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# Narratives of Balondo Migration and Implications for Identity and Ethnic Cohesion, C.1500-2015

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## Abstract

This study sets out to identify the narratives of Balondo Migration and settlement and their implications to identity construction and ethnic cohesion among the people. It adopted the qualitative research design and within it, the historical research method which privileges the use of archival materials and oral interviews as major sources of data collection. The findings revealed that there are two major incongruent narratives of Balondo migration and settlement. While a significant proportion of the people talk of migrating from the Congo to Nigeria before settling in their present sites in Cameroon, others hold that they migrated from the Congo, settled in Cameroon before a band moved to Calabar in Nigeria. The study ascertained that the basis of this incongruent narratives has been the presence of the Efut people of Nigeria in both narratives of Balondo Migration who are said to be originally of Balondo stock. However, from archival sources, oral traditions and secondary sources, the majority of the evidence privileges the Congo-Cameroon-Calabar Connection. The major source of the Congo-Calabar-Cameroon narrative comes from oral sources and a single secondary source. This notwithstanding the existence of variant narratives has implications on identity and ethnic cohesion amongst the Balondo. These different narratives had divided the Balondo into two opposing groups with each group holding firm to its narrative as the original version of Balondo history. It also shows the weaknesses of oral tradition as a historical source in the (re)construction of the history of pre-literate African societies.

**Key words:** *Migration, variant narratives, identity, ethnic cohesion, the Balondo.*

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## Introduction

Population movements played an important role in state formation within Africa and the world at large. These movements did not only help in the formation of African polities but also contributed a great deal in shaping their ways of living. The sketchy and near absence of documentary evidence tracing the migratory

movements of some groups has raised much controversy not only with regards to their migratory trends and routes, but also on the bases of which such (patchy) evidences can be relied on. In Cameroon, like most other parts of Africa, the migration and settlement of most ethnic groups (that form part of this political entity) has been traced to have occurred before or around the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

According to Ngoh,<sup>1</sup> while those ethnic groups which comprise present day Northern Cameroon were in contact with the political and cultural developments in the eastern Sudan well before the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the Bantu, to which group the Balondo belong were said to have originated from the region between Nigeria and Cameroon and had wandered the depth and breadth of Africa south of the Sahara. While it was understood that, many ethnic groups were still in search of favourable conditions for habitation and moved from one place to another, some accounts of such movements as recounted by contemporary generations do sometimes contradict or do not tie with the general understanding of migratory patterns recounted in History books. This makes uncertain the historical sources and the evidence they generate regarding certain population movements in Africa.<sup>2</sup>

It is in this context that the study discusses the variant narratives in the migratory history of the Balondo ethnic group of the South West Region of Cameroon, and how these different narratives have affected the identity and ethnic cohesion of the people. The Congo-Calabar-Cameroon narrative and the Congo-Cameroon-Calabar view as far as the migratory history of the Balondo is concerned have been discussed, and the implications of these different views on the language, customs and traditions of the Balondo have also been examined.

### **The Problem with Balondo Migration History and the Purpose of the Paper**

Many people make the mistake of considering everybody from Ndian Division as Balondo, especially those with whom the Balondo share cultural and language similarities like the Ngolo, the Batanga, the Balue, the Bima, and the Ekombe etc. The Balondo are a distinct group of people who are found in Ndian Division of the South West Region of Cameroon and the Cross River State of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (Efut) as a result of the 1884 partition.<sup>3</sup> The origin and migration of the Balondo has been shrouded in controversy for a long time and up

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<sup>1</sup> Victor Julius Ngoh, *Cameroon 1884 – Present (2018) The History of a People* (Limbe: Design House, 2019) 1.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Ebune and Roland Ndille, “Constructing The Bakossi-Bakundu Common Lineage: Is Oral Tradition A Subjective Historical Source? 1914-1945; *The International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* invention Vol.2| Issue 06| (2015) Pp 1424-1436.

<sup>3</sup> Ngoh, *Cameroon 1884 – Present*.

till recent times (2015), no compromise has been arrived at. Balondo origins and migratory history is contested by two variant narratives; One being a Congolese origin passing through Calabar to Cameroon,<sup>4</sup> and the other one being a Congolese origin directly to Cameroon.<sup>5</sup> It is therefore difficult to put a finger to the exact migratory route of the Balondo people. These variant narratives continue to tear the Balondo apart and justify the relevance of a re-examination of the issue of Balondo migration. In the absence of an authentic and generally accepted account of Balondo migratory history spurred by variant narratives which have negatively affected ethnic cohesion among the people, there is need for re-investigation into the contradictions surrounding Balondo migratory history. Based on the above, the paper seeks to present the controversies surrounding the migratory history of the Balondo and its implications to identity and ethnic cohesion.

This study is imperative for various reasons. It reveals the variant versions of Balondo migratory history that have been upheld by different polities and scholars within the wider Balondo community. Examining and analyzing the contrasting views of the various proponents, as well as presenting the impacts this have on ethnic identity and cohesion brings a new paradigm to the debate that has not been considered and researched earlier. This therefore add more to the historiography of the Balondo and serves as a data base for other researchers who may be interested in Balondo studies. By researching the migratory history of the Balondo, the study reveals historical facts which may lead to the establishment of an authentic Balondo history.

Most works on the Balondo have been from anthropologists, sociologists and linguists. All these works shaped by the background of their authors did not clearly deal with the subject of migration and as such cannot be confidently utilized as credible sources for the construction of Balondo history. It is against this backdrop that, this study seeks to present an alternative perspective to the discourse surrounding the Balondo migratory history by revisiting the variant narratives that have kept the Balondo people divided for so long.

