

Understanding Inter-Community Conflicts among the Ejagham of the South West Region of Cameroon 1961-2016

Victor Ntui Atom, PhD

University of Buea

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100700325>

Received: 15 July 2026; Accepted: 20 July 2026; Published: 31 July 2026

ABSTRACT

The study investigates the causes of intercommunity conflicts between Ejagham villages in the South West Region of Cameroon from 1961 to 2016. It argues that, intercommunity conflicts amongst Ejagham Cameroon villages were orchestrated by varied economic transformations in the area. Within a span of sixty years, the Ejagham area has witnessed more than 50 inter community conflicts. These conflicts began manifesting as early as 1961 and have continued till date intersecting with the current Anglophone crisis in the area rendering the situation very complex. While many have blamed these occurrences on discrimination and false claims, some clung tenaciously to leftover effects of colonization as key drivers to these conflicts. Using a historical research method with a qualitative design, the study upholds that, Ejagham inter-community conflicts were provoked by varying economic transformations that occurred in the area after independence. Its findings revealed that, increase in demography and the transformation of farming systems from subsistence to cash crop led to a high demand for farm land by many indigenes. Furthermore, changing economic value of land, high demand for non-timber forest products and the establishment of border markets in the main border communities of Ekok and Otu also resulted to high competition and antagonisms among the people. The post 2016 era presents a very complex conflict phenomenon due to the Anglophone grievances that degenerated into a crisis in 2016.

Keywords: Conflict, Communities, Relations and Economic activities.

INTRODUCTION/LITERATURE REVIEW

Throughout time, the phenomenon of conflict has been recurrent among humans propelled by the desire to protect divergent interests at both personal and group levels (Sills, 1968). Otite (1999) holds that, where interest is divergent with different parties competing, there is a likely hood for conflicts to occur. Such interests, goals and aspirations can be economic resources or political positions. Grey and Roos (2012) also commends this claim by accepting that, interest and pride remain an outstanding motive for the different community clashes especially among Africans drawing examples from South Sudan. Seemingly, African writers especially have often concluded that, the source of numerous conflicts in post-independent African states and communities was colonization. On this note, Achankeng (2013) asserts that, colonialism still works in post-colonial Africa through injected policies from the former colonizers and this has been the root cause of conflicts in present day Africa. Just like others, Zartman (1985) also agrees that, power struggles, new independent consolidations and colonial boundaries are the main causes of conflicts in Africa. In the same vein, Fanso (1982) attributes the roots of community conflicts to the introduction of European systems of boundary in Africa as he unveils that, the notion of lines and perks was alien to the African and therefore generated more confusion than necessary.

Among the Ejagham, the contributions of European colonisation to the occurrence of intercommunity conflicts cannot be undermined, yet the situation in the post-independence era seems different as it has evolved to integrate other factors that seem to thwart these colonial claims. The main Ejagham Cameroon groups like Ekwe (Njemaya), Keaka (Ngunaya) and Obang have consistently been confronted with contradictions and disagreements between their various communities apparently not rooted from colonial activities anymore but

orchestrated by certain economic transformations that were observed between 1961 and 2016. Among these transformations, increase in population, changes in farming methods, land scarcity and the growing economic value of land have been constantly observed as constituting the backbone in generating inter community conflicts within this area. Furthermore, other economic developments such as off-farm activities that accompanied the creation of the Ejagham border zone in 1965 have also been targeted as sources of infrequent bickering between Ejagham village communities in Cameroon (Atom, 2022).

In recent years, conflictual relations have tended to be more complexed propelled by the emergence of western styled capitalism, democracy and Globalization (Mbah, 2021). Characterised by a multifaceted approach, the introduction of western style capitalism, democracy and the resultant globalization did not only sway the people from previously respected economic and traditional political institutions, but as well rendered the people individualistic with each and every individual or community seeking to stand tall amidst others. The above factors thwarted every effort at communal coherence and promoted intermittent clashes among these communities. Such clashes were characterised by quarrelling, minor skirmishes, road blockages and attacks on farm to market roads. Conversely by the end of the 20th century, constant clashes between Ejagham Cameroon communities crystalized to the formation of vigilante groups to deconstruct the efforts of other neighbouring communities especially those envisaged as potential competitors.

From the above analyses, this paper attempts to contribute to existing literature in the study of conflicts by asserting that, apart from colonial ills, economic transmutations in the post-independence period antedated conflicts between Ejagham communities in Cameroon. Our focus is to demonstrate how certain economic changes like demographic increase, cash crop expansion and the creation of a border zone remain the key factors that exacerbated conflicts among Ejagham villages in Cameroon. It seeks to answer questions like what were the different economic changes that have occurred within Ejagham land of Cameroon between 1961 and 2016 and how did these changes propel intercommunity conflicts? This paper is important in respect to the negative implications of conflicts on the socio economic and political growth of border communities along the Cameroon-Nigeria boundary. But before we delve into answering the above questions, it will be imperative to discuss some concepts.

Conceptual Review

Conflict

The International Encyclopaedia establishes a sociological definition of conflict as a “struggle over values or claims to status, power and scarce resources in which the aims of the conflicting parties were not only to gain the desired values but also to neutralize, injure or eliminate their rivals” (Sills, 1968, 220). In line with this definition, Wehrmann (2008), saw conflict as “a social fact in which at least two or more parties are involved and whose origins are differences either in interest or in social positions of the parties” (p. 9).

