and surrounding areas for administrative, religious and economic purposes. In the face of this, the geography and touristic value of Agbokim Waterfalls prompted colonial interest. Foreign influence in Agbokim-Obi was largely shaped by colonial administration, missionary activities, tourism, and sustained interactions with neighbouring Cameroon. British colonial rule introduced new administrative structures, taxation systems, legal practices, and

²⁷ P. Okon and M. Udoh. "Cultural Identity and the Impact of Outsiders in Cross River Communities." *International Journal of Nigerian Studies*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2018, p. 98.

²⁸ Achu, Oti. 40+. Male, Lecturer, Oral interview, Calabar. 10/09/2025

economic policies that altered existing indigenous institutions. Colonial authorities also encouraged agricultural production and commercial activities that integrated Agbokim into broader regional and international economic networks.²⁹

The influx of local and foreign non-indigenes thus continued steadily from the 1960s onward, intensifying with improvements to road paths. The Agbokim area has a history that blends indigenous settlement patterns with waves of migration and interaction involving both local and foreign influences (mostly European, African, and neighboring ethnic groups). Cameroonian migrants (especially Ejagham from across the border), equally important was the influence of neighbouring Cameroon. Shared Ejagham ancestry and the porous nature of the international boundary facilitated continuous interaction between communities on both sides of the border. These interactions encouraged cultural exchange, inter-marriage, language diffusion and economic cooperation. Cameroonian migrants, traders, and refugees became important actors in the social and economic life of Agbokim, particularly during periods of political instability in Cameroon³⁰.

However, conflict has intermittently accompanied these interactions. Disputes over land ownership, economic competition, and political representation have occasionally occurred between indigenes and non-indigenes, especially between indigenes and their immediate neighbours over land. Cross-border tensions, including smuggling and security challenges, have also affected the area. However, large-scale crises have been largely avoided, with conflicts typically resolved through traditional institutions, negotiation, and state intervention. Ayuk states that the enduring strength of kinship ties, especially among Cameroonian Ejagham groups, has

²⁹ A. E Afigbo. *The Warrant Chiefs: Indirect Rule in Southeastern Nigeria 1891–1929*. Longman, 1972, p. 54.

³⁰ S. O Onor. *The Ejagham Nation in the Cross River Region*. University of Calabar Press, 1999, p. 5.

often helped mitigate escalation, and that the porous border has facilitated the continuous movement of people, goods, and ideas.³¹

This relationship took a more complex turn during the Anglophone Crisis, beginning in 2016. Conflict in Cameroon's Anglophone regions led to an influx of refugees into border communities in Cross River State, including Agbokim³². Many Cameroonians sought safety among kin in Agbokim due to shared Ejagham identity and pre-existing family ties. This development had significant implications for indigene–non-indigene relations. On one hand, it reinforced humanitarian and kinship bonds, as Agbokim residents provided shelter, food, and support to displaced persons. On the other hand, the sudden population increase placed pressure on land, housing, and local resources, occasionally generating tension between host communities and refugees. Cross-border trade was also disrupted, as insecurity along the border limited movement and increased the risk associated with commercial activities³³.

A view at the cross-border foreign influence between Agbokim and Cameroon also reveals policies enabling the interaction of this group of people linked not only by proximity but by a migratory story. Such policies include Land Tenure reforms or clarification of customary/non-customary rights, which reduce conflict and improve the inclusion of non-indigenes (while protecting indigenous rights). The tourism view (Agbokim waterfalls) of the area also served as an economic asset of the people, as foreigners came from far and wide to share in this view.

Land Tenure, Ownership and Distribution

³¹ Ayuk, Patience. 45, Female, Teacher, Oral interview, Akim- Akim. 23/01/2026

³² Ayuk, Attali 50+, Male, Businessman, Personal interview, Agbokim, 06/01/2026.

³³ V. E Ojong. "Tourism and Rural Development in Cross River State: A Study of Agbokim Waterfalls." *African Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2017, p. 102.

