



THE LANGUAGES OF THE CROSS RIVER STATE OF NIGERIA

By

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ABSTRACT

The eighteen Local Government Areas (LGAs) that make up the present Cross River State have various speech communities. Twelve of the LGAs in the northern part of the state are heterogeneous communities who speak languages from two major language sub groups : *Upper Cross* and *Bendi*, while the remaining six are fairly homogeneous and speak very closely related languages from the *Lower Cross* group (Crozier/Blench 1992). Cross River State is therefore one of the states in Nigeria with a complicated ethnic and linguistic composition.

This paper explores the languages spoken in the Cross River State of Nigeria, and it attempts to marry the current geo-political picture with the linguistic one.

BACKGROUND

The Cross River State is situated in the south-eastern corner of Nigeria as part of the country's South South Geo-political Zone. Historically, the state was one of Nigeria's earliest ports which began even before the colonial period. In fact Calabar, its capital, was the first capital of Southern Nigeria. Old Calabar before the

colonial period was a citadel of learning. After it embraced Christianity, the new religion was spread through the Cross River Basin (Peters/Agabi 2000:123).

The Cross River State, as part of the Nigerian Federation, was first created in 1967, under the 'State Creation and Transitional Provision' Decree No. 14 by General Yakubu Gowon (Rtd). This was an attempt to solve the secession crisis between Biafra and Nigeria. The creation of 12 states from the three regions under this decree constituted the original states of the Federation of Nigeria. The state was then called the South Eastern State, and it was made up of Calabar, Ogoja, Uyo and Anaang Provinces (Udoma 1994:256). Its name was changed to Cross River, in 1976, after the *Cross River*, following the decision to name the states of the Federation after physical features like rivers.

When the Akwa Ibom State was carved out of it in 1987, the state was left with seven L.G.As. Today it has eighteen L.G.As.

LINGUISTIC CLASSIFICATION AND GENETIC AFFILIATION OF THE LANGUAGES OF CROSS RIVER STATE.

Until 1987, when Akwa Ibom State was carved out of it, the Cross River State harboured the majority of the *Lower Cross* as well as the *Upper Cross* languages, and all of *Bendi* groups of languages, all of which belong to the *Benue-Congo* family, following Crozier/Blench (1992) classification. Twelve of these L.G.As are heterogeneous communities and they speak various languages with which they co-exist. The *Lower Cross* languages are spoken in the southern part of the state, while the rest are spoken in the middle and northern parts of the state. The Cross River State is therefore a linguistically heterogeneous state, with an extremely fragmented linguistic picture. The creation and subsequent move of Akwa Ibom, which separated Ibibio, Anaang, Oron, Eket and other *Lower Cross* languages from the Efik, made

this fragmentation more obvious, because the move merely reduced the population of speakers of the *Lower Cross*.

All the languages spoken in Cross River State fall within the *Benue-Congo* sub-family of the *Niger Congo* larger family. Following Crozier/Blench (1992), three of the twelve listed major sub groups are represented adequately, viz, the *Idomoid*, the *Cross River* and the *Bantoid*. Of all three, *Cross River*, made up of *Bendi* and *Delta Cross* together constitute the largest number of languages. Only three of the *Lower Cross* languages are represented in the state : Efik Ito and Ukwa, while the *Upper Cross* group dominates with several languages.

The large number of languages in the *Upper Cross* group may be due partly to wrong classification of some of these languages. For instance, Leyigha is actually a variety of Leggbo. It is highly mutually intelligible with other varieties of Leggbo which are not listed, namely : Lebamna, Letatama, Lekuleku, Lemmabana. These four varieties in addition to the Leyigha and Lenyima (listed as separate languages) all together make up the Leggbo language. In 1.1.2 we present a classification of the languages of the state adapted from (Crozier/Blench 1992).¹

Table 1.1.2

Linguistic Classification and Genetic Affiliations of Languages in Cross River State

Group	Subgroup	Sub-subgroup	Clusters	Languages	Dialects
Cross River	Bendi	Bekwarra	Bekwarra		
		Bete-Bendi			
		Obanliku	Basang Bebi Bishiri Bisu Busi		
		Ukpe-Biobiri Ubang			

