

Evolution and Spread of Settlements in the Esan Area of Edo State

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ABSTRACT The study focused on the pattern of settlements evolution and spread in the Esan area of Edo State. The catastrophic theory and the infilling concept are very useful in explaining the evolution and spread of settlements in the study area. The settlements in the study area were founded by migrants from Benin Kingdom in 14th century during the reign of OBA EWARE. The Oba's only two sons died mysteriously on the same day and to mourn them the Oba enacted some laws forbidding; cooking, dancing, sexual intercourse etc., Those who could not abide by these laws have to flee or migrate into the jungle. Those who migrated and settled in the jungle – North east of Benin kingdom are the ancestral fathers of the Esan people. However, the hardship encountered in the jungle — high mortality rate due to the malaria, fever, wild animals and slave raiders forced the settlers to re-migrate to the EGWALEs (villages with traditional ruler) for security. In 1807, slave trade was abolished. The consequent freedom and safety encouraged some farm-families to move to their farm sites to settle. With time these farmsteads developed into out-post settlements. This is how the entire region was balkanized by the different communities and humanized through agricultural activities. The current phase is that of competition and in-filling of the available spaces. In the course of history, some “Egwales” — Ekpoma, Uromi, Ubiaja, Irrua and Igueben — have emerged as the leading settlements. These urbanizing centers are currently the headquarters of their respective local government areas. It is suggested that further investments in these urbanizing centre will empower them to function adequately as rural service centers.

INTRODUCTION

The geographic literature is replete with a plethora of theories and studies of settlements evolution and spread. Some of the scholars who have made their mark on the study of settlement geography: Bylund (1960), Udo (1963), Hudson (1969), Stone (1965), Tandap (1976), Gana (1978), Wagstaff (1978), Okafor (1981). Adejuyigbe and Aloba (1987) to mention but a few. The contributions of these scholars have helped in understanding the pattern of rural settlement evolution and spread over space.

One common feature of these studies is that they are geographically specific. For instance, Bylund (1960) studied the evolution of settlements in the central Lappland area of Sweden. Hudson (1969) used the American environment as bases for his model. Tandap (1969) studied settlements evolution in the Cameroon. Okafor (1981) worked on settlements expansion in the eastern part of Nigeria. Adejuyigbe and Aloba (1987) studied inter-community settlements in the Ife-Ijesa frontier areas of south western Nigeria. Gana (1978) had a panoramic view of the settlement patterns in the different parts of Nigeria. None of these studies or others known to the researcher is focused specifically on the Esan area of Edo State, Nigeria. More so and as noted by Udo (1963) Gana (1978)

and Okafor (1981), the pattern of rural settlements in any area is basically a product of past and present historical, cultural, economic and ecological factors. The study area with distinct physical and cultural characteristics (Okojie. 1960, Nationals archives; 1982) is likely to possess an interesting and useful history of evolution and spread of settlements.

The study of the evolution and spread of settlements is very instructive in the organization of a political unit, especially in a country like Nigeria where the creation of states and local government areas is a recurring phenomenon. A political unit based on primary communities (group of settlements with common origin) are more cohesive and easier to administer (Adejuyigbe 1978). Furthermore, the pattern of settlement evolution and spread are important in the regionalization process. Delimitation of regions for development programmes/projects is easier and faster if the history of the evolution and spread of the constituent settlements are known. Development programmes/projects based on regions whose constituent settlements have common history are most likely to achieve the desired objectives.

Generally the study of settlements gives insight into the functioning of the rural subsector. In a country like Nigeria which is dominated by rural settlements and were more than 70 percent

of the population reside, studies on settlements are very imperative at least for the purpose of planning to met the needs and aspirations of the people. It is on the basis of the forgoing discussions that this research is set to examine the evolution and spread of settlements in the Esan area of Edo State.

MODELS OF SETTLEMENTS EVOLUTION AND SPREAD

Over the years, geographers have been developing generalizations about the evolution and spread of settlements in a geographic space. One of the very first attempts at formulating a model to explain the evolution and spread of settlements is that made by Bylund. Bylund (1960) postulated a four phase model to describe the types of colonization process applicable to the spread of settlements from a "mother settlement" assuming certain uniform physical conditions, settlements expansion would take place along main transport arteries, and area close to the mother settlement were settled before more distance places. One of the problems with this model is its restricted applicability to areas where such "mother settlement" are linearly arranged along a coastline (Hudson, 1969).