The concept has also been defined as “the interaction of interdependent people who perceive incompatible goals and interference from each other from achieving these goals” (Otite, 1999, p.15). Mbah (2008) on his part defines conflict as “contradictions arising from differences in interest, ideas, ideologies, orientations, perceptions and tendencies” (p.2). This study understands conflict as differences in interests and opinions manifested through reproach and confrontations. These conflicts are of different forms like inter-state and inter-community.

Here our focus will be on inter-community conflicts. Inter-community conflict is defined as a conflict between two or more communities. This type of conflict is an old phenomenon and traces its origin as far back as the pre-colonial period. Brosche & Elfversson (2023) define communal conflicts as violent or nonviolent conflicts between non state groups that are organised along a shared community identity. Inter-community conflicts were often seen along community and/or ethnic lines. In this study, we define inter community conflict as disagreements and confrontations between two or more Ejagham communities over shared interest or goal.

Economic Activities

basically agriculture; the secondary sector is entrenched on industries and transformation while the tertiary sector was mainly services like trade and transport. Handerson et al. (2018) hold that economic activities are money making activities and suggest that, the basic determinant of any economic activity of a people was geography. In their view, primary sector economic activities were minded by fertile areas for farming while secondary and tertiary economic activities were dogged by societal transformations from villages to industrialised urban centres. This study defines economic activities in line with Handerson et al. as all money-making activities aimed at livelihood sustenance. In the context of the Ejagham Cameroon, such activities were, agricultural activities like farming, hunting, fishing and petty trading.

METHODOLOGY

This study has made use of the historical research method with a qualitative design to examine conflictual relations amongst the Ejagham of Cameroon's south west region in the post-independence period. The historical research method is justified here because it deals with the verification and explanation of human phenomena using scientific processes (Creswell, 2009). Such processes include the use of oral traditions/interviews, archives as well as other documentary sources that facilitate data collection. This method was relevant in the collection and careful analyses of primary, secondary and archival materials in order to understand past conflict experience, the causes, evolutions, changes and continuities that have characterized this area overtime. Data were obtained from two main sources which were primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include basically oral interviews and archival documents from personal archives to community, sub divisional, divisional, national archives from Buea, government and administrative reports and official documents. These archival materials range from the colonial period to the post-independence period. They were obtained from the village and traditional councils of all the villages involved in conflicts while government records were obtained from the sub divisional delegation of forestry in Eyumojock, the sub divisional office Eyumojock, the Divisional office Mamfe while colonial archives were obtained from the national archives Buea. These primary sources include photographs, maps and eyewitness account that helped to give credibility to the work. Meanwhile, secondary sources were obtained from published works like books and journal articles that were directly related to conflict studies although with a few others that discussed the history of the Ejagham and other generalities in the areas of community cooperation and conflicts globally. These sources were obtained from the library of the University of Buea, the national archives while journal articles were gotten from online. Besides, unpublished works were also of relevance to the completion of this study. These were mainly thesis and dissertations that were gotten from the libraries and laboratories of the University of Buea and other libraries.

The study adopted a qualitative research design that relied mainly on oral interviews and archival materials to gather detailed information from the field. It made use of semi-structured interviews administered using a purposive and snowball sampling method to allow for a meticulous selection of individuals who were directly involved and concerned with these conflicts. In this case, oral information gotten through interviews came from individuals using a face-to-face interview method while others were obtained using a focus group discussion with local authorities like villages chiefs, community elders, farmers, youth leaders, and government administrative authorities such as foresters, surveyors, divisional and sub divisional officers to explore the causes and understand the evolution of these conflicts within Ejagham land of Cameroon. These approaches were chosen because it gave participants the freedom to express their experiences, share indigenous knowledge and explain the circumstances that triggered these occurrences and at the same time enabled the research to corroborate, verify, and ensure accuracy and reliability in the information obtained. To ensure credibility of information, the author began by determining the authenticity of every source by examining its originality, authorship and date. This was further ensured through triangulation by using multiple sources to verify findings and avoid bias. Information from secondary sources were obtained and verify from more than one source to ensure accuracy in dates and events while the author made use of structured and semi structured questions during oral interviews in interviewing a wide range of people across the different communities involved in the conflicts. At the end, interviewees were

asked to review their responses and interpretations to ensure and confirm that the information given was authentic and accurate. The information obtained from these different sources was then compared to see where difference and similarities appear. The information collected was analysed using thematic analysis, which enabled me to identify varying themes, common ideas and patterns across the data. The findings were presented thematically organised around key issues rather than individual or personal perceptions to ensure a clear, logical and meaningful presentation that directly addresses the worries that were raised.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that after independence, the Ejagham area witnesses certain economic transformations that fuelled inter-community conflicts among the villages. These transformations revolve around four main issues. These were increase in demography, the rise promotion and expansion of cash crop farming, changing patterns on land tenure and growing economic value of land, land scarcity and the creation of the border zone in 1965 and the border markets in 2015.