As stated by an informant, another economic impact is the interest accrued over time from land use and rental income. Land tenure constituted one of the most important dimensions of relations between indigenes and non-indigenes in Agbokim-Obi. Traditionally, land ownership was vested in indigenous families, lineages and village communities, with rights transmitted through customary inheritance systems. Land was regarded not merely as an economic resource but also as an ancestral heritage linking present generations to their forebears. Consequently, the outright alienation of communal land to outsiders was generally discouraged; the outright purchase of land in Agbokim by non-indigenes was against the community's law. Rather, the lands are inherited by indigenes.³⁴

For non-indigenes, it is rarely possible to buy land in Agbokim despite this, non-indigenes can still acquire land by establishing relationships with indigenes through marriage or by joining age associations. Thus, the participation of non-indigenes in land use was made possible through mediation by customary relationships (marriage, patronage, paying cash or gifts to the land-owning family or village head)³⁵. This generates income for indigenes and eventually stimulates agricultural investment by non-indigenes, creating channels of economic exchange and income flows for the indigenous land-holders.

This economic impact also comes with land tenure insecurity, leading to royalty issues and a lack of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from big neighbours (local or foreign). In the case of royalties, there is constant tension between the government (which takes control of a particular estate (cocoa) and the community)³⁶. This is largely so because in most cases, the government

³⁴Albert, Ntui. 62, male, chief, oral interview, Agbokim, 12/12/2025

³⁵Agbor, Achima. 60+, Male, Business man, Oral interview, 20/10/2025

³⁶ E. Ojong. *Five Communities Lament Cross River Govt's Non-Payment of N20 m Royalty*. Daily Post Nigeria, 19 May 2021, p.67.

introduce foreign bodies to the community without paying certain commissions or developmental levies to the community, but instead are believed to keep up with resource extraction. Sometimes, this also culminates in the displacement of indigenous farmers and their agricultural livelihoods (that is, the introduction of these external bodies).

Christianity and Its Impact on Traditional Religion

The indigenes were open to such development as the introduction of Christianity (Catholic and Presbyterian missions) in the area. The introduction and spread of Christianity were among the most significant external influences on Agbokim society during the twentieth century. Christian missionary activities intensified during the colonial period and gradually transformed religious life within the community. The missionaries established churches, schools and other social institutions that facilitated the spread of Christian teachings and values among the people.³⁷

Before the arrival of Christianity, religious life in Agbokim revolved around ancestor veneration, sacred groves, shrines, nature spirits and various traditional rituals associated with community well-being and social order. The expansion of Christianity challenged some of these indigenous practices by discouraging certain ritual observances and redefining traditional religious beliefs. Consequently, some sacred sites and ritual practices declined in importance as more people embraced Christianity. Nevertheless, Christianity did not completely eradicate indigenous religious traditions. Rather, elements of traditional belief systems continued to coexist with Christian practices, as many families maintained respect for ancestral traditions and customary institutions even as they identified as Christians. This process of religious adaptation produced a

³⁷ E. Ojong. *Five Communities Lament Cross River Govt's Non-Payment of N20 m Royalty*. Daily Post Nigeria, 19 May 2021, p.61.

form of cultural continuity in which traditional values remained embedded within changing religious realities, thus giving room for economic relations.³⁸

Trade

It has to be said here, too, that even in the face of formal trade, informal trade between Nigerian and Cameroonian traders continued, and there was also smuggling of Cocoa, Bush Mango, and even Afang leaves. Trade thus became a central pillar of indigene–non-indigene relations. Owing to its strategic location along the Nigeria–Cameroon border, the community emerged as an important centre for the exchange of agricultural products and forest resources. Long before the establishment of modern markets, local exchange was facilitated through barter involving products such as bush mango, palm produce, kola nuts, livestock, and food crops. Non-indigenous traders, particularly the Efik, Igbo, Boki, and Cameroonian Ejagham, played an important role in linking Agbokim producers to wider regional markets. Weekly market activities encouraged social interaction and economic cooperation among different groups. At the same time, agricultural commodities such as cocoa, cassava, plantain, palm produce, bush mango (ogbono) and afang leaves became major items of trade. The cross-border nature of commerce also facilitated the movement of goods and people between Agbokim, Akwaya, Mamfe, and neighbouring settlements³⁹.

