

**OLOKPO, ISO-BENDEGHE AND AKPARABONG IN RESOURCE CONFLICT IN
IKOM, MIDDLE CROSS RIVER REGION, NIGERIA, 1815 – 1970**

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Abstract

Around 1815, the Olokpo, Akparabong, and Iso-bendeghe peoples migrated from their primary settlement in Etinghinta (Nta), south of their present homeland, and advanced into Yala-Nkum territory. After a protracted conflict lasting approximately twenty-two years, they successfully dispossessed Yala-Nkum of its valuable salt pond. In the pre-colonial period, salt was a highly prized resource and a cornerstone of local economies before the introduction of English salt in the early twentieth century. Beyond its culinary value, salt functioned as a commodity, medium of exchange, medicinal substance, and preservative. The seizure of the Yala-Nkum salt pond by Akparabong, represented by the Nturokim and Ogbagante communities, alongside Olokpo and Iso-bendeghe, illustrates both the effectiveness of traditional diplomatic alliances and the inherent challenges of managing collective victory. This paper examines the ensuing diplomatic disputes among Olokpo, Iso-bendeghe, and Akparabong over salt mining prior to the rise of cocoa production and the influx of English salt. It focuses on mining processes, rivalries over access rights, and the indigenous institutions and mechanisms employed for conflict resolution. Guided by realistic conflict theory, the study explains how competition over scarce resources generated intergroup hostility. Using a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach, the research draws on social anthropology, ethnography, interviews, intelligence reports, and relevant secondary literature. Findings reveal that the three groups shared close affinities, migrated simultaneously, and forged alliances that enabled their conquest of Yala-Nkum. However, disputes soon emerged over control and use of the salt pond. These tensions, which persisted until a negotiated compromise, intensified in the 1970s when cocoa supplanted salt as a major economic resource. The paper recommends establishing a joint salt-resource management committee and community-based conflict resolution mechanisms to promote equity, dialogue, and peaceful coexistence.

Keywords: Salt mining, Traditional economy, Cocoa production, Communal rivalries, Mining rights

Introduction

Diplomatic alliances by groups in traditional African societies predated contacts with Europe. Security concerns, communal conflicts, and rivalries over competing interests more

often drive groups to form partnerships for defensive purposes, to checkmate intruders, and to consolidate positions, as the case may be. The choice of membership in the alliance group was more often dictated by neighborliness or shared historical experiences. The Olokpo-Iso-Bendeghe and Akparabong share a common origin, tracing their primary settlement to Etinghinta (Nta), a premier group in the Bakor homeland; Bakor-speaking groups stretch from Ikom Local Government Area to Ogoja in the northern part of the Cross River region.

In 1815, the trio vacated their primary homeland (Nta) for reasons- pressure from other groups *inter alia* may have contributed to their southward migration, which led the trio to a salt pond initially mined by the Yala-Nkum¹. This Idoma stock separated from its core Yala-Okpoma in Yala Local Government Area, in C the 17thc². It may never be known how long the Yala group settled in this homeland before the clashes which dislodged them from the settlement to the right bank of the Cross River flowing from the Cameroun, especially as oral tradition is silent on precise dates. John Becroft's expedition up the Cross River in the 1840s lent credence to Yala-Nkum, already on the bank of the river, having been so dislodged from its hinterland habitation a few miles away from the bank of the Cross River³. The chief of *Okoom* (Yala-Nkum) donated his son to Becroft to serve as an interpreter as they weighed up the Cross River until their return journey.⁴

Traditions gathered from Akparabong and Yala-Nkum attest to a protracted communal clash lasting for C 22 years. The Yala-Nkum lost its homeland and salt pond to Akparabong in the incident, which culminated in the evacuation of the motherland to the right bank of the Cross River. It was this eventual settlement that gave rise to the name *Nkumuma*, translated as

¹ F. N. Enor and K. O. Etta. "Akparabong and Yala-Nkum Relations in the Middle Cross River Region, Nigeria". *International Journal of Law and Society (IJLS)*, Vol 2, No.2. 2023, p.3.

² E. O. Erim. "Yala Historical Text (YHT)".

³J. Becroft. XIV. Details of Exploration of the old Calabar River in 1841 and 1842, by Captain Becroft, Retrieved from 105 – 116.2.141 on Wednesday 04 September 2024 12:01:30 UTC.