The findings of this study to an extent will help enhance peaceful co-existence, cultural tolerance and the much talked about regional integration and African unity. To the Balondo in particular, this study analyzes facts which helps them better understand the variant narratives associated with their migratory

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<sup>4</sup>Aja Oro, *Balondo Through the Ages, 1100-2013* ( Morgan Hill, CA: Bookstand Publishing. 2015/201787).

<sup>5</sup>Sama Nebengu, "Origins and Settlement of the Balondo: A Historical Survey." (Masters dissertation, Department of History, University of Yaoundé, Cameroon. 1990).

history, and also encourage ethnic cohesion among them. To Balondo younger generations and students of Balondo history, the study equips them with useful information which will serve as the basis for further research and understanding of who they truly are.

Geographically, the Balondo are found in Ndian Division of the South West Region of the Republic of Cameroon. Balondo villages are found in three different sub-divisions of the Division; Ekondo –Titi, Bamusso Sub and Isangele. The study covers the period c.1500 to 2015. The exact date when the Balondo began their migration to their present site is not known. However, early studies on the Cameroon coast in the 1500 clearly discuss the activities of the Balondo on the coast of the Rio del Rey between 1500 and 1650.<sup>6</sup> This shows that the Balondo had settled in the Rio del Rey region even before 1500. The reason for the choice of 2015 as the terminal year of this study is because 2015 marks the year during which the Balondo organized their first ever Grand Cultural Festival which brought together all seventeen Balondo villages in Ekondo Titi. Traditional dances of all types were displayed; traditional dishes, dressing and many other aspects of the Balondo culture were exhibited for three days. Since then, the year 2015 has remained a remarkable year in the history of the Balondo.

### **Conceptualizing Migration, Identity and Ethnicity**

Here we shall examine a few concepts which have been used in the course of this study. The examination of these concepts is instrumental in our understanding of the issues discussed. Concepts like migration, identity, ethnicity and the Balondo have been examined. Migration is defined as the movement of large numbers of people, birds or animals from one place to another.<sup>7</sup> The International Organization for Migration sees migration as the movement of a person or group of persons, either across an international border or within a state.<sup>8</sup> In this study we are looking at migration as the movement of African ethnic groups from one part of the continent to another during the period before the continent's contact with the outside world.

**Identity on the other hand** is viewed as the self.<sup>9</sup> This self has a process named self-categorization because it is reflexive, it can be taken itself as an object, and it

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<sup>6</sup> Edwin Ardener, *Kingdom on Mount Cameroon: Studies in the History of the Cameroon Coast 1500-1970*. Ed. Shirley Ardener (Providence, RI: Berghahn Books, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary: International Student's Edition, (7<sup>th</sup> Edition, Oxford University Press, 205).

<sup>8</sup> International Organization for Migration, 2015 <https://historia-europa.ep.eu> retrieved on 08/06/2022 at 06:27am.

<sup>9</sup> Ruth Villeda Carvajal Becerra, "The Construction of Social Identities through Narratives in the Classroom" *Caudernos de Linguística Hispanica* N0.19, (2011) p 188.

can be categorized, classified or named itself in particular ways in relation to other social categories, thus we can say that, through this process of categorization, we shape our identities.<sup>10</sup>

Identity is the process that is part of every person, because each person belongs to a family, community, state or race.<sup>11</sup> Identity can be constructed and contested. In the case of the Balondo, their identity which was constructed many centuries before the colonialism experience underwent so many challenges which ignited to contestations in recent decades.

The term “ethnic” on its part is derived from the Greek word “ethnos” which means “people of the same race”. Ethnicity can be defined as a collective that has a shared common name, a shared myth of common descent, shared historical memories, one or more differentiating elements of common culture, an association with a specific “homeland,” and a sense of solidarity for significant sectors of the population.<sup>12</sup> An ethnic group is a subjectively-subscribed-to cultural collective that emphasizes the role of myths of descent and historical memories and that is characterized by one or more cultural differences such as religion, customs, language, or institutions.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Variant Narratives of Balondo Migratory History**

This section examines the two main views regarding the migratory history of the Balondo. It discusses the Congo-Calabar-Cameroon view and the Congo-Cameroon-Calabar perspective in relation to the origin and migration of the Balondo. The importance of this section is seen in the revelations it brings about historical sources and their role in the construction of the histories of people,<sup>14</sup> migrations and population movements. It also speaks to the importance attached to ethnic origins, identity formation and inter-ethnic relations especially in areas of Southwest Cameroon where people of different ethnic groups claim a unique eponymous ancestor.<sup>15</sup>

Ethnicity means that an individual belongs to a specific culture, social groups or nation. Although race is defined by physical, biological attributes, it is also strongly tied to cultural and behavioral attributes as well.<sup>16</sup> Cirjack has argued

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Hanna Zagefka, “Concepts of Ethnicity” ResearchGate, (2016) p 1 <https://www.researchgate.net> accessed on 08/06/2022 at 7:16am.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Ebune and Ndille, “Constructing The Bakossi-Bakundu”.

<sup>15</sup> Sone Ejedepang-Koge, *The Tradition of a People Bakossi*, (ARC Publication Alexandria, Virginia U.S.A, 1986).

<sup>16</sup> Antonia Cirjack, “How Do Race and Ethnicity Affect Identity?” (*Society*, Vol 10, Issue 2, 2020) Pp. 1 – 5.

that belonging to a specific culture tends to strongly shape a person's identity. This means that being able to determine the most rational explanation of Balondo people would enable them to identify people with whom they share ancestry. This has so far not been possible because of the differing views. It is hoped that the conclusion of this study will provide a most convincing theory which would have been established as the author's position is based on the evidences available.