The gradual shift from barter (before 1900) to monetized exchange systems (from 1920, with the use of cowries and shells, to pounds and shillings, and later Naira in 1973, while Cameroon used Franc), largely facilitated by non-indigenous traders, integrated Agbokim into

³⁸ E. Ojong. *Five Communities Lament Cross River Govt's Non-Payment of N20 m Royalty*. Daily Post Nigeria, 19 May 2021, p.61.

³⁹ I. Eyo. *Pre-Colonial Societies in Eastern Nigeria*. University of Calabar Press, 2005, p. 128.

wider regional markets. Cameroonian traders frequently crossed into Agbokim markets, while local farmers exported produce across the border. This interaction also introduced challenges such as smuggling, informal taxation and periodic disputes over market control. Economically, non-indigenes have played a key role in transforming Agbokim's economy. Migrant farmers expanded agricultural production, while traders enhanced market networks. In recent decades, the growth of tourism around Agbokim Waterfalls further expanded commercial opportunities by creating demand for transportation, accommodation, food services, and local handicrafts. Consequently, trade and market activities became important channels through which non-indigenes contributed to local economic development while simultaneously deepening social interactions within the community.⁴⁰

Conclusion

The historical trajectory of Agbokim-Obi from 1900 to 2020 unfolds a consistent pattern of interaction between indigenes and non-indigenes shaped by migration, trade, religion, and cross-border dynamics. From its early existence as a kinship-based and relatively self-sufficient society within Etung Local Government Area, Agbokim gradually evolved into a socially and economically interconnected community, engaging with diverse groups around her like Ikom, Ogoja, Obudu, her immediate neighbours and the neighbouring Republic of Cameroon. A critical assessment of these interactions reveals that, despite the pressures of colonial restructuring, economic competition, and occasional disputes over land and resources, the Agbokim people have largely sustained a culture of openness and accommodation. The integration of migrant farmers, traders, missionaries, and cross-border populations into the social, political and economic life of

⁴⁰ Cross River Tourism Bureau. *"Tourism Potentials of Cross River State"*. Calabar, 2015, p. 11.

the community underscores a long-standing tradition of hospitality. This is particularly evident in patterns of intermarriage, shared market systems, and the willingness to adapt cultural practices without completely eroding indigenous identity⁴¹.

Additionally, Agbokim's response to periods of strain, most notably during the Anglophone Crisis, reinforces this characterization as hospitable. The reception of displaced persons from Cameroon, many of whom were accommodated through kinship networks and communal support systems, highlights a deeply rooted ethic of solidarity and compassion. Even where challenges arose, such as pressure on land and local resources, the prevailing response was not exclusion but negotiation and coexistence. Economically and culturally, the presence of non-indigenes has contributed to the growth and dynamism of Agbokim-Obi, particularly in agriculture, trade, and tourism around the Agbokim Waterfalls. Rather than resisting external influences, the community has historically engaged them in ways that promote mutual benefit, thereby reinforcing its reputation as a welcoming and adaptive society. In sum, Agbokim-Obi's experience over the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries reflects a community that, though not without conflict, has continuously demonstrated resilience, inclusiveness, and hospitality in its relations with non-indigenes. Its history affirms that coexistence, rather than confrontation, has been the dominant principle guiding its interactions, making Agbokim a notable example of peaceful and productive intergroup relations in a borderland and non-indigene relations context.

⁴¹E. Ojong. *Five Communities Lament Cross River Govt's Non-Payment of N20 m Royalty*. Daily Post Nigeria, 19 May 2021, p.74.

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