⁴N. Ayok, 101 Years, Informant, Nturokan Village, Akparabong, Ikom LGA.20/8/20203

"I will die here," and, thereafter, Yala-Nkum.⁵ In no time at all, the Olokpo, a member of the trio alliance, challenged Akparabong's mining rights in a dramatic manner that undermined the age-old alliance sustained by common origins and historical experiences. This paper proceeds in segments: the introduction, theoretical framework, salt mining processes and rivalries over salt baking rights, traditional conflict settlement mechanisms, and the conclusion.

Theoretical Framework

The realistic conflict theory, also known as realistic group conflict theory, has been used here to explain how inter-group conflict arises from conflicting goals and competition over limited resources⁶. Groups may compete for real or perceived resource scarcity, leading to feelings of resentment. As developed and articulated by Muzafer Sherif, an American psychologist, the theory states that whenever two or more groups seek the same limited resource, this leads to conflict, negative stereotypes and beliefs, and discrimination between the groups. The conflict can lead to increased animosity toward the other group and to an ongoing feud. The competition between the Olokpo and Akparabong groups regarding the time span for mining their salt pond led to growing animosity between them.

A second theory adopted is the Ibuanyidanda philosophy of mutual complementation. This theory pontificated by Innocent Azouzu, emphasize the urgent need for mutual complementarity among all humans and groups, if they have to attain the most excellent possible common good. Azouzu avers that for humans to enjoy common good, they must necessarily work in mutual complementation⁷. Olokpo, Iso-Bendeghe and Akparabong needed to achieve the greatest possible robust relationship and realize the common good through

⁵F. Enor and K. Etta. Akparabong and Yala-Nkum Relations in the Middle of the Cross River Region, Nigeria. Vol. 2, No. 2. *International Journal of Law and Society (IJLS)*, 2023, p.36.

⁶J. J. W. "Realistic Group Conflict Theory: A Review and Evaluation of the Theoretical and Empirical Life Nature", *Psychological Record*, 1993, p. 395.

⁷ I. Asouzu. *Ikwa: Essential Readings in Complementary Reflection*. (: Seaprint Publishers, 2007), p. 2.

mutual interdependence and by working together in order to restore peaceful co-existence and mining of the salt pond through compromise, peaceful negotiation and co-existence.

Salt Mining Processes and Rivalry between Olokpo and Akparabong

The mining of salt by Akparabong commenced immediately after the sacking of Yala-Nkum and the dispossessing of her of its salt pond. Evidence obtained from informants during fieldwork corroborates the processes of salt extraction between Yala-Nkum and Akparabong as the same. Minor differences are however that, the Yala-Nkum mined the salt as the sole group at the vicinity of the salt pond, which site was close to what is referred to as *Besamansa-bi-Nkum* while Akparabong and its allies, taking turns, mined inside the salt pond which had the *Okwa* stone embedded, to which sacrifices were made praying the gods for a fruitful, peaceful and harmonious salt extraction. The sacrifices which preceded every mining season included such items as yams mashed with palm oil, locally referred to as *nnagboghango*; boiled vegetables with palm oil; *mgbasar-anya*; fried garden eggs; and *mgbamu* leaves, a vegetable used for making draw soup when dried and pounded into a dust-like form. These items were placed in a woven basket, *ekwai*, and presented to the gods by the priest⁸.

The items were prepared by the womenfolk who sat with their male counterparts around the salt pond on the day of the sacrifice. The women, however, were not permitted to participate in mining the main salt pond, as this could be detrimental to conception and childbearing, according to custom and tradition. The womenfolk had a separate salt pond, exclusive and free of sacrifices and taboos. The priest offers the sacrifices by lifting the items from the basket, praying and requesting a bountiful harvest of salt. The gods, in acceptance of the aromatic food

⁸N. Ayok, 101 Years, Informant, Nturokan Village, Akparabong, Ikom LGA. 20/8/20203.

combination, offer protection to the miners and induce the pond to generate enough salt for the season⁹.

Salt-baking materials were acquired locally by pottery. The earthen pots were made from clay soil abundant in the area. The process of salt baking involved fetching salt water from the pond into the earthen pots, which were then put on the burning fire overnight until the water evaporated, leaving baked salt as the end product. The finished product was removed by breaking the earthen pots. Until recently, broken earthen pots adorned the salt mining site at Akparabong. The galvanised frying pan replaced the clay pots as a baking utensil. With the pan, a large quantity of salt was churned out to meet the demand from far and near neighbours of the old Ikom division in the years of colonial rule.

Mining was conducted from November to May, during the dry season. The clan head, who also doubles as the *Okwaor* head of the judiciary, *Minen-Emang*, was accorded the rights of the first to mine the pond for seven days during which period his household, comprising family members, relatives and enslaved people constituted the labour force which undertake the tedious task of fetching water and firewood to feed the burning salt water to enable the extraction of salt. Thereafter, mining activity took turns reflecting the tripartite diplomatic contraption- Akparabong, Olokpo and Iso-bendeghe, using the age grades as their labour force.