	Alege Obe	Obe Afrike Utugwang Okorogung Okworotung		
Delt-Cross	Bumaji Bokyi Lower Cross	Central	Efik	Efik Usakade
	Upper Cross (North South)	Oring	Ufia fiom Okpoto	
	Kukele Uzekwe Ubaghara		Biakpan Ikun Etono Ugbem Utuma	
		Kohumono Agwagwune	Erei Abini Adim Abayongo Etono II	
		Umon		
	(East-West)	Olulumo-Ikom Lokaa Nkukoli Lubila Mbembe Leggbo Leyigha ² Lenyima Ukpet-Ehom		
		Agoi Doko-Uyanga Bakpinka Kiong Korop Odut Yace Akpa		
	Idomoid			

		Idoma	Eloyo Igede Etulo Yala Ogoja Yala Ikom Yala Obubra Ndoe		
Bantoid	Southern Tivoid Bantoid (wide Bantu)	Ekoid Bantu		Ekpara Ibong Ejagham	Balep Bendeghe Northern Etung Southern Etung Ekin Nse-Nsele-Nta Abanyom Efutop Nkem-Nkum Nnam Ekajuk
				Bakor	

POLITICAL CLASSIFICATION AND ETHNIC/LINGUISTIC AFFILIATIONS IN CROSS RIVER STATE

The majority of Cross River, all of Bendi, some of the Bantoid, and a few Idomoid languages are spoken in the Cross River State. They are spoken in the 18 LGAs of the state with the distribution given in 1.1.3. When Akwa Ibom State was carved out of Cross River State, there were only 7 LGAs. Today, the state has the following 18 LGAs : Abi, Akamkpa, Akpabuyo, Bakassi, Bekwarra, Biase, Boki, Calabar Municipality, Calabar South, Etung, Ikom, Obanliku, Obubra, Obudu, Odukpani, Ogoja, Yakurr and Yala.

The LGA boundaries do not exactly correspond to ethnic groups, such that there are very few linguistically homogeneous L.G.As. In some L.G.As, two or more ethnic groups are combined together. The L.G.As are Abi (Leggbo and Bahomono), Akamkpa (Efik, Korop, Ejagham), Ikom (Ejagham, Mbembe, Yala),

Table 1.1.3

Affiliations in Cross River State

Annimations in Cross River State						
	LGA	H/O	Population	Ethnic Group	Languages	Some Major Towns
1	Abi	Itigidi	87,452	Agbo (Agbo) Bahumono	Leggbo (Legbo) Bahumono ³	Itigidi Adadama Ekureku Imbabana Ediba Igonigoni Usumutong Afafanyi Ebom Anong Ebijakara
2	Akamkpa	Akamkpa	118,472		Efik Ejagham Korop	Akamkpa Uyanga Ojor Iko Eberem Akansoko Ifiang Nsung Ikang Ikot EmemOdo Aningeje Mbarakom Nkorokum Isoba Ekong Mfamosing Old Netim Awi

3	Akpabuyo	Ikot Nakanda	99,583	Efik	Ikot Edemodo Atimbo Ikot Eyo Enayo Ikang
4	Bakassi	Abana	4,369	Bakassi	Abana
5	Bekwarra	Abuochiche	58,144	Bekwarra	Ushara Gakem Nyanya Olim Anyikang Ugboro Afrike Ukpah
6	Biase	Akpet -Central	101,121	Nne Ubagara (Ugbagara) Umon Mehu Isanginyoinyo Iyoniyong	Agwagwune Erei Adim Abini Etono Biakpan Ikun Ugbem Utuma Ikot Ana Bechie Akpasip Begani Berekpe Ikot Okpora Akp Ehom Iwuru Ewen Ekpri-Ibami Akwa-Ibami Idoma Akpanti-Okopedi Agbangana Atokpot

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7	Boki	Boje	145.010	Bokvi (Boki)	Bokvi	Abo Boje Alankwo Buentsebe Beebo Bumaji Katchuan Bunyia Kakwagom Oku Bashua Wula Kakubok Bekpo Bankpor Owearu Bansan Okundi
8	Etung	Efraiya	45.299	Ejagham	Ejagham	Efraiya Burom Njua Osokom Bendeghe Ekim Etome(i) Ajaso Agbokim Little Agbokim Ekimaya Ekuk-Ntai Abijang Nsofang Mkpot Itaka Acharum Okoroba
9	Ikom	Ikom	141.537		Ejagham	Ofutop Olulumo Ikom Nde Nselle Nta Abanyom Nnam Akam