Bylund's model was subsequently improved upon by Hudson (1969), who made use of a theory formulated by plant and animal ecologist. He postulated that the process for rural settlement evolution are essentially the same as those made by ecologists in which the original settlers reproduce and their offsprings subsequently settle in the available space close to the original homestead before occupying more distant areas. Given enough time, this process repeats itself because the sons of the sons settle land in approximately the same manner, and so forth. What result over time around each pioneering homestead is a diffusion of settlements of first generation descendants and around them, a diffusion of settlements belonging to their sons. This regularity of spread of offsprings continues with each succeeding generation. At its height such as a process increases the density of settlers over time in the new areas. With increasing density of settlers, the last process postulated by Hudson is that of spatial competition. Thus, the three basic processes which operate in rural settlement expansion are those of colonization, spread and competition (Okafor 1981).

In a swift reaction to the overtly deterministic models of Bylund and Hudson, Grossman (1971) posited that human settlements especially in pre-industrial societies is more often controlled by specific CULTURAL VALUES rather than by PRE-MEDITATED HUMAN BEHAVIOURS. When the assumptions of equal opportunity for expansion in all directions are relaxed, one might expect a situation where segments of space nearest to a node are by-passed in favour of more remote areas. Thus, there are other forces which could act on the colonization wave of rural settlement pattern and which could disrupt the recognized radial expansion model of Bylund and Hudson. For instance, Okafor (1981) posited in the case of eastern Nigeria that, community remembers would settle the limits of their territory first before occupying the space between the original homestead and the outpost settlements. This phenomena of leap-frogging the mainland, to settle at the periphery is occasional by the need to prevent encroachment by neighbouring groups, and to effect total control over the territory belonging to the community. It also reduces the distance traveled to farm by community members. This process of settlement expansion is anti-thesis of Bylund and Hudson's models where the neighbourhood effect is very apparent. One other model which is relevant in this study is Wagstaff (1978) "catastrophic theory". Wagstaff stated that the founding of new settlements is not necessary a continuous process in space but as a result of certain event(s) which may lead to dissatisfaction by members of the community. For instance, a group of people whose leader has being denied access to the throne or a chieftaincy title in their settlement may decide to move out in search of another kingdom where their wishes and aspirations could be fulfilled. On the otherhand, if members of a particular community living in the core of another community are denied access to land without any interference. Whatever the reason for the out migration, the end result is the founding of a new settlement. The aptness of the catastrophic theory rest on some common negative features of the African traditional system. Such negative features include disagreement over succession to kingship or chieftaincy throne, inter-communal conflicts, land disputes etc. Any of these can initiate a fresh out migration and may lead to the founding of a new settlement.

Generally, the neighbourhood effect which is apparent in the settlement expansion model

of Bylund and Hudson is observable in the growth of settlements. Also the “fill-in” concept of Okafor can be substantiated because land owners and/or land speculators can deliberately delay development of some plots of land for private reasons. The “hallow plot” will be in-fill later. Finally, the catastrophic theory is of particular relevance in explaining the founding of new settlements in Africa because the theory is based on factors which are of historic importance in African traditional system.

THE STUDY AREA

The Esan area of Edo State, Nigeria is the geographic unit situated between latitude $6^{\circ} 10'$ and $6^{\circ} 45'$ north of the equator and between longitude $6^{\circ} 10'$ and $6^{\circ} 35'$ east of the Greenwich meridian. These latitudinal locations imply that the study area falls within the tropical rainforest region. The area experiences high temperature,

high humidity and heavy down pour of rain. Physically, the whole region is a plateau with relative undulating surface and very fertile soil. (Akinbode, 1983). The altitude modifies the temperature and eliminates extremes. The fertile soil is the important historic factor that attracted settlers into the area (Omofonmwan, 1995). Politically the region is divided into five Local Government areas. These five local Government areas are organized into Edo State, Central Senatorial districts (Fig. 1). The total land areas of the region is $2,730\text{km}^2$ with a 2003 population projection of 537,513 people (National Population Commission Benin City, 2003). This yields a density of 197 persons per square kilometer.