Increase in Demography

In the area of demography, it was observed that, the Ejagham Cameroon population currently stands at approximately 35,999 persons (BUCREP, 2015) with a growth rate of about 2.04% annually. This demographic increase is said to have been propelled by a number of factors like a rise in birth rates, early marriages and neglect of birth control measures. In addition to the above, the vast forested area on the Ejagham Cameroon side attracted migrants from Ejagham Nigeria and areas as far as Calabar, Uyo and Enugu. it should be noted here that, the Ejagham of Cameroon are constituted into three groups under one sub division – the Eyumojock Sub Division – in Manyu Division and are settled contiguously with the Ejagham in Nigeria sundered by the international boundary that separates Cameroon from Nigeria in the southern cross river area. This separation was made eminent in 1884 during the European partition and colonization of the continent. Borrowing from Bate (2008), the tremendous increase in the population was also attributed to factors such as the economic boom between the 1960s and 1980s, increase in agricultural produce, improved medical facilities and good living standards that were observed at independence. However, the small population size at this time was also an advantage. Ejagham Cameroon in 1961 was not more than 3000 persons but by 1998 it stood at more than 13000 people with an annual growth rate of 9.1%. **(See Table 1).** Table one gives a clarification of the actual demographic situation of Ejagham Cameroon between 1953 and 1998. It shows that, in a span of over forty years, Ejagham population increased at a growth rate of 3.1% to 9.1% with a total increase of about 11715 people.

Table 1: Evolution of Population in Ejagham Cameroon from 1953-1998

Year	Population	Growth Rate
1953	2155	-
1967	3087	3.1
1976	3318	0.8
1987	6784	9.5
1998	13870	9.1

Source: Atom, 2020, p.52.

Among the three Ejagham clusters, the Keaka cluster registered the highest increase. At independence, Ejagham population stood at 2155 people. Such a small number was easily contained and managed within the limits of the reserve zone at the time. Even the forested land allocated to them at the time was more than enough to satisfy their agricultural needs. However, by 1967, the population increased from 2155 to 3087 people with an increase

of 932 people registering a growth rate of about 3.1%. Population increase continued in the subsequent years until 1998 amounting to about 13870 people with a growth rate of 9.1% and by 2015, the population of Ejagham Cameroon was more than 35000 persons (BUCREP, 2015). Such rapid population growth can generate varying worries for communities. In the views of Oamah (2006), feeding a growing population in a community can result to exerting unnecessary pressure on land. It can lead to scrambles and indiscriminate exploitation and expansion on forest areas by the expanding population.

In the Ejagham communities of Cameroon, tremendous demographic increase saw many people flocking into the forest in search for farm lands. It generated a quest for control of land and indiscriminate boundary claims by stronger villages as fertile forest areas for farming could no longer meet the needs of the population. Consequently, various villages and clusters began scrambling for recognition in the forest. Home (2001) poses that, rapid growth in population can lead to the eventual shortage of farmlands and fierce competition over limited resources. The result can be rampant trespass and crisscrossing of people on others lands. Among the Ejagham, it resulted to intermittent clashes between villages sharing the same community lands. The case of Ewelle and Njege in 1975 was a concrete example (Agbornde Emmanuel, personal communication, May 10, 2026). The conflict between these two villages dates back to 1975 when the people of Ewelle began invading the forest closer to Njege due to the rapid growing population. Moreover, one of the causes of the Ekok/Nsanarakati conflict was the increase in the population of Ekok due to her strategic position at the border (Ferdinand Assam, personal communication, March, 5 2026). Her position provoked uncontrolled and rampant cross border migrations that left many in search for farming and settlement lands. This bore the risk of civil conflict and destabilisation of neighbouring communities like Nsanarakati owing to the fact that the migrant population did not only search for settlement and farm land but also resorted to disrespect for community boundaries in the area. According to Oamah (2006), increase in population produces large group sizes that can provoke disrespect for authority and trigger internal violence among people. In an assessment report by Population Action International (PAI) an American based NGO, demographic stressed factors were identified as the greatest factors that can cause disorder and conflicts in ethnic groups. According to the PAI, when a youth bulge population is attained, it may likely lead to social unrest. Youth bulge population can only be seen when young adults make up more than 40% of the population in the community. For instance, in the year 1990, Ejagham Cameroon population was mainly characterised by youths who constituted more than 50% of the population (Agbor, 2002). The rapid growth led to scrambles and disagreements on land and later strife between the various Ejagham communities. As population increases so too did people began scrambling for farm lands to expand cash crop production.

Promotion and Expansion of Cash Crop Production

Among the most visible economic changes that led to frequent bickering between Ejagham Cameroon villages was the progressive increase in cash crop farming. This initiative was introduced and promoted in Cameroon and particularly in Ejagham land as early as 1961 when the newly independent government of Cameroon decided to boost the economy of the country by promoting cash crop production. Although previously practiced in a low scale, after the independence and reunification of the two Cameroons, President Ahidjo saw the improvement and diversification of farm production as a remedial measure to avert the daunting challenges that the country was facing at the time. In order to achieve these goals, he announced and initiated a development plan in 1961 where priority was given to agriculture especially in the sector of cash crops like cocoa, coffee, rubber and cotton. According to Nji & Engwali (2019), although the implementation and valorisation of cash crop production was driven by the aspirations of the colonizers aimed at maintaining former African colonies as sources for the steady supply of raw materials to the world market, it was, in the eyes of Ahidjo a solution to social dilemmas like poverty and joblessness that have plagued the baby state in the mid-1960s.