#### **a) The Congo-Calabar-Cameroon view**

This view is called the Congo-Calabar-Cameroon view because it suggests a movement of the Balondo from the Congo region through Calabar to Cameroon. It holds that the Balondo left the Congo region in about the 1100s and first sailed to Old Calabar where they settled among the Efik for years.<sup>17</sup> Major exponents of this theory are Aja Oro who has written extensively on the Balondo, Michael Anje, Stephen Itor and Michael Monya among others.

After over forty years of living together with the Efik in Calabar this view continues that the Balondo decided to embark on another journey which finally brought them to the Rio del Rey Region of Cameroon.<sup>18</sup> It is believed by those who accept this theory that, not the entire Balondo group which arrived Calabar from the Congo region engaged in the second journey which brought them to Cameroon. A small group of the stock which migrated from Congo into Calabar had opted to stay back in Calabar. They Stayed among the Efik in Calabar and were referred to as Efut by the Efik.<sup>19</sup>

The justifications for this view of Balondo migratory history are the presence of a group of the Balondo stock in the Cross River State of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the language and cultural similarities between the Balondo and the Efik. Proponents of this view believed that the Balondo embarked on two major voyages before settling in their present location.<sup>20</sup>

The strength of the Congo-Calabar-Cameroon view of Balondo migratory history lies in oral tradition. Anje Michael<sup>21</sup> holds strongly to the fact that, this view of Balondo migratory history was the authentic one which was narrated to him by his grandfather. He dismisses the other opinion of Balondo migratory history as lacking any substantial evidence. He goes further to say that if there was to be any other version of Balondo migratory history, his grandfather should have narrated

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<sup>17</sup> Nebengu, "Origins and Settlement".

<sup>18</sup> Oro, *Balondo Through the Ages*.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Michael Anje, 55, groit, Mbongo, 01/12/2021.

it to him. He also claims that throughout his life, he has grown to know that the Balondo migrated from the area around the Congo, moved to Calabar where they settled for many years before making a second journey to Cameroon. The fact that these migrations took place a very long time ago sometimes make the use of oral tradition questionable.<sup>22</sup>

On the other hand, no matter how convincing and popular the Congo-Calabar-Cameroon view of Balondo migration appears to be, the weaknesses are alarming. The presence of Balondo communities in the Cross River State of Nigeria and the linguistic and cultural similarities with the Efik which are the justifications for the authenticity of this view of Balondo migratory history has been met with serious challenges from archival materials and secondary sources. Foremost, this view directly contradicts with the narrative of the Balondo people in Calabar (Efut).

According to the Efut, they migrated from the Cameroons during the Batanga wars of the 11<sup>th</sup> century and settled in Calabar in the present day Cross River State of Nigeria.<sup>23</sup> The Efut narrative is not in tandem with the Congo-Calabar-Cameroon view. Adener also contradicts with the Congo-Calabar-Cameroon view as he instead reveals that some Balondo migrated to Isangele and Calabar from Cameroon.

On linguistic and cultural similarities between the Balondo and the Efik as a justification for the authenticity of the Congo-Calabar-Cameroon view of Balondo migratory history, Kuperus<sup>24</sup> explains that the geographical position of the Balondo area just to the east of the Cross River delta, was responsible for the rather large proportion of borrowed Efik, Ibibio and possibly other Cross River languages. Not only do many Nigerians speaking these languages work in palm plantations in the Balondo area, but Calabar appears to be a center of attraction for young people wishing to experience the outside world.<sup>25</sup> Trade would also play a major role in the mixing of Efik and other related languages into the Balondo language.<sup>26</sup> Since the Balondo had established trade links with the Efik and Efik was regarded as the language of commerce, it was easier for the Balondo to adopt the language. These were the reasons for the large amount of Efik words in the

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<sup>22</sup> Ebune and Ndille. "Constructing The Bakossi-Bakundu".

<sup>23</sup> Efut Combined Assembly. "The position of the Efut Nation on moves by the government to achieve unity, peace and stability in Calabar – Cross River State of Nigeria" (Typed Memo, 2003) 68 pages.

<sup>24</sup> Juliana, Kuperus "The Londo Word: Its Phonological and Morphological Structure" (Tervuren, Belgique: Musee royal de l'Afrique Centrale, 1985).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

Balondo language.<sup>27</sup> It was not because the Balondo migrated from Calabar to their present location that was responsible for the large amount of Efik words in the Balondo vocabulary. Rather it was largely as a result of the geographical position of the Balondo area which made trade easy between the Balondo and the Efik. Just like Rev. Father Carney puts it<sup>28</sup> “some Balondo suffering from a superiority complex state that their place of origin was Nigeria ...”<sup>29</sup>

One can now comfortably say that the Congo-Calabar-Cameroon view of Balondo migratory history cannot be relied on as an authentic account for the migratory history of the Balondo. This is because the view does not only contradict itself in many ways, but it also contradicts with Archival materials and secondary sources. Also the Efut who are the Balondo purported to have remained in Calabar during the second journey hold that they know not of such history. They migrated from Cameroon to their present location.