EVOLUTION AND SPREAD OF SETTLEMENTS

The Esan people are the aborigin of the Esan area of Edo State, Nigeria. The name Esan, is a

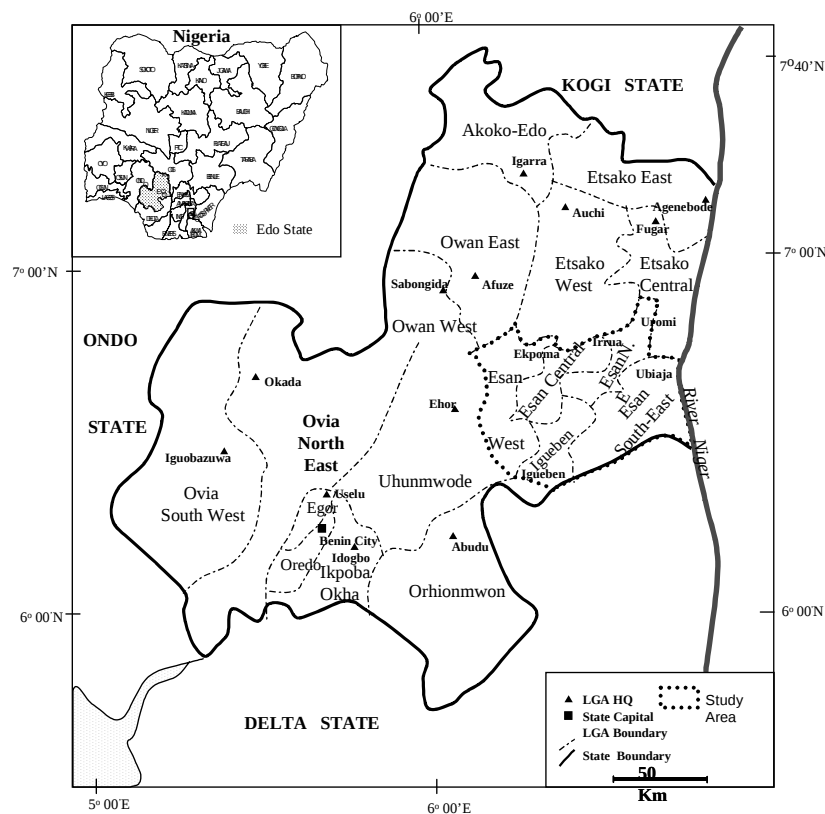


Fig. 1. Edo State (showing Study Area)

corruption of the Benin word-ESANFUA; meaning those who jumped of or fled away (Okojie 1960). The Esan people migrated from Benin kingdom in the 14 century during the reign of OBA EWARE (the great). Oba Eware enraged by the mysterious death of his only two sons on the same day enacted some laws to be obeyed as a mark of respect for his departed sons. This law which were to be observed by all the citizens in the various community/quarters in the kingdom for about three years forbade:

- Sexual intercourse
- Making of fire and cooking of food
- Washing of clothes and sweeping of the houses and
- Drumming and dancing etc.

That every person in the kingdom should from then on live a verminous life of fit and degradation was easy enough, it was also easy to live on ripe plantain, bananas and other fruits but only for few weeks. Also everyone could forgo seeing drum or dancing for ten years. But for each man to be living with two, three or seven wives in the same house and yet forget nature was far too much. The hardship and diseases that followed on the heels of these laws caused many people to flee. A great number of those who fled Benin and migrated toward the North-east and settled in what is now known as Esan area are the ancestral fathers of the present Esan people.

The preceding historical account clearly illustrates the geographical concepts of "Push and pull" and the catastrophic theory of Wagstaff. The hardship which result from OBA EWARE's obnoxious laws was the "PUSH factors" of the migrants while the present location (Esan area) where freedom was guaranteed represents the "PULL factors". Similarly, the mysterious death of the only two sons of OBA EWARE and the consequent obnoxious laws enacted by the OBA are the catastrophic events that ignited the wave of migration from Benin kingdom.