Certainly, it helped in advancing and upgrading income levels in rural communities and as such, attracted the attention of many people. It became fashioned by all and sundry within Ejagham villages in Cameroon especially those who have been conversant with farming activities overtime (Onor, 1994). For instance, between 1990 and 2016 the Ejagham area harboured more than two thousand cocoa estates in the 64 villages that make up the sub

division. To them, it was a quick means to sustainable growth and poverty alleviation. To sustain this move, President Ahidjo further took steps in 1973 to announce the green revolution as a means to improve production and expansion of export crops. The revolution encouraged and influenced not only the people around coastal or plantation areas but as well as the rural Ejagham people to engage in large scale farming. This desire pushed most of the youths into the forest in search of fertile farm lands as observed by the scrambles between the people of Njege and Ewelle in 1975, Ekok and Nsanarakati in 1989 and Otu and Ekoneman Awa in 1992 (Emmanuel Ntui, Personal Communication, May 10th 2025). Ejagham quest and motivation for cash crop farming was further boosted by the creation of private and state corporations like the National Agricultural Credit Bank aimed at granting short term loans and the creation of the *Funds National de Developpements Rurale* (FONADER) in 1973 to provide long term loans and ensure the distribution of inputs and marketing of agricultural products through the creation of marketing boards (Nji & Engwali, 2019). On the other hand, government also provided credit union loans as a means to improve cash crop production.

Following law, no 73-15 of 7th December 1973, cooperative societies were further created with limited government control. These cooperatives helped to give training to farmers, attract government support, gain access to local and international markets, attract credit and input supply to farmers (Flint & Teboh, 2012). According to Budi et al. (2021), cooperatives and marketing boards facilitated the buying process of farm products from farmers and opened them to ready marketers. They also provided agricultural seedlings and training to local farmers, helped to construct farm to market roads and created a stabilization fund to avoid price fluctuations (p.70.) By the year 1980, almost all Ejagham clusters in Eyumojock sub division had cooperative societies. Most prominent was the Kembong Cooperative society that covered the entire Keaka area and the Otu Cooperative society that covered the Njemaya area (Jacob Ita, personal communication, May 10th 2025). These institutions and their numerous advantages convinced the people to switch from subsistence farming to large scale cash crop farming especially cocoa and palms which previously were practiced in low scale.

Their high-income yielding nature led to a general rush among Ejagham youths especially school dropouts into the forest in search of fertile farming areas that can sustain these crops. Since most of the fertile areas that supported these crops were in patches, many youths from the different Ejagham villages constantly scrambled over these limited areas pushing their villages to engage in intermittent skirmishes with their neighbours. Of the sixty-four Ejagham villages, none is said to be void of a cocoa or palm farm. The largest were found along the central Ejagham areas of Mfuni, Ewelle, Ogomoko, Ebinsi, and Bakwelle. Seconded by the Njemaya and Obang clusters. As early as the mid-1970, villages in the Njemaya cluster like Nsanakang had begun making trouble with Ekok and Ndebaya over fertile farm lands that were envisaged to support cocoa and palm farming (Patrick Ntui, personal communication, May 12th 2025). At the centre, Ebinsi had also engaged Bakwelle in a conflict over farm land as early as 1980. A conflict that had prolonged till date with no visible end. Similarly, by the beginning of the 1990s Otu had also run into conflict with Ekoneman Awa on the east over fertile forested areas for the cultivation of cocoa, palms and bananas along the Akeghem River which acted as a boundary between the two villages (Atom, 2020). Consequently, some villages resorted to the creation of vigilante groups to guard and protect their boundaries from neighbouring encroachment. In due course, patterns of land tenure began changing giving land a new value that further aggravated the situation.

Changing Patterns on Land Tenure and Growing Economic Value of Land

On issues related to land, the study reveals that before 1961, the value of land was not strongly felt among Ejagham villages because of the sparsely populated nature of the villages, strong land tenure systems based on communal ownership and the slow pace in extensive agriculture and cash crop farming as shown in the previous sub section. Generally, the Ejagham saw land as a communal commodity. It was their birth right directly attached to their customs and tradition. Land was sacred, collectively owned and never had any individual attributes. Charles Joseph Okokon says: "Land is the spatial attribute of sovereignty and that in Africa; land is embroidered with mystical attributes or qualities. Land embodies the spirit of the earth goddess and it is also the burial place

for ancestors, the invisible forefathers who bequeathed land to us” (Okokon, 2008, p.235) In this sense, land could only be entrusted or gifted from lineage to lineage, family to family and from father to son.

However, in the early 20th century, colonialism and its different policies applied in Africa led to changing patterns in land use. At independence in 1961, these patterns were continued resulting to a shift in ownership from community or kindred to individuals. Alongside this, Ejagham patterns of land have been confronted with modern forms which have resulted to confusion and illegal claims by different people.

Mbah and Ngwangwu (2014) observed that the shift of ownership resulted to varied expropriation patterns and monetization. Compounded by the rising population, climate change, degradation, introduction of plantation agriculture, rising consciousness in the economic and political atmosphere of Cameroon, creation of new societies, farming extension methods and communal claims, much pressure was exerted on land rendering it purchasable, rented and sold. It became an economic good with very high value attached to it. Land was no longer considered a unique commodity; it can now be exchanged for money and was used to measure power, wealth and survival (Sone, 2012). As time went on, these communities discovered that, land can be commercialised, yet soils in most of these villages were un-uniform and unfertile.

Consequently, fertile land became scares and its value kept on rising (Akinsanni, 1975). Owing to its growing scarcity, the thickly populated and fast-growing villages like Otu, Ekok, Ewelle, Kembong, Bakwelle, Ebinsi, Mbakem and Eyumojock in the mid-1990s began securing land for their future generations. It became a major problem as various villages employed security measures like survey teams to protect their community lands from any form of invasion, expropriation or exploitation (David Erem, personal communication, December 20th 2024). These moves met with numerous clashes from various villages.