#### **b) The Congo-Cameroon-Calabar variant**

This view is called the Congo-Cameroon-Calabar perspective because it suggests a movement of the Balondo from the Congo region to the Rio del Rey Region of Cameroon, and further movement of a group of the Balondo from the Rio del Rey Region of Cameroon to Calabar.<sup>30</sup> The main proponents of this theory include Ofonda Esoh Itoh,<sup>31</sup> Ndena Paul Ndena,<sup>32</sup> Cecelia Etona<sup>33</sup> and Bridget Iyaiya Mosongo.<sup>34</sup>

Archival data<sup>35</sup> holds that the Balondo sailed through the creeks and arrived at a place called Ekondo ya Ikeni in the Rio del Rey Region and it was from Ekondo ya Ikeni that many Balondo settlements sprang up. Earliest Balondo settlements like Illor, Funge, Lobe, Illoani etc. were believed to have migrated from Ekondo ya Ikeni to their present locations.<sup>36</sup> Most of them sailed through the creeks and landed at the end of the creeks before exploring the land beyond.<sup>37</sup>

Another group of seven Balondo families also left the Rio del Rey Region of Cameroon, sailed in seven different well equipped canoes and landed at Old

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Akak, “Efuts: Disintegration and Integration”.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Nebengu, “Origins and Settlement”.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Ofonda Esoh Itoh, 74, traditional ruler, Ekondo Titi, 27/12/2016.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Paul Ndena, 60, teacher, Illor, 29/11/2021.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Cecelia Etona, c.80, griot, Illor, 01/12/2021.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Bridget Iyaiya Mosongo, 67, teacher, Dibonda Balondo, 27/11/2021.

<sup>35</sup> File No. Ae 20. 1015/23, “Assessment Reports”.

<sup>36</sup> Nebengu, “Origins and Settlement”.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Cecelia Etona, c.80, griot, Illor, 01/12/2021.

Calabar in around the 11<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>38</sup> In a document compiled by the Efut Combine Assembly in 2003, the Efut narrated that they migrated from the Cameroons during the Batanga wars.

There are some common elements in this Congo-Cameroon-Calabar perspective on Balondo migrations especially when it comes to the movement from Cameroon to Calabar. The narrative of the Efut Combine Assembly somehow agrees with Ardener's account which talks of a faction of the Balondo migrating to Isangele and Old Calabar. The Efut also admitted to have made a stop at Usakedet (Isangele) before proceeding to Ikang and finally to Calabar. It has to be noted that once in Calabar, the Efik called the Balondo Efut an Efik term for "strangers or newcomers"<sup>39</sup> and this is how they have been referred to for many centuries. The Efut narrative as contained in the document they addressed to the Governor of Cross River State in 2003 however differs with Ardener when it comes to the date when the Efut migrated from Cameroon to Calabar. While the Efut talk of the 11<sup>th</sup> Century as the time when they left Cameroon to Calabar, Ardener holds that the Efut migrations took place around the 15<sup>th</sup> Century. But for the fact that the two accounts have other things in common makes it reliable.

Proponents of this theory strongly believed that their account was the most accurate because it agrees with the narratives of the Efut in Calabar. As far as the other theory is concern, Nawango thinks that it is absurd to imagine a migration from Congo to Calabar and back to Cameroon given the geographical location of Congo, Calabar and the Rio del Rey Region of Cameroon. According to him it would have been easier for the Balondo to migrate from the Congo to Cameroon than from Congo to Calabar.<sup>40</sup> Charles Offiong-Obo, and many other Efut indigenes in Calabar held that the Efut migrated from Cameroon and settled in their present location in the Cross River State of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.<sup>41</sup>

The greatest strength of the Congo-Cameroon-Calabar view of Balondo migratory history was the agreement in the different narratives of the people interviewed. All the interviewees in Calabar did not only agree that the Efut were of the Balondo stock who migrated from Cameroon before settling in the Cross River State, they also agreed that, their migration out of Cameroon was as a result of the Batanga wars. However they do not agree on the date of when the Batanga wars were fought and many of them were unable to explain the cause of the Batanga wars which led to their migration out of Cameroon. In addition to the

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<sup>38</sup> Efut Combined Assembly. "The position of the Efut".

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Stephen Nalemu, 60, notable, Mbongo, 28/11/2021.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Manfred Nawango, 55, Traditional ruler, Ekondo Titi, 13/12/2022.

<sup>41</sup> *Idem*.

interviews conducted some documentary sources also support the fact that the Efut were a Balondo group who migrated from Cameroon and settled in Old Calabar. Ardener<sup>42</sup> writes that:

A faction of the Balondo moved and occupied the Rumby Estuary and mingled with the Efik who later called them the Efut or Ekita. Whereas some Efut and Efik later combined to form a new group known as Isangele to the north of the Rio del Rey, others became part of the population of Old Calabar.”<sup>43</sup>

Etubom Eyo<sup>44</sup> an Efik historian also writes that:

The history of the Efut is to be recorded as those of the two ethnic groups in Calabar, the Efik and the Qua who have got their own in various version by different authors. It is however noted that while the two are bound with serious controversies, that of the Efut is not so much involved since lots of our materials come directly from those who claim to be Efut.<sup>45</sup>

By this statement, Etubom acknowledges the fact that, the Efut history was almost completely void of contentious views. Quoting a report by E.C. Alderton, Etubom held that:

The Efut were an offshoot of the Bantu speaking people who first migrated from there and settled around the Rio del Rey area of Usakedet in Cameroon. In other words, they are believed to be originally of Bantu stock, but having forgotten all about their ancestral home in that region, they took to their second home in the Cameroon forest before shooting out to settle at Usakadet, otherwise known as Isangele by the Cameroons.<sup>46</sup>

All these documents including the report by the Efut combine assembly of 2003 agree that the Efut migrated from Cameroon and settled in Calabar which is a major strength of the Congo-Cameroon-Calabar perspective of Balondo migratory history. Unlike the Congo-Calabar-Cameroon view which presents weak evidences that has already been debunked, the Congo-Cameroon-Calabar perspective presents strong evidences which tie with the people’s narrative, archival material and some documentary sources.