Akparabong took the lead, mining from November to March because of its large grouping and population. Olokpo was mined from April to May before the rains commenced. Iso-bendeghe, being geographically far removed from the pond site, receives seven pots of baked salt from Olokpo annually. This understanding harmonised the confederate groups, whose mainstay was the alliance and common origins, prospered by the salt economy. The harmony enjoyed by the trio was soon challenged when Olokpo insisted that Akparabong

⁹ N. Ayok, 101 Years, Informant, Nturokan Village, Akparabong, Ikom LGA. 20/8/20203.

reduce the number of months it mined the salt ponds, creating more time for Olokpo, which mined only from March to April, leaving it little time to exploit the salt pond before the rains set in. Akparabong seized the opportunity created by the unfolding communal feud to remind Olokpo that it did not partake in the fierce campaign that routed out Yala-Nkum and took over their salt pond. As noted, the accounts Iso-Bendege and Akparabong had decided the battle when Olokpo arrived at the scene (battle ground) later. Olokpo was accommodated by the duo only because of their shared historical experiences¹⁰. The Olokpo, however, were not impressed by this argument; they mobilized their relatives to disrupt the mining process and threatened to withhold the annual delivery of the seven pots of salt to Iso-bendeghe if Akparabong would not limit the number of days it used the mine, allowing Olokpo more days in the salt pond. This feud culminated in the colonial era, thereby inviting the intervention of the Divisional Officer (D.O) based at Ikom.

The timely intervention of the (DO) doused the communal feud sparked by mining rights¹¹. The DO's intervention did not eliminate the rivalry between Olokpo and Akparabong. In the 1960s and 1970s, hostilities between the duo resumed. In the 1960s, for instance, Obin Akuba, an Olokpo, derogatorily mocked Akparabong chiefs whose gesture conceded baking rights to Olokpo following the DO's intervention. Mockingly, Obin rendered; *boulep-borkor-mbini*, translated as "a cripple too has grown pubic hair". The rendition was an apparent reference to Ndifon Obim, a leading Akparabong elder who was strongly opposed to the baking concession granted to Olokpo. Akuba's expression meant that though Ndifon Obim was a rich man, "he was a money-miss road, because he did not acquire a Western education,

¹⁰ Details of the alliance and communal conflict that resulted in the sacking of Yala-Nkum and the taking over of its salt pond, *see*, F. N. Enor and K. O. Etta. "Akparabong and Yala-Nkum Relations in the Middle Cross River Region, Nigeria". *International Journal of Law and Society (IJLS)*, Vol 2, No.2. 2023, p.36.

¹¹N. Ayok, 101 Years, Nturokim Village, Akparabong, Ikom LGA. 20/8/20203.

notwithstanding that he had educated and outstanding children”. Akparabong elders were so furious with the remark to the extent of fining Olokpo, for the second time. The Olokpo paid a fine of a goat to restore normalcy and cordial relations with Akparabong¹².

In the 1970s, Olokpo was again determined to disrupt the baking process in an incident which fell short of a bloody conflict with Akparabong. The Olokpo forcefully attempted to mine the pond against their turn. Takim Tawo (Olokpo) and his age mates led others, determined to mine when it was Akparabong's turn. The situation was again diplomatically resolved by the elders of the confederate groups. Nkang Ayok (Akparabong), Manyo Odo (Olokpo), Ewor Agbor, and other chiefs (Iso-Bendeghe) convened a meeting at Iso-Bendeghe with the agenda of restoring peace and maintaining the status quo to their mutual benefit.¹³ The meeting was a success, as no conflict arose between them over the long term.

In the northern part of Cross River State, the Okpoma, an Idoma stock from which the Yala-Nkum broke away, and a scion of Idoma in the Benue valley, also mined salt. The Okpoma, noted for pottery, used the clay pots, as did Akparabong for salt baking. Unlike Akparabong, salt baking was mainly undertaken by the womenfolk who did not have a separate mining pond. The men offered support in gathering and splitting firewood used for burning. However, maidens who were observing their monthly cycle abstained from the activity for obvious socio-cultural and other implications.¹⁴

Thus, Akparabong in Ikom, middle Cross River and the Yala-Okpoma in the northern part of the state, from early times were famous for salt production before the advent of the colonial era, when English salt was introduced first by middle men who partook in the Cross River trade, linking the northern part of the state to the southern or lower region of the estuary. Later, European trading agents like the United African Company (UAC) and the John Holt Company penetrated the interior and established trading firms with warehouses at the Cross River banks, where European products, including salt, were sold to the indigenous peoples.