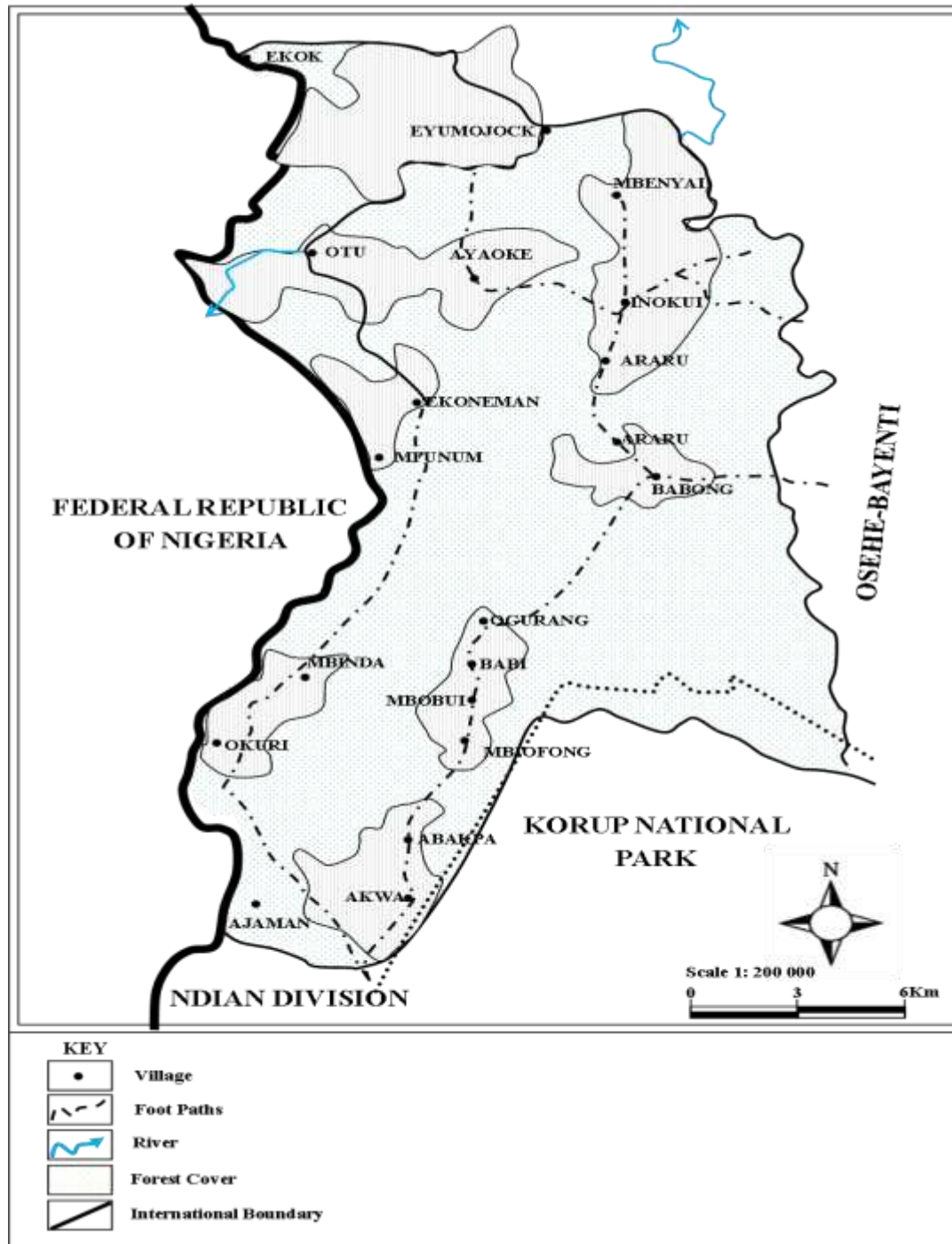
Again, with the increasing adoption of tree crop planting and enterprising, farmers noticed that land was more profitable to cultivate for cash crops purposes than for subsistence (Oтите and Oniongwо, 1979, p.389). It should be noted that more than 70% of Cameroonians derive their livelihood from land. Out of this, more than 80% of Ejagham Cameroonians depend on secondary and primary land for a living. Since most of them were forest employed, the quest to own and control certain fertile areas was the main driving force for the many inter-village conflicts. As cocoa and palms became leading cash crops in the post-independence Ejagham Cameroon, people concentrated less on subsistence and more on these money making crops.

Others concentrated on renting and selling as they spent time clearing virgin forest and delimiting it even if they had no means to plant just to scare away others (Agbor Ndip Cyprian, personal communication, April 16th 2025). Moreover, infertility of certain areas within particular villages led to shifting cultivation. With this method of farming, encroachment into the lands of other villages became eminent. A notable example was the conflict between Ebinsi and Bakwelle that started in early 1980 and the conflict between Mbenyan and Inokun in 1988 as well. As the quest for cash crop farming among individuals is consistently increasing, land too has continually become scarce especially with the presence of a forest reserve in the area.

