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The Politics of Economics over Expansion: *Why the Efik People Chose Economic Expansion Over Warfare*

By Kosisochukwu Nzeribe

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FEATURE
IMAGE

A decorative brass plate with Ekpe society symbolism, the Ekpe institution supported law, contract enforcement, trade regulation, and diplomacy, vital to Efik economic strategy.

Photo credit: Philipakoda / Ironbar family of Old Calabar, via Wikimedia Commons

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Throughout West African history, societies adopted varying strategies for political and territorial growth. While some groups such as the Oyo Empire or the Benin Kingdom expanded through military conquest, the Efik people of Old Calabar chose a markedly different path. Rather than engage in aggressive territorial expansion, they developed a sophisticated economic and diplomatic system rooted in commerce, maritime mobility, and strategic alliances. The Efik became one of the most influential coastal trading communities in the Niger Delta due to their dominance of trade routes, multilingual abilities, and strong commercial relations with Europeans.



The Calabar River port, a major economic lifeline where Efik traders and middlemen shuttled goods with European ships, showing the physical infrastructure of economic expansion. Photo credit: RuthAS, via Wikimedia Commons

01

Historical Background of the Efik People

· Origins and Settlement

The Efik people trace their origins to migrations from the hinterland to the coastal region of southeastern Nigeria. By the 17th and 18th centuries, they were firmly settled in Old Calabar, particularly in towns such as Creek Town and Duke Town. As coastal dwellers, their identity became intertwined with riverine trade, fishing, and canoe transport. Unlike inland states that depended on land expansion for security or agriculture, the Efik derived power from controlling waterways and international trade routes.

- Political Structure and Merchant Leadership

The Efik political system was dominated by wealthy merchant families and influential chiefs. Merchant-capitalists, not warriors, held the highest authority. The powerful Ekpe society, which functioned as both a regulatory body and judicial authority, reinforced norms that favored diplomacy, commercial trust, and conflict mediation. This structure naturally promoted economic expansion rather than military conquest.

02

Geography and Strategic Riverine Position

- Natural Barriers to Land Expansion

The Efik resided in a dense riverine and mangrove-dominated environment. This geography made large-scale warfare or territorial conquest inefficient and costly. Warfare requires mobility, open terrain, and logistics, conditions far better suited to savannah states like Oyo or Sokoto. In contrast, the Niger Delta's maze-like waterways acted as natural barriers to sustained military campaigns.

- Advantage in Maritime Trade

The same geography that limited warfare created exceptional opportunities for maritime commerce. The Efik became skilled canoe builders, navigators, and middlemen in the Atlantic trade. Their economic power came from controlling access to inland groups such as the Ibibio, Igbo, and Oron and acting as intermediaries between these societies and European traders.

Thus, geography itself made economic expansion more attractive and more rational than military expansion.

03

Commercial Priorities over Military Conquest

- Control of the Atlantic Trade

From the 17th century onwards, the Efik emerged as major players in the trans-Atlantic trade. Though the slave trade was a major component, they also traded palm oil, ivory, textiles, guns, and European manufactured goods. According to Dike, the Niger Delta middlemen formed a commercial coalition that prevented Europeans from bypassing them, ensuring monopoly over trade routes.

- Wealth as the Source of Political Legitimacy

For the Efik, wealth accumulation not land expansion was the primary determinant of influence. Merchant-chiefs such as Duke Ephraim and Eyamba V gained power through economic networks and commercial alliances rather than military achievements. Wealth enabled the funding of communal rituals, support for large households, influence within the Ekpe society, negotiation power with European traders. Thus, the logic of political power was tied to commerce.

- Ekpe Society as an Economic Regulator

The Ekpe society played a major role in maintaining stable commercial practices. It used encoded symbols, sanctions, and judicial authority to enforce agreements, resolve trade disputes, and regulate prices. Because the Ekpe system fostered stability and trust, warfare which destabilizes trade was discouraged.



Obong Orok Edem-Odo; Asibong Edem; Ekpo Eyo Asibong; Magnus Adam-Duke (Edet Nsa); Otu Mesembe; Ekpenyong Eyo; Ani Eniang Ofiong; Antiga Bassey Cobham; Ekpenyong Ekpe (Eyamba VI); Ekeng Ita, Efik chiefs and rulers having diplomatic and economic negotiation power rather than conquest-based military power. Photo credit: Iamosamudiame, via Wikimedia Commons

04

Diplomatic Culture and Inter-ethnic Relations

- Avoidance of War with Neighboring Groups

The Efik interacted frequently with neighboring communities such as the Efut, Qua, Ibibio, Oron, and Igbo. Instead of warfare, they built economic partnerships and sometimes elite assimilation through intermarriage. Many inland groups depended on the Efik for access to European goods, which created interdependence rather than hostility.

- Use of Diplomacy to Manage Conflict

When conflicts arose, the Efik often relied on mediation through the Ekpe society, trade negotiations, marriage alliances, tribute, gifts, and exchange obligations. This diplomatic approach was more beneficial for long-term coastal trading opportunities.

05

Impact of European Contact

- European Alliances Reinforced Economic Focus

European traders preferred dealing with cooperative merchant societies rather than militaristic kingdoms. The Efik, known for their multilingual abilities and reliability, cultivated strong and consistent relationships with Portuguese, Dutch, and British traders. Europeans rewarded peace and commercial stability with exclusive trade agreements, further incentivizing the Efik to avoid warfare.

- Literacy and Western Education

By the 19th century, the Efik were among the first Niger Delta communities to embrace Western education and Christian missionary work. This led to increased literacy, new economic opportunities, and expanded diplomatic prestige. Warfare became increasingly incompatible with the Efik vision of modernization.

06

Economics as an Alternative to Territorial Expansion

- Wealth Over Land

Unlike agricultural states that needed land for sustainability, the Efik economy relied on trade monopolies, maritime transport, commercial brokerage, ritual and diplomatic networks. Because their economic

system was not land-dependent, there was no incentive for territorial conquest.

- Commercial Expansion as Political Influence

Economic growth enabled the Efik to expand their influence culturally and politically without warfare. Through trade networks that reached deep into the Cross River hinterland, they extended their power by distributing European goods and controlling access to foreign markets.

The Efik people chose economic expansion over warfare because their geography, political structure, and historical circumstances made commerce more profitable, sustainable, and culturally aligned with their values. Their strategic coastal location, merchant-dominated leadership, strong diplomatic traditions, and close ties with European traders positioned them as one of West Africa's most influential commercial societies. In the politics of Efik society, economics was not merely a means of survival, it was the foundation of power, prestige, and long-term stability.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kosisochukwu Nzeribe

Law Graduate / Creative & Research Writer.



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