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The Era of Great Duke Ephraim: *Examining the Reign of the Nineteenth-Century “Merchant Prince” Who Consolidated Efik Power*

By Kosisochukwu Nzeribe

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FEATURE
IMAGE

**Chiefs and British Officials at the
official opening of the Calabar Watt
Market. Photo credit: Wikipedia**

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Great Duke Ephraim (often referred to as Duke Ephraim or Ephraim Duker) is remembered in Efik and Niger Delta history as one of the most powerful political and commercial figures of the nineteenth century. His reign in Old Calabar coincided with dramatic economic transitions from the era of the trans-Atlantic slave trade to the expansion of legitimate commerce in palm oil. During this period, Old Calabar emerged as one of the most influential trading polities in West Africa. Duke Ephraim’s political authority, maritime diplomacy, and commercial acumen earned him the reputation of a “merchant prince,” a ruler who used business to consolidate power.



Duke Ephraim Eyamba IX (Royal Portrait) Photo credit; Pinterest.

01

Background to the Efik Ascendancy

Before Duke Ephraim's rise, the Efik had settled in the Cross River region after migrations through the Ibom and Uruan hinterlands. By the eighteenth century, they were based in Creek Town, Duke Town, and Old Town, forming a network of coastal merchant elites who controlled riverine access to European ships. According to historical summaries, Old Calabar was deeply embedded in the slave trade, serving as a major export site until abolitionist pressure intensified in the early nineteenth century. Because Efik chiefs acted as commercial middlemen, political authority became intertwined with trade profits.

02

Merchant Power and the Slave Trade

Duke Ephraim emerged from an era when Efik rulers derived power through exclusive commercial relationships with European firms. These alliances granted chiefs access to firearms, luxury goods, and diplomatic support. During the final decades of the slave trade, the Efik elite resisted external constraints and maintained commercial primacy. Duke Ephraim's family lineage belonged to the leading houses of Duke Town, whose chiefs functioned as quasi-sovereign actors capable of enforcing tariffs, imposing embargoes, and waging economic blockades against rivals.

03

Transition to the Palm Oil Economy

With Britain enforcing the suppression of slave exports, Duke Ephraim helped redirect Efik commerce toward palm oil, a commodity in high demand for industrial lubricants and soap production. As one historical analysis notes, West African coastal rulers “exercised remarkable adaptation through palm oil trade”. Duke Ephraim used his control to secure Efik dominance; canoe fleets transported produce from the interior to the coast, and foreign ships depended on the chiefs for brokerage. This economic transition strengthened the authority of the Efik houses, especially in Duke Town, where Ephraim was based.

04

Political Consolidation and Ekpe Authority

Efik governance in Duke Ephraim's era was anchored in the Ekpe (Leopard) Society, which combined judicial, administrative, and enforcement power. Ekpe acted as the policing structure of trade, imposing fines, declaring trading sanctions, and resolving disputes. Under Duke Ephraim, Ekpe's authority expanded, functioning as what one scholar terms a "state-like institution exercising coercive legitimacy". By supervising Ekpe hierarchy, Ephraim consolidated political influence and curtailed rival merchant factions within the city-states of Old Calabar.

05

Diplomacy with European Powers

Because Old Calabar was essential to British, Spanish, and Portuguese commerce, Duke Ephraim's reign included significant diplomatic engagement. Treaty negotiations later in the century culminating in the 1884–1885 Anglo-Efik agreements reflected decades of prior political maneuvering. Although many of these treaties were concluded after Duke Ephraim's lifetime, his era laid the foundations of Efik-European diplomacy. Efik rulers were treated as sovereign commercial partners, not passive subjects.

06

Conflict, Coercion, and Merchant Competition

The competition for middleman advantage sometimes escalated into violent economic enforcement. Efik chiefs imposed trading boycotts or destroyed palm oil shipments from upriver groups who bypassed their tariffs. Some conflicts also emerged among Efik towns themselves: Creek Town and Duke Town periodically clashed over trading priority. Duke Ephraim's tenure was characterized by aggressive protection of economic monopoly, a policy that secured profits but contributed to internal factionalism.

07

Cultural Prestige and the Image of the Merchant Prince

In Efik memory, Duke Ephraim represents a symbol of aristocratic wealth. Merchant princes wore imported clothes, commanded large retinues, and hosted elaborate diplomatic receptions. As Peter L. Shinnie has observed, the Niger Delta commercial elite blended African political legitimacy with European luxury consumption as markers of status. Duke Ephraim's household exemplified this hybrid culture.

Legacy in Efik History

The legacy of Duke Ephraim is tied to the high-water mark of Efik commercial power. By the mid-nineteenth century, Old Calabar served as a major palm oil port and an influential center of political negotiation. While colonial establishments later diminished Efik diplomatic autonomy, the institution of the Obong and the prestige of merchant houses endured. The memory of Duke Ephraim also feeds into a broader historiographical narrative: African leaders shaped the terms of global exchange before colonial conquest.

The era of Great Duke Ephraim illustrates how commerce could function as a tool of statecraft in precolonial Africa. Through palm oil brokerage, maritime diplomacy, and Ekpe enforcement, the merchant elite of Old Calabar consolidated geopolitical influence along the Cross River. Duke Ephraim remains significant not only as an economic actor but also as a cultural symbol of Efik prestige. His reign demonstrates that African agency was not merely European intervention structured nineteenth-century trade and governance.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kosisochukwu Nzeribe

Law Graduate / Creative & Research Writer.



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