The issue of land scarcity resulted from the creation of the Ejagham Forest Reserve (EFR) in 1934 by the British colonial government (SDAFE, Ordinance No.65 of 1936). The reserve encompassed almost all Ejagham villages except for those in the Keaka and Obang clusters occupying more than 53.3% of Ejagham Cameroon forest. (See **Map 1**). The EFR had a total area of 74851 hectares of land stretching from Ekok in the north to Ajaman and Ekoneman Ojong-Arrey in the south.

When the reserve was created, all villages were allocated communal land for agriculture in proportion to the population at the time and were given certain rights for exploitation of domestic and alimentary products in the reserve zones (SDAFE, Annual Report on the Ejagham Forest Reserve, January-July 1949). They had rights to collect domestic products and were also given rights to hunt certain species of animals, fish, collect salt and building materials like poles and thatches (Agbor, 2002).

Map 1: Ejagham Forest Reserve in Cameroon



Source: Agbor, 2002, p. 4.

It was also agreed that as population expanded and economic activities increased, pending on request from the villages, land was to be de-reserved and added to them for agriculture and other activities geared towards development (SDAFE, Ordinance No.65 of 1936). Between 1936 and 1961, the British colonial administration made only a single attempt in 1953 to de-reserve land and add to that which was previously allocated to these villages at the inception of the reserve (SDAFE, Ejagham Reserve Public Notice No.231 of 1953). Even at the time of such exercise, not all villages were allocated land. For instance, Eyumojock was not given any land for agriculture (Ita Nkom, personal communication, June 12th 2025). Eyumojock community forest was very small

as compared to the growing population. It is an unfertile area characterised by sandy soils which could only support the cultivation of certain species of roots like cassava and yams.

The problem was further exacerbated by the failure of post independent governments of Cameroon to de-reserve land from the Ejagham Forest Reserve (EFR) to satisfy farm needs of growing communities even upon request from the villages. Owing to her expanding population, pressure on land was inevitable. By 1987 the people of Eyumojock in search of cultivable land on the east began encroaching into the lands of their neighbours like Ndebaya. While the people of Ndebaya were constantly demanding the recognition of the boundary with Eyumojock at *Ayok* Stream, the people of Eyumojock held onto the fact that they were custodians of the land with equal rights of usage (SDAE, Ejagham Reserve Public notice No 231 of 1953). On the other hand, Eyumojock started claiming ownership over the lake Ejagham area in early 1980 and by mid-1990, they have run into conflict with another neighbouring village-Ayaoke (Atom, 2020). It was not until 2020 that part of the reserve was liberated and handed over to the council under the mayor of Eyumojock rural council to be distributed accordingly to villages who owned this portion of the reserve. Unfortunately, the Mayor who doubles as the chief of Eyumojock turned the affair to favour only the people of Eyumojock. This act further aggravated the long existing conflict between Eyumojock and her neighbours (Ojong Obi Ferdinand, personal communication, May 15th 2025). Such discomfiting circumstances brought about scrambles between villages for unprotected reserve areas. The result has been persistent quarrelling, attacks and fighting between communities on particular fertile reserve areas. When land becomes the main form of wealth and an absolute tool for survival for humans, it will inevitably become a source for competition and fighting among its claimant (Broche & Elfversson, 2023).

Scrambling to extract timber and non-timber forest products inside the reserves was another call for concern. The EFR harbours numerous resources which constitute a source of livelihood to the Ejagham Cameroon people. It is rich in natural resources like salt, bauxite, timber and a variety of non-timber forest resources like bush mango, *eru*, thatch and *njansang* that serves both as food and commercial items at the border market with Nigeria. Thus, the forest provides employment to more than twenty thousand Ejagham Cameroonians along the Cameroon-Nigeria borders. This constitutes an active population of 57.1%, with the youths making up about 46.5% of the active population particularly dependent on the forest for a living. This generated pressure and unnecessary competition among them (Atom, 2022). Wily (2011), confirms that population pressure triggers illegal entry for exploitation and extraction of forest resources and the conversion of forest reserve areas into agricultural land. As of 2015, more than half of the population in all the villages around the reserve were involved in both agricultural activities and tapping of forest resources within the reserve area. These activities often culminated into differences and arguments between villages within the reserve zone. For instance, between 1965 and 2015, various inter community conflicts were witnessed in the reserve zone between Ejagham Cameroon villages with notable ones being Ekok and Nsanarakati in 1965, Eyumojock and Ayaoke in 1965 Ewelle and Njege in 1975, Eyumojock and Ndebaya in 1988, Otu and Ekoneman-Awa in 1992, Ebinsi and Bakwelle in 1998, 2004 and 2015 and so on (Atom, 2020). Besides, the border zone also provided the people with numerous petit business opportunities that often-brought competition among the people.

The Creation of a Border Zone

The idea of a border zone came in 1965 when the government of Cameroon and Nigeria agreed on a series of accords to ensure the fluidity of the boundary and facilitate interactions between the two countries. The zone in this area linked the main border commercial centres of Ikom and Akor on the Nigerian side and Ekok and Otu on the Cameroonian side. It was to boost trans-border interchange between the two countries and to permit for the free flow of people, goods and services across the boundary (NAB, File, No.O.1545 Co-operation between Nigeria and Cameroon, October, 1965). As per the 1965 agreement, it stipulated that, indigenous people occupying these border areas had the right to move to and from either side of the border for a short period of time to visit their kith and kins. This was to be done through the presentation of a border pass rather than a stamped passport. On the Cameroonian side, from Ekok, Otu and Okuri the zone ended at Eyumojock, while on the Nigerian side from Ekok, it ended at Ikom and from Otu it ended at Akor. Such an idea facilitated the entry and

exit into the area and presented exceptional business opportunities for both indigenes and immigrants. The zone slowly converted the main border communities of Ekok and Otu on the Cameroonian side from villages to semi urban centres by attracting an array of immigrants from neighbouring Nigeria and other African countries. Consequently, it brought about a good number of petty trading opportunities like smuggling and trans-border transport (Atom, 2020).