Mbembe

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					Yala	Nkum Edor Abangork Alesi Nsofang Ajasor Agbokim Abia Bendeghe Ekim Etomi Four Corners
10	Obalinku	Sankwala	48.611		Obanliku	Bishiri Bisu Bassang Busi Bebi Kationg Bendigie Begiatsul Akuashi Begaitte Kekwokai Akwalaka Begiagba Begiagbah Lishukwel Omale
11	Obubra	Obubra	134.225	Mbembe	Mbembe	Obubra Ofat Ababene Ofumbongha Ovonum Apiapum Ochon Osopong Onyedama Ofodua Okpetumo Isoba Ogada Nkum

						Akpame Ohana Iyamoyong Isabang
12	Obudu	Obudu	84,799		Bette	Bebuabong Bebuagam Ikwomikwu Kakim Igwo Owhong Bedia Ibong Ukambi Bebua abie Kutiang Okworogung Okworotung Ukpe Bayobiri Bayatung Ugbung (Owung) Ashikpe Alege Amukwoong Ngokpu Ebuasu Ukodim Araru Ukwikwo
13	Odukpani	New Netim	122,352		Ejagham Efik	New Netim Creek Town Adiabo Ikoneto Anaku Onim Ankiong Eniong Eki Ito Obmitiat Odot Kiong Akpap-Okoyong Inua-Akpa Ndodua Ubambat

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14	Ogoja	Igoli	110,360		Ejagham	Ekajuk Ishibori Ndok
15	Yakurr	Ugep	1,134,773	Yakurr	Lokaa	Ugep Ekori Idomi (Ikomi) Mkpani Nko
16	Yala	Okpoma	156,617	Aggbo	Leggbo	Assig(h)a Inyima
17	Calabar (Municipality)	Calabar	135,163	Efik	Efik	Okpoma Yahe Okuku Echumofana Gabu Yache Manikad Ntrigom Mfuma
18	Calabar (South) Total	Calabar	43,996 1,911,297	Ejagham Efik	Ejagham Efik	Ikot Ekpa Ikot Effanga Ikot Ansa Ishie Town Duke Town Efut Uwanse Archibong Cobham Town Anantigha Ediba Akim Qua Town Calabar

THE LINGUISTIC SITUATION IN CROSS RIVER STATE

The linguistic situation in Cross River State is fairly complicated. There are over thirty languages, and a network of dialects. The state has chosen three languages, as the state languages, Efik, Ejagham and Bekwarra.

Efik has been a lingua franca in the Cross River Basin for a very long time indeed. It was also a liturgical language. It is indigenous in the southern L.G.As of the state, like Calabar South and Calabar Municipality, Akamkpa and Odukpani, but in the rest of the state, it is just a possible lingua franca. The Ejagham language is spoken as an indigenous language across the state, from the south to the north in L.G.As like Calabar Municipality, Odukpani, Akamkpa, Ikom etc. The Bekwarra language is spoken in the north. These three languages are used in the state capital for some radio and television programs, and the news translation is read in them. Besides these three dominant languages, there are several others. In some L.G.As there are even two or more languages spoken within the L.G.A.

THE STATUS OF THE LANGUAGES OF CROSS RIVER STATE

Within the definition of 'minority' and 'majority' languages in Nigeria, the languages of Cross River State have since the state creation been raised in status. All the languages spoken in the state are minority languages. However, some languages have assumed a dominant status, deriving from the practical need to communicate along the Cross River Basin.

The Efik language, for instance, had been used along the Cross River Basin as a lingua franca for trade, education etc. It had an orthography in the 19th Century, and a full Bible translation. However, it is gradually being replaced by the local languages. These languages are even being used in the churches where Efik

used to prevail, as some kind of liturgical language.