¹² N. Ayok, 101 Years, Nturokim Village, Akparabong, Ikom LGA. 20/8/20203.

¹³ N. Ayok, 101 Years, Nturokim Village, Akparabong, Ikom LGA. 20/8/20203.

¹⁴ P. Odey, 40+, Lecturer, Department of History and International Studies, University of Calabar, Calabar. Interviewed 10/8/2024.

As agriculturalists, salt mining was undertaken alongside other farming activities, including yams, cocoyams, and plantains. Gaming, tapping, fishing, and hunting activities, as full- or part-time endeavours, were also part of the livelihood activities of indigenous people. In Akparabong, the transition to cocoa in the 1940s therefore had less dislocating effect than in other areas. Salt held prominence because of its many uses as a spice, currency, medicine, and so on. Many households retained their varied uses, some of which were now overtaken by the advent of European currency and English salt. Salt baking laid the basis for a class of wealthy folks in Akparabong who showed off their wealth through multiple wives and modern story buildings, which captured the imagination of Philip Allison and other observers¹⁵. These salt men turned their attention to cocoa farming in the middle of the 20th century.

It is pertinent to note that English salt did not automatically displace the local salt from the market, as the indigenes continued to use their homemade salt alongside it until the advent of cocoa as a cash crop. The former salt men turned their attention to cocoa cultivation and production, which transition was made easier for two reasons. Firstly, cocoa cultivation was less arduous than salt production, which compelled the labour force to work night and day, filling clay pots with salt water and gathering firewood to keep the glow and enable baking. Cocoa did not require extraneous labour. Moreso, the Colonial government encouraged the cultivation of cocoa as a cash crop, which was much needed by English factories abroad. As more attention was directed to cocoa, made possible by available land as a factor of production, salt production, which sustained the pre-colonial economy into the colonial times, received less patronage and was finally abandoned when cocoa farming gained currency and distributed more income to families than salt production¹⁶.

The Age Grade institution and conflict resolution

¹⁵ A. Philip. Cross River Monoliths Federal Department of Antiquities 1969, Lagos, p.14.

¹⁶F. N. Enor. "Society and Economy of Ikom in the Middle Cross River Region of Nigeria 1700-1995", PhD Dissertation, Department of History and International Studies, University of Calabar, Calabar, 2001, p. 57.

The age-grade institution occupies a central position in the social structure of pre-modern groups in this region. Outside of playing advisory roles to their age mates, age grades, and sets, they perform socio-economic and political roles (functions) in the communities where they are formed. It is defined as an aggregation of male and female individuals born within a 2- to 3-year period. The male counterparts usually take community roles in the villages, which constitute the highest political unit. Such roles as defence, road construction and clearing, warrior roles for their priest chiefs, and so on. They also arrange communal labour for community- and self-help projects, such as farming, baking, and mining, as the case may be.

Members of the age set ascribe rules and regulations to check their *modus operandi*. The examples of Akpanbong, Isobendeghe, and Olokpo are illustrative models for alternative conflict resolution. For instance, leaders of the age grades handled minor disputes during the mining period and in the villages, involving themselves. In more serious cases (over mining), the elders of the trio groups constituted a peace committee to negotiate among themselves in a neutral and conducive environment, as was the case in Iso-bendeghe, where the sour issues involving mining the salt pond were itemised, examined, and resolved.

Conclusion

This paper draws on primary sources, including interviews conducted during fieldwork on the Ikom and Etung groups of the old Ikom division. It relates the accounts of the Akparabong, Olokpo and Iso-Bendeghe, whose common origin and historical affinities enabled an alliance formidable enough to dislodge the Yala-Nkum group, which arrived earlier to settle within the confines of a salt pond now exploited by Akparabong until the 1970s. Managing the salt resource generated rivalries between the Akparabong and Olokpo, until elders of the groups resolved to eschew rivalries for peace and mutual coexistence, an architecture that has been sustained through salt exploitation until the advent of cocoa in the mid-20th century. Shared

historical affinities, expressed in common origins and alliances, and cemented by a common language, laid the basis for continuity and mutual socio-economic and political relationships between Olokpo, Akparabong and Iso-Bendeghe. The conflict and management models adopted by cognate groups, as applied by the Iso-Bendeghe, Olokpo, and Akparabong, lend them credibility as alternative conflict and peace mechanisms.

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