Although the Congo-Cameroon-Calabar perspective of Balondo migratory history presents stronger evidences with a convincing narrative, the view equally have one major weakness which is the discrepancy on the date of migration by the different protagonists. While the Efut combine assembly wrote in 2003 that the migration of the Efut from Cameroon to Nigeria took place around the 11<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ardener, *Kingdom on Mount Cameroon*.

<sup>43</sup> Akak, “Efuts: Disintegration and Integration”.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

century, Ardener's account suggests that the migration occurred between 1500 and 1650.<sup>47</sup> Also whereas Offiong-Obo<sup>48</sup> held that Efut migrations out of Cameroon to Calabar occurred around the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Centuries, Mesembe Enembe<sup>49</sup> aligns with the Efut combine assembly that Efut migrations occurred around the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Implications of Variant Migratory Narratives on Identity among the Balondo**

The Balondo identity is one which has undergone significant changes over many centuries. Having been known and referred to variously by different people, the Balondo themselves have always held and defended their Balondo identity amidst contestations and reconstruction of new identities. Key to the changes that have taken place as far as the Balondo identity was concerned is the effects of migration. In this section we aim at evaluating the impacts of variant migratory narratives of Balondo history on the identity of the people. As a result we shall examine the Balondo identity viz a viz their language, culture and tradition; and how variant migratory narratives have affected cohesion among different parts of Balondo

#### **a) How the Balondo identify themselves**

Although different people have identified the Balondo using different names at different times, the Balondo have always identified themselves as Balondo and nothing else. As far back as the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, all the ethnic groups behind the Rio del Rey, including the Balondo were known by the Portuguese as *Calbongos*.<sup>50</sup> Within this same period, some Balondo migrated to Calabar from the Rio del Rey Region where the Efik called them Efut or Ekita.<sup>51</sup> In 1973, when some people from Ndian and Meme Divisions of the South West Region of Cameroon came together to form the Oroko ethnic group, they decided to rename the Balondo as *Balondo ba Nanga*.<sup>52</sup>

The name *Balondo ba Nanga* which was attributed to the Balondo by the Oroko project of 1973 was received with a lot of resistance from many Balondo people who protested that it was very wrong for other ethnic groups to name them. The name *Balondo ba Nanga* was seen by many Balondo as a means to destroy the true Balondo identity. This explains why some Balondo were contesting the

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<sup>47</sup> Ardener, *Kingdom on Mount Cameroon*.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Charles Offiong-Obo, 55, notable of Efut Abua, Calabar, 04/03/2022.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Mesembe Enembe Edet, 61, notable of Efut Ibonda, Calabar, 06/03/2022.

<sup>50</sup> Ardener, *Kingdom on Mount Cameroon*.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Paul Ndena, 60, teacher, Illor, 29/11/2021.

Oroko identity. They claim that the Oroko identity has come to suppress the Balondo identity.

There was yet another group of the Balondo led by Aja Oro who thought that the Oroko project was a rebellion against the Balondo identity which was the dominant identity in present day Ndian Division and parts of Meme Division of Cameroon. Before the creation of Oroko in 1973, all the ethnic groups in Ndian and Meme Divisions which are now part of a larger group called Oroko were known as Balondo. As a matter of fact, on the 27<sup>th</sup> of February, 1961, a letter which was written by these peoples was titled “Resolution on future of Balondos”.<sup>53</sup> In this letter which was signed by N.N Mbile and Z.N Efamba on behalf of groups like the Bakundu, the Ngolo, the Batanga and the Balue etc., they petitioned the UN to interpret the plebiscite results according to the votes of the Balondo speaking ethnic group which wanted to join the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

Ngoe,<sup>54</sup> a prolific writer and Oroko youth leader from the Balue ethnic group holds that:

The term Oroko was used not in the sense of creating an organization of sorts, but the aim of inspiring an Ethnic or national belonging among the people who used that term to express brotherhood. There are two important over-arching contexts within which this term became important in constructing a unified identity for these related peoples. The first was the newly acquired independence and unification of the state of Cameroon. Before these events, the groups that would become Oroko were by and large referred to as Balondo and in some cases, Bakundu. Even though there are colonial documents that identify some groups such as the Balue, Ngolo, Batanga, Mbonge, Ekombe and Bakundu, all of these groups seemed, at least in the eyes of colonial officials, to be essentially Balondo. So, collectively, the term Balondo was used to refer to these groups as a people (in the singular) and to their language(s). Even though individual group members often referred to themselves as Balondo, they also acknowledged their belonging in groups that no longer identified as such.<sup>55</sup>

When interviewed on his thoughts concerning the contestation of the Oroko identity by many Balondo people, Ngoe said that:

Personally, I think those who chose to use the term Oroko to refer to themselves as a people referred only on a single cultural element, language, to claim kinship with others. This was an unfortunately flawed move as language alone does not explain ethnicity. A more conscious and reflexive choice would have been to retain the

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<sup>53</sup> Letter to the UN. Secretary General by the Balondo speaking people.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with Blessed Ngoe Efilo, 30, Oroko (Blue) youth leader, 26/04/2022.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with Blessed Ngoe Efilo, 30, Oroko (Blue) youth leader, 26/04/2022.

term Balondo, by which they had already become widely known, and which I believe is older than the other ethnonyms.<sup>56</sup>

Despite all the contestations the Balondo identity has remained unique, as can be seen in their language, the culture and traditions. Although there were some similarities between the Balondo and many other ethnic groups in Cameroon and Africa, their unique characteristics as portrayed by their language, culture and traditions have given them a unique identity which is the Balondo identity.