Crozier/Blench (1992) records three languages Kiong, Bakpinka and Odut, all spoken in Odukpani and Akamkpa L.G.As, as becoming extinct. The speakers are however, now making desperate efforts to reverse this situation. Kiong forms a cluster with Korop and Derop. These are spoken in Akamkpa and the Cameroons, with Derop spoken in a remote area of Akamkpa which has not allowed its assimilation with Efik. Korop is not moribund, but appears to be retreating. However, Kiong is nearly extinct. Only about 20 people speak it, and even these elderly few who speak it do not know all the vocabulary.⁵

The death of Kiong is caused by the domination and subsequent assimilation by the Efik language. Oral tradition has it that it started with an ethnic war between the Efiks and Kiong, which the Kiong lost. In an attempt to hide their own identities and rather identify with the Efiks, they started speaking Efik. I owe this information to Dr. Magaret Okon of the department of Languages and Linguistics, University of Calabar.

Some languages are spoken by rather small communities in an area where there are other dominant languages and they face some threat of extinction too due to assimilation and reduced populations. The Akam language in Ikom LGA (not listed by Crozier/Blench) is surrounded by Ofutop and Olulumo varieties of Ejagham, and it is an Upper Cross variety of Mbembe, whose speakers use Ejagham as the lingua franca. The Qua dialect of the Ejagham, spoken in Big Qua (Calabar), is gradually being assimilated by Efik as the youths speak Efik.

A few retreating languages spoken along the Cross River Cameroon border fall within this group. Many varieties of Ejagham (Bendeghe, Etung, etc) are spoken along this region. Korop is spoken both in Cross River (Ekonganaku) and Cameroon, which harbours the larger population of the group

(Ekondo-Ekondo and Ikpari).

The majority of languages of Cross River state are underdeveloped because they have no orthographies and no written literary tradition.

Very few languages of Cross River State can qualify as developing languages, because they have orthographies at least, and as such there are some literary works. Efik, Ejagham, Bekwarra and Yala have orthographies, and out of this number, Efik is the highest on the scale of development.

The pidgin spoken in Cross River State is English based, and it is popular mostly in the urban areas where people from several linguistic backgrounds have to coexist. Like most other pidgins, it is highly versatile. It is quite popular throughout the state and it is the only language spoken in every part of the state without the usual resentment that accompanies the attempt to use any of the other indigenous languages in public addresses.

Generally, the language used in administration and governance in the whole state is English (like the rest of the country). It is the official language of education and business. In churches, it is used along side other languages spoken in the different localities. Besides English, Efik, which was the lingua franca along the Cross River Basin is still sometimes used for worship. There are Efik Bible and Hymn book, and these make it possible and easier to use in churches. However, the languages used at home in different communities are those spoken in such communities. In some schools, the mother tongue is used in the first few years of the primary school as the language of instruction in line with the National Policy on Education.

THE EFFECT OF THE CREATION OF STATE AND L.G.As ON THE LANGAUGES OF CROSS RIVER STATE

The creation of states and LGAs has had some effects on the

languages of the state. Before we go into the details of these, let us review the interaction between these languages and the effects they have on each other. The three languages (Efik, Ejagham and Bekwarra) which enjoy some government patronage by way of having news translations on the state television and radio can be said to have some degree of official status in the state. For ease of the discussion, we group the LGAs into three groups.

1. Homogeneous LGAs : These are LGAs which have one language in the whole area. There are eight of these : Akpabuyo (Efik), Bakassi (Efik), Bekwarra (Bekwarra), Boki (Bokyi), Etung (Ejagham), Obubra (Mbembe), Yala (Yala), Calabar South (Efik). Out of these eight, three of them speak Efik, one Ejagham and one Bekwarra, the so-called state languages.
2. Heterogeneous LGAs : There are two categories here. One group is made up of two or more languages coexisting in a kind of imbalanced asymmetry with one of the languages being more dominant. The dominant language gradually assimilates the others. Four LGAs have this kind of relationship. In Akamkpa, Odukpani and Calabar Municipality, the Efik language has almost assimilated the languages spoken in these areas. Some of the known moribund languages Kiong, Odot, Korop, Derop, are spoken in these LGAs. Even the Qua dialect of Ejagham spoken in Big Qua has almost been assimilated by Efik, though other towns like Ikom, Etung, etc. still speak Ejagham as one goes further north of the state. In Yakurr LGA, the Assigha and Lenyima towns form a minority in an otherwise homogeneous Lokaa-speaking LGA. These two Aggbo communities are separated from the rest of their kith and kin on the other side of the Cross River. Lokaa is the lingua franca in the area, and at present these people are bilinguals, speaking both Lokaa and Leggbo. Although the threat of assimilation is not very eminent, it is expected as a consequence of languages in contact. In Ikom, Ejagham is almost assimilating the

small Mbembe and Yala communities in Akam and Nkum respectively.