Oral interview and documentary evidence support the view that the first group of colonizers lived in tiny but dispersed settlements. This is most probably true because, the fleeing or migrating band of people who first colonized the area did not come at the same time. They migrated from Benin at different times, from different points within the new colony. Each of these migrating groups was relatively small in number and lived in tiny hamlets far removed from each other (Fig. 2a).

The migrants or settlers were confronted with a number of environmental problems in their new colony. The environment consisted of virgin tropical forest. The tropical rainforest is characterized with high temperature, high humidity of the air and heavy down pour of rain. These conditions are very conducive for the breeding and spread of diseases vectors such as mosquitoes, tse-tse fly, rats, flies and other vermin. Mortality rate was very high due to malaria, fever and other intestinal diseases such as dysentery, cholera and diarrhea. Secondly, there were incessant attacks from wild animals (such as elephant, tiger, bush pig, leopard etc) homicide in this virgin forest. Third, slave traders raided the areas with ease because the number of people in each group was few and the slave traders has superior fighting weapon. These problems couple with man's intrinsic gregariousness forced the inhabitants of these tiny settlements to re-migrate to other larger settlements within the colony (Fig. 2b) where safety was assured.

During this re-grouping process, the EGWALE'S (villages with traditional rulers) were the attraction zones. At that time, the Egwale's had a well organized defensive mechanism which was used to rebuff or wade-off invaders. The population of these larger settlements (or Egwales) was further increased by migrants from other places such as the Nupe, Igbira, Ika, Ibo colonies and other territories north, east and south of the colony. These later migrants were attracted by the fertile soil which led to increase in farming activities within the settlements. The direct corollary of these centripetal movements was the nucleation of the Egwales and other larger settlements. Thus, at that time; the Esan area consisted of nucleated but dispersed village settlements. This marked the end of the second phase in the evolution of settlements in the study area.

The nucleation of the Egwales led to increased competition for farm land within each village in the colony. However, virgin land for farming were still very abundant but at distant places. This implies that the people have to trek long distance for farming purposes. Trekking long distance to farm is not only tiresome but also reduces man-hour of work. This situation coupled with the abolition of slave trade in 1807 encouraged many farm-families to stay behind in the farm. The period of staying behind in the farm at the early stages was one market – week.

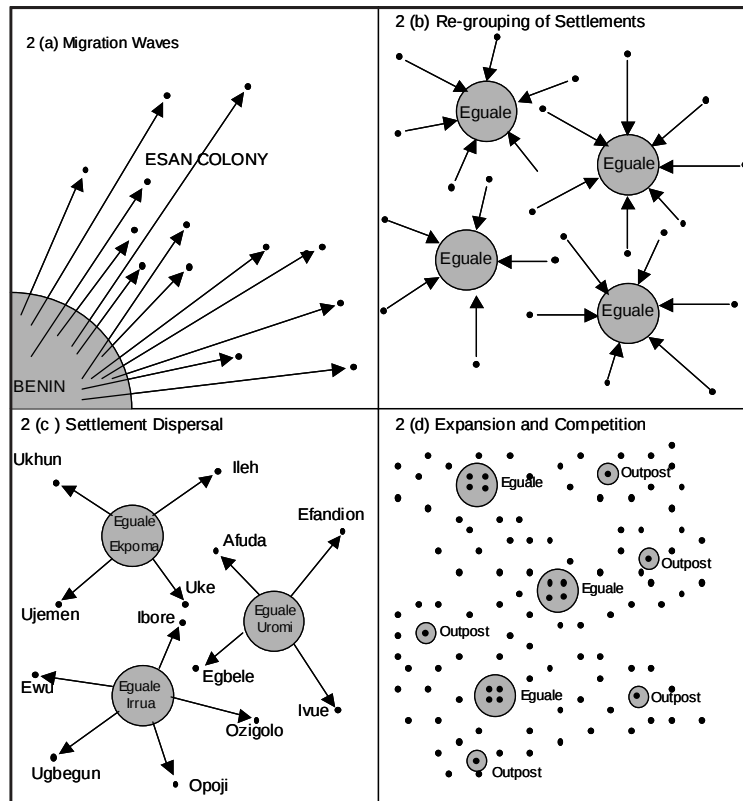


Fig. 2. Evolution and Spread of Settlements in Esan of Edo State.