### **b) The Balondo Language**

The Balondo speak Londo. According to Guthrie's standard referential classification of Bantu languages carried out in 1953, Londo was listed A.11, a member of the A.10 group.<sup>57</sup> It should be understood that, under Guthrie's classification, Londo has the same status as Duala. A.10 was Londo-Mbo group while A.20 was the Duala Group. It should be noted that under Guthrie's classification, Bakundu was a language under the Londo group including Ngolo, Batanga, Bima, Ekombe, Mbonge, Balue, Balong etc.<sup>58</sup>

Due to migration and contact, the Balondo language now has a mixture of Efik, Ibibio and other related languages.<sup>59</sup> Apart from the Efik and the Ibibio whose words can be found in the Balondo vocabulary, the language is also similar with other African languages like Lingala, Swahili, Duala, Mokpe, Ngolo, Batanga, Balue etc. Despite the similarities the Balondo language still stands out as a unique language which is the first element of their identity. However, there are certain nuances that exist in the Balondo language which can be attributed to variant narratives in the migratory history of the Balondo. Nuances involving words like 'come, stay, you, and good morning etc.' can be traced to variant narratives in the migratory history of the people. The Mbusa villages including Lobe Town and Kumbo Balondo in the Mesaka area use *fɔkɔ*, *yaa*, *owa* and *boyedi* for come, stay, you and good morning respectively. On the other hand all the villages in the Boso area including Ekondo Titi and Meme Balondo in the Mesaka area use *yaka*, *daa*, *wɛ* and *oado* for come, stay, you and good morning respectively. Each of these Balondo groups think that their own version of the language is the real one. The Mbusa people think they speak the real Balondo language while the Boso people think theirs too is the original language.

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<sup>56</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>57</sup> Kuperus, 'the Londo Word'.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

### c) Birth Rites

There were two types of birth rites in Balondo: when the woman gave birth to a new baby and when she celebrated her 'first born'. The first born of a Balondo woman was the rite of passage to womanhood and it was a pride for the girl's family to have their daughters go through the prestigious practice. For example, if a family had three daughters it was their responsibility and pride to see that all the girls went through the traditional birth rites after they put to birth for the first time.<sup>60</sup>

The first born celebration was very important because it qualified a Balondo girl to become a woman and gave her the right to freely associate with other women in the community. It gave the girl the opportunity to be educated on responsibilities of motherhood and how to manage a home. In fact the girls acquired a lot of traditional education during the period they spent indoors. Also, the celebration of first born was a source of economic empowerment for the women especially during the post-colonial era.<sup>61</sup> Most Balondo girls used the money they acquired as gifts during the celebration of their first born as startup capital for businesses. Many built up houses and sponsored their children to school. Most importantly, the ritual of first born blessed the woman's marriage and opened her womb for many children. If she was not yet married, many suitors would come looking for her after the celebration of her first born.

Birth rites were the same all over Balondo. However, the effects of variant narratives could be seen in the dressing of the woman who celebrated her first born (*Nyanga Nabua*). The dressing of the *Nyanga Nabua* in the Boso and Mesaka areas had been modified. For example glittering combs were purchased from Calabar which were placed on the hair of the celebrant. This with other things gave the lady the look of an Efik or Ibibio princess. The people of Boso and mesaka believed that they were the same people with the Efik.

### d) Burial Rites

Balondo people treated a corpse with utmost respect. In the Balondo land, there was a connection between the living and the death. Even before the coming of the white missionaries, the Balondo already believed in life after death. Burial rites varied depending on the circumstances surrounding the death, the age of the deceased and his or her status in the society. Children had special burial rites. There were some deaths which were considered special in Balondo and their burial rights were different. Deaths which occurred as a result of drowning,

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<sup>60</sup> Interview with Cecelia Etona, c.80, griot, Illor, 01/12/2021.

<sup>61</sup> *Idem*.

suicides of all types, and all forms of accidents and death by gunshot etc. were considered as “Bad deaths” and had special burial rites.

If one died by drowning in a stream or River, he/she was buried on the shores. If one fell from a tree and died, he/she was buried under the same tree. If one died by hanging, he/she was buried in the forest. If one died normally and later develop a swollen stomach, he/she was considered to have died of witchcraft. Such a corpse was also buried in the forest. In the case of any accident which resulted to death, the deceased was buried in the same place where the death occurred.<sup>62</sup>

The reason why people who died under uncommon circumstances were buried differently was because it was seen as a means to cleanse the land and prevent a repeat of such an event. For someone to take his/her own life was a taboo which was followed by cleansing of the land. The deceased was ostracized from the community as the corpse was buried in the forest. This was to prevent him/her from ever coming back into that community in his/her next life. This also explains why no celebrations took place during such burials; no food, no drinks. Family members were not allowed to mourn the relatives who died under such circumstances.