3. Other heterogeneous LGAs : These are made up of closely related two or more Upper Cross languages coexisting symmetrically with each other without any of them threatening the others beyond the normal shifts associated with languages in contact. Five LGAs fall within this group Abi (Leggbo, Bahomono), Biase (Nne, Ubagara, Umon, Mehu, Isaninyonyo, Iyoniyoung), Obanliku (Obanliku, Bendi, Utanga, Becheve), Obudu (Bette, Utugwang, Ukpe, Alege), Ogoja (Ejagham, Mbube).

These languages coexist in this way. The situation is not the same in the different LGAs, with so many languages in the state, some of which are spoken by rather small populations. The division of the state into further smaller LGAs than we had a few years ago, has brought development closer to the people at the grassroot level and further recognition of more ethnic groups. A major advantage of the creation of states and LGAs therefore is the elevation in status of the languages spoken in the rural areas. Languages which previously were 'local' languages have now assumed the status of 'state' languages, and languages which were spoken in obscure villages have assumed the status of LGA languages.

In the case of Cross River, Efik which was the language of the state has maintained that status, but the creation of the state separated the Efik-Ibibio-Anaang cluster, as well as other Lower Cross languages, such that Efik alone was left in Cross River. It should ideally have been left as the lingua franca, but its status was beginning to lose grounds long before the state creation due largely to the growth of awareness of speakers of other languages and the need of these speakers to use and develop their own languages. Secondly, oppression and neglect of their languages created a situation where language maintenance appeared to be a

political tool of resistance to ethnic domination of small groups by large ones. Speakers of smaller languages began to take more pride in their own languages and a lot of effort is currently being put into developing their individual languages. However, in spite of this, Efik is still the state language, and it is threatening to assimilate many languages in the state.

With this increase in use and the rise of the languages in status, more languages are being developed, and as such more of the speakers of these languages have now put in place the instruments for developing orthographies in the different languages. This is setting the pace for development of written literary traditions.

THE FUTURE OF THE LANGUAGES OF CROSS RIVER STATE

What is the future of the languages in this state? Crozier/Blench (1992) records about 37 languages, excluding several clustering of some of the languages listed from 3 sub-groups of the Benue Congo sub family. Out of this lot, only 3 (Efik, Ejagham and Bekwarra) enjoy some considerable level of government patronage. Essien (1982) records that only 5 of these languages have orthographies : Efik, Ejagham, Bekwarra, Bokyi and Yala.

The lack of an orthography which is a basic necessity in the course of linguistic development inhibits the National Policy on Education which stipulates that the mother tongue or language of the immediate community be used in teaching in the first three years at the primary level. The state has no officially recognized indigenous language as English is still used for this purpose. The English language is used in the offices and to record minutes at local meetings even when the local language is used at such meetings. Such records are read and translated for those who do not understand English.

The future of the majority of the languages spoken in Cross River State is very bleak indeed. Small communities may disappear in the near future and with them their languages. Such communities are currently threatened, not by foreign languages, but by surrounding Nigerian languages spoken by larger groups. For instance, the Akam language spoken by a small village between Ofutop and Ikom forms a minority in an Ejagham-speaking homogeneous majority area. Ejagham and its dialects are spoken in this area, while Akam is a variety of Mbembe, and it may gradually diverge from it and become more like Ejagham by virtue of contact. The unfortunate part is that such languages would not leave any records for posterity as there is no likelihood that they would be described and written down before their imminent assimilation and/or extinction.

Pidgin has become very popular indeed, especially among the urban populations. It is likely to continue to be so popular beside English, Efik and Ejagham.