Smuggling entailed the illegal pottering and crossing of goods and people across the borders (Enow, 2009). Although it has been in existence prior to this period, the Ejagham who were the ascendant ethnic band in this area had a monopoly over it (Roschenthaler, 1996). But by the mid-1960s the creation of the border zone saw a multiplication of smuggling activities by broadening its scope to include immigrants and settlers from non-frontier villages. Smuggling along these areas was mostly concerned with contrabands like fuel, cocoa chemicals, second hand wears, drugs and small arms. By 1990, this informal trade has flourished especially around Ekok/Ikom axis and Otu/Ekang axis due to its lucrative nature and the construction of border markets in Otu and Ekok (Atom, 2022). It was further compounded by the completion of the trans-African highway in 2010. Many Ejagham youths from both sides started creating illegal check points inside some inland routes in the forest to demand compensation from other smugglers who were not known to them. In due course, the different Ejagham gangs controlling the inland routes began harassing their fellow Ejagham brothers from distant villages along these inland routes. Consequently, it was no longer a matter of village gangs but individuals who confronted each other on daily bases in the rivers and inland routes. These attacks were characterised by severe beating of youths from either village. When neighbouring villagers noticed these irregularities, they invariably accused their neighbours, ambushed and also beat them as way of retaliating. The outcome was frequent gang attacks that never ended in the forest but also saw the involvement of their different communities. These confrontations pitted the different Ejagham villages not only within Cameroon but also between those in Cameroon and Nigeria. The bloody conflict that erupted between Ekok on the Cameroonian side and Mfum and Ajassor on the Nigerian side in 2013 resulted from manipulation and differences in interest in illicit businesses along the Cross River. On the other hand, Otu and Ekang also clashed in 2016 over who and when to control smuggling along the Otu/Ekang border axis.

CONCLUSION

This study was driven by the desire to understand the sources of conflicts among Ejagham communities in the south west region of Cameroon. It has unravelled that, conflict as a natural phenomenon has plagued human existence from its inception with the Ejagham of Cameroon not being an exception. Among the people, the phenomenon has been recurrent especially as they constantly interact. However, its magnitude in the pre-independence period was controlled by low demographic pressures showing a population of not more than 3000 persons harbouring this border areas and also due to colonial repression. The period was also characterised by less concentration on cash crop farming and/or the absence of large-scale farming among the people. The reduced form of agriculture was due mainly to the fact that the people were focused only on subsistence to satisfy primary needs. Most of the Ejagham communities within this period were constituted into small households that were merely depended on food crops like yam, cassava, plantain, cocoyam, maize and vegetables with each and every family and or community producing enough to satisfy their immediate needs. Hence, the above circumstances invariably limited frequent interaction and antagonisms among the people. However, after the independence of Southern Cameroons in 1961, the growing population, the encouragement of cash crops and large-scale farming by the newly independent government led to incessant scrambles over land. These scrambles led to unnecessary pressures over land, overturned its value by monetizing and commoditizing it. This led to competition among the different communities that made up this area. Besides, the introduction of a border zone in 1965 and the construction of border markets also ignited reactions that pitted the different villages against each other. As custodians of the reserve, they began scrambling for it while trying to delimit operation zones for illegal businesses within the border. Therefore, far from colonisation, the different economic transformations experienced in the post-independence era constituted the backbone to the occurrence of intercommunity conflicts among the Ejagham in Cameroon. These factors did not only exert additional pressure on land but also increased its value and thwarted its communal nature leading to rampant scrambles between communities with the purpose