Nuances in the burial rites could be seen during after death celebrations where the Mbusa people celebrated the fifth day, the tenth day and the twentieth day as opposed to the Mesaka and Boso people who celebrated the fourth day, the tenth day and the twentieth day. Also the Mesaka and Boso people had a ritual called *Eteh* where they prepared food mostly porridge plantains with smoked fish which was served on the grave of the deceased. This practice which was carried out on the fourth day after burial in the Mesaka area was believed to be the last meal of the deceased with his or her family members. In the Boso area the ritual of *Eteh* was not performed on the fourth day after burial rather, it was performed only upon the request of the deceased who appeared in the dream of a family member or a friend requesting for food and drinks. The ritual of *Eteh* was not practiced at all in the Mbusa area.

### **Implications on Ethnic Cohesion among the different Balondo Villages**

Many of the problems of cohesion among the different Balondo villages have come largely as a result of boundary disputes and land issues. Generally Balondo villages cooperated and collaborated with one another especially on social and cultural issues. Balondo villages came together during annual

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<sup>62</sup> Interview with Paul Ndena, 60, teacher, Illor, 29/11/2021.

ceremonies and festivals organized by the Balondo Cultural and Development Association, the Balondo Youths Development Association and the different age grade Associations.

The impact of the variant migratory narratives on ethnic cohesion in Balondo was not very glaring probably because a majority of the Balondo people were not so interested in knowing their history, very few griots existed in the villages and the youths too did not have interest in their history. However the case was not the same in the early 1990s after Nebengu defended his dissertation from the University of Yaounde.<sup>63</sup> This dissertation contained variant migratory narratives especially concerning individual Balondo villages. These narratives seriously affected ethnic cohesion among Balondo villages and in some cases led to dispute. On pages 19 and 21 of his dissertation Nebengu writes that:

... It should be noted that some Balondo villages are offshoots of older ones... Any present Balondo village which does not claim to have come from Ekondo ya Ikeni is not of the true Balondo stock. It would therefore appear from the above point that Balondo is made up of essentially those who have migrated from Ekondo ya Ikeni and that those people or villages who do not claim origin from Ekondo ya Ikeni have only been integrated into the Balondo ethnic group, and not considered as the real Balondo. Early Balondo migrations led to the following villages; Lobe, Illoani, Meme, Funge and Illor. The other villages which at times were offshoots of other villages were founded as a consequence of later Balondo migrations.<sup>64</sup>

By these statements, Nebengu states very clearly that a majority of the villages which call themselves Balondo today are not original Balondo villages. Some of them according to him were merely integrated into the Balondo ethnic group.<sup>65</sup> This proclamation did not go well with many Balondo villages and this strained their relations and affected ethnic cohesion.

One of the villages which have suffered more from variant migratory narratives was Mbongo. They have openly criticize Nebengu for writing what they consider as a fake history of Mbongo.<sup>66</sup> Netomba questioned why Nebengu decided to interview Gabriel Nekena of Dikome Balondo concerning the migratory history of Mbongo when there were many elders in Mbongo at the time.<sup>67</sup> He went further to accuse Nebengu of twisting the history of Mbongo in order to undermine the influence of the village in the Boso area since he Nebengu

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<sup>63</sup> Nebengu, "Origins and Settlement".

<sup>64</sup> Nebengu, "Origins and Settlement".

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> Interview with Michael Anje, 55, griot, Mbongo, 01/12/2021.

<sup>67</sup> Interview with Louis Nasama Netomba, 39, President General of Balondo Youths Development Association, Limbe, 18/05/2022.

was also a Dikome Balondo man. The part of Nebengu's dissertation which angers Mbongo people the most was when he stated that:

The village known as Mbongo, came from Bomboko from a village called Bomana. The reason or cause of their migration was intertribal wars. Due to molestation, the people left Bomana in Bomboko and migrated southwards and settled near a stream called Mbongo maliba where the soil was fertile for cultivation.<sup>68</sup> As a result of this (quarrel over fishing), a war broke out between the Barombi and the Mbongo people, the Mbongo people sustained heavier casualties because Barombi people were more numerous. Eventually the surviving Mbongo people decided to migrate in order not to be extinct. They sought for land first at Diongo and then at Boa which was refused them for settlement. When they went to Bonjare village, they also told the story of the cause of their migration and the Bonjare people gave them a hiding place at their beach.<sup>69</sup>

This narrative which is in sharp contrast with what the Mbongo people know about their migratory history affected the relationship between Mbongo and other Balondo villages especially with her immediate neighbours like Dikome Balondo. Contrary to Nebengu who suggested that, the people of Mbongo were not originally of the Balondo stock, the Mbongo people themselves hold that they were among the Balondo families who migrated from Ekondo ya Ikeni.<sup>70</sup>

The suggestion that Mbongo and many other Balondo villagers were simply integrated into the Balondo ethnic group<sup>71</sup> has caused a lot of problems among Balondo villages. Some Mbongo people think that Nebengu's hypothesis may have influenced the decision of the Balondo Cultural and Development Association (BACUDA) during a boundary dispute settlement between Mbongo and Dikome Balondo. When Mbongo and Dikome Balondo disagreed over their boundary in the early 1990s, the Balondo Cultural and Development Association sat in June 1994 and marked a line which had to be respected by the two villages as their boundary.<sup>72</sup> This judgment was not acceptable to Mbongo people who protested openly.<sup>73</sup> The protest which involved the display of *Mokongoh nwa Ebanja*<sup>74</sup> was interpreted by BACUDA as gross disrespect. As a result heavy fines

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<sup>68</sup> Nebengu, "Origins and Settlement".

<sup>69</sup> Nebengu, "Origins and Settlement".

<sup>70</sup> Interview with Michael Anje, 55, griot, Mbongo, 01/12/2021.

<sup>71</sup> Nebengu, "Origins and Settlement".