Although the fate of these languages depends very much on the political situation and government policies, it is apparent that government alone can not cope with the problem of developing these languages.

The creation of LGAs each time the exercise is done brings development closer to the grassroots. Villages are raised in status and they become more known. The status of the languages of the speakers also get raised. Some local languages spoken in the villages attain the status of LGA languages because they are spoken in the LGA capital. In other words, such languages become the languages of the immediate community. If the National Policy on Education requirement on language is to be properly implemented, such languages should be used in primary schools as the language of instruction in the first three years of education. The implication of this is that all things being equal, the LGA will have to develop the language by way of developing personnel and

materials to cater for this need.

Although a few languages have Bible translations, there have been very little literary activities in some languages spoken in the state. Crozier/Blench (1992) list some languages that have 'Reading and Writing Book', such as Bekwarra, Ekajuk, Etung, Leggbo, etc., but what does that mean? These can hardly be considered adequate given the fact that these languages do not even have approved orthographies, which should ideally be the basis for any form of literary activity.

However, a few languages are on the right track. The Efik language can be said to be the most developed language in the state. It has a dictionary (since 1862), an orthography, many literary works, a complete Bible translation, a hymn book, a prayer book, etc. It was used as a trade language along the Cross River Basin, having been the language the European traders and missionaries came in contact with first. In fact, it is believed to be one of the most studied African languages (Connell 1991:7). The Ejagham language has an orthography, primers 1-3, and Ejagham-French vocabulary book. Bekwarra has an orthography and a literary program in progress. Yala has an orthography, primers from 1-5, some folk stories, Bible translation and a literary program in progress (Crozier/Blench, 1992).

Generally, there seem to be very little community efforts to develop these languages. The government on its part merely pays lip service to this effort in spite of very laudable policies aimed at developing the languages. Due to lack of use, some of these languages are becoming moribund and extinct. With the confusion and debate surrounding the choice of a national language(s) in Nigeria, very little is being done about the several indigenous languages which are on the brink of extinction. Many more may have the same fate as information on these languages is sketchy.

The choice of more than one language by the government for patronage in our heterogeneously linguistic society tilts the scale of the linguistic debate towards a national multi-lingualism geared towards developing many languages to the neglect of the heterogeneous ethnic groups which were forcefully grouped together (for the convenience of the colonialists) into one nation. In line with this policy, the Cross River State chose three languages for use in the state media for news translation and other discussions on radio and television. These are : Efik, Ejagham and Bekwarra, and these languages enjoy what little government patronage there is. The fate of the other minor languages has been left to the mercy of a few philanthropists and cultural groups who are making efforts to develop them.

CONCLUSION

Linguistic data provides very useful insights into the history of a people, particularly regarding events and movements. From this perspective therefore, linguistic diversity is an asset which should be preserved. No language should be allowed to die, and for those on the brink of death, efforts should be made to record them, and perhaps resuscitate those that are threatened by death.

The Cross River State records thirty seven languages from Idomoid, Cross River and Bantoid sub groups. This linguistically fragmented picture is fraught with several problems. In a state where almost each community speaks a different language from the next, one expects nothing less than this. Since this is a fact of history which we cannot avoid, we need to make the best use of the available resources.

Currently, the picture of the linguistic situation in Cross River State appears rather gloomy. If nothing is done, many of these languages will become moribund in this century, and probably die out before the middle of the century. When we debate so much on the choice of a national language and lingua franca either in favour

of English or the majority languages, we should realize that the minority languages (which also have a right to exist) are gradually but steadily getting moribund.

NOTES

¹There is need to revise this classification based on some of the issues raised here and more.

²Leyigha and Lenyima are closely related varieties of Leggbo, which have been consistently classified as separate languages. This error may be due to the fact that both languages are spoken across the river separated from the rest of Aggbo people, and they are currently in Yakurr LGA where they form a minority group in a dominantly Lokaa-speaking area.

³Bahomono has been consistently referred to as Kohomuno in previous classifications. It is the language spoken by the Mahomono people.

⁴Agwagwune dialect of Nne is the most central of all the languages spoken in Biase LGA, as all others understand it. Nne, Ubaghara and Umon are the closest. Nne is also close to Bahumono and Leggbo.

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