Source: Fieldwork 2003

In this part of the world a market-week is four days. The system involves movement of the able-bodied men and women in the morning of the day before the next market-day. After some time, and as a result of the general freedom occasioned by the total abolition of slave trade, the men started to stay longer in the farm. The women will have to come to the market-village to buy cooking ingredients on market days. This is how the out-post settlements evolved. In the course of time, other people from the mother settlements and other places came to join those in the farmland. The out-post settlements usually form the nuclei of new villages named after the founder with a prefix (such as Emado-Ekpoma, Ivue – Uromi, Ibore – Irrua, Ilel – Ekpoma etc) relating it to the village of origin (Fig. 2c) of the founders.

The upsurge of outpost settlement and rapid increase in the population led to the balkanization

of the total land area of the region among the perspective communities and farm-families. This has in turn led to the humanization of the entire region in form of farming activities (Omofonmwan 1995). the current stage in the spread of settlements in the study area is that of competition for, and infilling of, the space between the original homestead and the outpost settlements (Fig. 2d). the competition for land is in the form of changing land use pattern. Specifically, agricultural land use which is the most dominant is giving way to other land use patterns such as Education, industrial, road construction and other modern land use types. These changes in the land use pattern are mostly observable in the larger settlements or Egwales.

Currently, the Esan area of Edo State is witnessing a renewed upsurge in the inflow of people into the area. The increasing rate of immigration into the study area is due to the high

level of socio-economic development taking place in the region. There is a University – Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma – in the area with all necessary ancillary facilities. There is also a medium sized industry – the Bendel feeds and flour mills, Ewu—in the area. There are a number of small-scale industries in the region. Uromi (one of the largest settlements in the region) is a bulk-breaking centre. In short, Uromi is the commercial nerve within the region and beyond. The point here is that, apart from the agricultural activities there are abundant opportunities for job in all other types of human endeavour in the region. There are five local government areas in the region. Their headquarters are growth centres and are well – served with government goods and services. They consist of a number of development impulses which are propulsive and thus attract people and materials to themselves. The overall effects of the observed population increase are the nucleation of the Egwales or larger settlements. If the current influx of people and the urbanization of the Egwales are sustained, the conurbation of some settlements in the area is a question of time.

COMMENTS

The Esan people migrated from Benin kingdom in the 14th century during the reign of OBA EWARE. The mysterious death of the Oba's only two sons on the same day and the subsequent obnoxious laws enacted by the Oba as a mark of respect for his dead sons were the catastrophic events which sparked-off the wave of migration from Benin Kingdom. The initial settlement pattern in the Esan colony was the tiny but dispersed hamlets. However, environmental hazards such as malaria, fever, slave raider and attack from wild animals forced the settlers to re-group into larger settlements. The regrouping led the nucleation of some of the villages especially the Egwales. The nucleation created local scarcity of farm land in the neighbourhood. Farming activities were therefore extended to distance place.

The general freedom that accompanied the abolition of slave trade encouraged farm-families to spend some days in the farms. In the course of time and due to the seriousness of work, many farm-families started to stay longer in the farms. Thus, farmsteads matured into permanent outpost settlements. This led to the balkanization

of the whole region among the farm-families and the total humanization through agricultural activities. Today competition for land in form of changing land use pattern due to urbanization is a common feature in the larger settlements in the area

The Egwales and other larger settlements in the area are rapidly urbanizing due to the high level of socio-economic development in the area. These Egwales—Ekpoma, Irrua, Uromi, Igueben and Ubiaja—consist of a number of development impulses, which attracts both human and material resources to the area. These identified growth centers can be re-classified as rural services centers. More development variables can be injected into these identified rural service centers to enhance their ability to hold behind the teaming rural labour force for the socio-economic development of their respective areas of influence. Secondly the people are culturally homogenous and the area is functional (due to the well developed road network) and can therefore be organized into a development region for the implementation of programmes or projects for the overall development of the area.

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