to secure fertile areas for both farming and businesses. In sum, these scrambles resulted to heightened tensions and frequent bickering among Ejagham villages. The study recommends that, parts of the Ejagham Forest reserve should constantly be de-reserved and redistributed to suit the rapid growing population and their agricultural needs and the frontiers especially the border zone properly securitized, it will help in curbing some intercommunity clashes within this border area.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Achankeng I. F., (2013), "Conflict and Conflict Resolution in Africa: Engaging the Colonial Factor", *African Journal on Conflict Resolution*, Vol.13, no. 2, 11-38.
2. Agbor V. M., (2002), "The Management and Conservation of the Ejagham Forest Reserve", The University of Yaoundé 1 (ENS): DIPES II Dissertation in Geography.
3. Akinsanni, O., ((1975), *Certificate Agricultural Science*, London: Longman Group Ltd.
4. Atom, V. N., (2020), "Intra-Ethnic Conflicts among the Ejagham in Cameroon and Nigeria 1884-2015: A Historical Assessment", The University of Yaoundé 1: PhD Thesis in History.
5. Atom, V. N., (2022), "Integrating Traditional Conflict Resolution Mechanisms in Trans-Border Conflicts among the Ejagham of Cameroon and Nigeria", *Pantikar Journal of History*, Vol.8 no.1., 83-103.
6. Atom, V. N., (2022), "The Creation of Border Zones and the Rise of Petty Trading among Immigrants on the Southern Crescent of the Cameroon-Nigeria Boundary 1965 To 2015", *African Humanities, Revue des Sciences Sociales/Journal of Social Sciences*, vol.7, 94-111.
7. Bate, G. N., (2008), "Population and Economy of Eyumojock: A Border Sub Division", The University of Yaoundé 1: Maitrise Dissertation in Geography.
8. Bate, G. N., (2010), "Eyumojock: A Border Sub Division of Cameroon, its Interchange Relationship with Nigeria", The University of Yaoundé 1: Masters Dissertation in Geography.
9. BUCREP, 3eme RGP, (2005), Répertoire Actualise des Villages du Cameroun.
10. Broche, J. and Elfversson, E., (2023), "Communal Conflict, Civil War and the State: Complexities, Connections and the Case of Sudan", *African Journal on Conflict Resolution*, vol.23 no.1, 33-60.
11. Creswell, John W., (2009), *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, Los Angeles: Sage.
12. Enow, E. C., (2009), "The Cameroon-Nigeria Parallel Trade along the Manyu Trade Axis in Cameroon", The University of Yaoundé 1, (ENS): DIPES II Dissertation in History.
13. Fanso, V. G., (1982), "Trans frontier Relations and Resistance to Cameroon Nigeria Colonial Boundaries 1916-1945" The University of Yaoundé: Doctorat d'Etat Thesis in History.
14. Flint, K. and Teboh, B. A., (2012), "Impacts of Globalization on Health, Food security and Biomedicine in Africa", in Emmanuel M. Mbah and Steven J. Salm (eds), *Globalization and the African Experience*, North Carolina, Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 167-188.
15. Gray, S. and Roos, J., (2012), "Pride, Conflict and Complexity: Applying Dynamical Systems Theory to Understand Local Conflicts in South Sudan", *African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes*, Durban, 1-22.
16. Home, R., (2001), "Towards a Pro-Poor Land Law in Sub Saharan Africa" in Robert Home (eds), *Essays in African Land Law*, Cape Town: University Law Press (PULP), 22-36
17. Mbah, E. M., (2008), *Land/Boundary Conflicts in Africa, the Case of the Former British Colonial Bamenda, Present day North West Province of the Republic of Cameroon, 1916-1996*, New York: the Edwin Mellen Press.
18. Mbah, E. M., (2009), "Disruptive Colonial Boundaries and Attempts to Resolve Land/Boundary Disputes in the Grasslands of Bamenda, Cameroon", *African Journal on Conflict Resolution*, vol. 9, No 3.
19. Mbah, E. M., (2021), "Globalization and African Conflict", in Emmanuel M. Mbah and Steven J. Salm, (eds), *Globalization and the African Experience*, North Carolina, Durham: Carolina Academic Press.
20. Mbah P, and Nwangwu, C., (2014), "Sub Ethnic Identity and Conflict in Nigeria: The Policy Option for the Resolution of Conflict between Ezza and Ezillo in Ebonyi State", *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, vol.5, no.2, 681-688.

21. NAB, File, No.O.1545 Co-operation between Nigeria and Cameroon, October, 1965.
22. Nji, P. M. and Engwali, F. D., (2019), "Farmer Organisation in the Northwest Region of Cameroon: Actual State of Affairs", *International Journal of Agricultural Extension and Rural Development Studies*, Vol.6, No.2,13-26.
23. Oamah I. T., (2006), "The Effects of Population Growth in Nigeria", *Journal of Applied Science*, Vol 6.
24. Okokon, J. C., (2008), *Ethnography of African Societies, Sub Saharan Region*, Calabar: University of Calabar Press.
25. Onor, S. O., (1994), *The Ejagham Nation in the Cross-River Region of Nigeria*, Ibadan: Kraft Books, Limited.
26. Otite, O., (1999), "On Conflicts, their Resolution, Transformation and Management" in Onugi Otite and I. Olawale Albert (eds) *Community Conflicts in Nigeria: Management, Resolution and Transformation*, Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, 1-23.
27. Otite, O. and Oniongwo, (1979), W., *An Introduction to Sociological Studies*, Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books (Nig)Ltd.
28. Roschenthaler, U., (2011), *Purchasing Culture, The Dissemination of Associations in the Cross River Region of Cameroon and Nigeria*, Trenton: Africa World Press.
29. SDAFE, Ordinance No.65 of 1936.
30. SDAFE, Annual Report on the Ejagham Forest Reserve, January-July 1949.
31. SDAFE, Ejagham Reserve Public Notice No.231 of 1953.
32. Sills, D.L., (eds), (1968), *International Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences* (3 vols), USA: The Macmillan Company and the Free Press.
33. Sone, P. M., (2012), "Conflicts Over Land Ownership: The Case of Farmers and Cattle Grazers in the North West Region of Cameroon", *African Journal on Conflict Resolution*, vol.12 no.1, 83-102.
34. Tumenta, B. F., Amungwa, F. A. and Nformi, M. I., (2021), "Role of Agricultural Cooperatives in Rural Development in the era of Globalization in the North West and South West Regions of Cameroon", *Journal of Agricultural Extension and Rural Development*, Vol. 13, no.1, 68-81.
35. Wily, L. A., (2011), *Whose Land Is It? The Status of Customary Land Tenure in Cameroon*, Yaoundé: Centre for Environment and Development.
36. Zartman, I. W., (1985), *Ripe for Resolution, Conflict and Intervention in Africa*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.