<sup>72</sup> Interview with Gabriel Nalemu, 42, farmer, Limbe, 18/05/2022.

<sup>73</sup> Interview with Louis Nasama Netomba, 39, President General of Balondo Youths Development Association, Limbe, 18/05/2022.

<sup>74</sup> *Mokongoh nwa Ebanja* was a special masquerade of the *Matamu* sacred society which came out to signify danger in the community. Non initiates were not allowed to view it because it could harm them. It was different from the ordinary *Mokongoh* in that, it carried a sword instead of a beautifully decorated staff or cane. In the case of Mbongo it was used as a sign of protest against the Balondo Cultural and Development Association's ruling of June 1994.

and sanctions were levied on the Mbongo village. They had to pay a cow, several crates of beer, and also suffered other sanctions.<sup>75</sup>

In demarcating the boundary between Mbongo and Dikome Balondo, all of the land which belonged to the extinct Kundu Town<sup>76</sup> was given to Dikome Balondo. This is why some Mbongo people think that it might have been because Mbongo was not considered to be an original Balondo village as suggested by Nebengu that influenced the decision to demarcate the boundary in favour of Dikome Balondo.<sup>77</sup> It should be noted that the border conflict between Mbongo and Dikome Balondo came as a result of the extinction of Kundu Town in about the 1900s.

## **Conclusion**

The overriding purpose of this study was to examine the variant narratives in the migratory history of the Balondo and its impacts on the identity and ethnic cohesion of the people. The main objective was to discuss the origin, migration and settlement of the Balondo in a bid to address controversies in their migratory history. It also examined the implications of variant narratives on identity and ethnic cohesion in Balondo. The strengths and weaknesses of each of the variant narratives were also highlighted and the findings showed that the Congo-Cameroon-Calabar view was the more convincing of the two variant narratives on Balondo migratory history. This was because apart from the many weaknesses found in the Congo-Calabar-Cameroon hypotheses, it also lacked the backing of archival and secondary sources. Unlike the Congo-Cameroon-Calabar view which corroborates with both archival materials and documentary secondary sources, the Congo-Calabar-Cameroon narrative relies almost entirely on oral sources with just a single documentary source.

The study wraps off with an evaluation of the implications of variant migratory narratives on identity and ethnic cohesion. Here the findings indicated that variant migratory narratives caused a lot of problems in Balondo especially during the 1990s. It strained the relationship between the Balondo village of

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<sup>75</sup> Interview with Louis Nasama Netomba, 39, President General of Balondo Youths Development Association, Limbe, 18/05/2022.

<sup>76</sup> Kundu town was located in between the villages of Dikome Balondo and Mbongo Balondo. From the description provided by Reverend Alexander Ross who preached the gospel of Jesus Christ in this town on Monday the 7th of December, 1879, Kundu was a bustling town and a major trading center in lower Balondo. Kundu was ten minutes' walk from Dikome Balondo and fifty minutes' walk from Mbongo. Nebengu also records that after the collapse of Kundu Town most of its inhabitants migrated into Dikome and Mbongo villages which enveloped Kundu.

<sup>77</sup> Interview with Louis Nasama Netomba, 39, President General of Balondo Youths Development Association, Limbe, 18/05/2022.

Mbongo and the others especially her neighbours of Dikome Balondo and Bonjare. It also revealed that for oral tradition to be a reliable source of African history, the historian must be patient enough to scrutinize the narratives to corroborate with written sources as well as sources from other disciplines like anthropology, linguistics, geography etc. That if historians master the skills on how to effectively use oral tradition in the construction of African history, there will be no room for variant narratives in African history.

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Name	Age	Occupation	Place	Date
Anje Michael Netomba	55	Notable of Mbongo Balondo	Miselele	14/12/2021
Etona Cecilia	c.80	Notable	Ekondo Titi	01/12/2021
tor Itor Stephen	66	Notable	Lobe Town	30/11/2021
Iyaiya Bridget Mosongo	67	Retired Teacher	Dibonda Balondo	27/11/2021
Mesembe Enembe	61	Retired Banker and notable of Efut Ibonda	Calabar	06/03/2022
Monya Michael	70	Notable of Lobe Town	Lobe Town	28/11/2021
Mosomgo Pius	64	Traditional Ruler of Mbongo Balondo	Ekondo Titi	02/01/2022
Moto Peter	60	Notable of Illor Balondo	Illor	29/11/2021
Nalemu Gabriel	42	Farmer and youth leader of Dikome Balondo	Limbe	18/05/2022
Nalemu Stephen	60	Notable of Mbongo Balondo	Ekondo Titi	28/11/2021
Nangoh Joseph Ambang	78	Retired Teacher and Traditional Ruler of Loe Balondo	Buea	13/12/2021
Nanyondo Christiana	61	Farmer	Kumba	15/12/2021
Nasama Louis Netomba	39	President General of Balondo Youths Development Association	Limbe	18/05/2022
Naseri David Isong	66	Medical Doctor and notable of Kumbe Balondo	Ekondo Titi	25/03/2022

Nawango Manfred Achia	55	Magistrate and Traditional Ruler of Ekondo Titi	Buea	13/12/2022
Ndena Paul Ndena	60	Teacher and notable of Illor Balondo	Illor	29/11/2021
Ngoe Efilo Blessed	30	Oroko youth leader and Graduate instructor at the University of Colorado at Boulder, U.S.A	WhatsApp	26/04/2022
Ofondo Esoh Itoh	74	Traditional Ruler of Ekondo Titi	Ekondo Titi	27/12/2016

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