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**<PART1: Lifestyle of Hunter-Gatherers and History of Surrounding Farmers>Ethnic Movements in the Cross-Border Region of Southeast Cameroon: Oral History and Ethnogenesis of the Bakwele, a Bantu Farmers**

AUTHOR(S):

**Yamaguchi, Ryota**

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# ETHNIC MOVEMENTS IN THE CROSS-BORDER REGION OF SOUTHEAST CAMEROON: ORAL HISTORY AND ETHNOGENESIS OF THE BAKWELE, A BANTU FARMERS

Ryota Yamaguchi\*

*Faculty of Humanities, Institute of Human and Social Sciences, Kanazawa University*

\*E-mail: y.ryota@gmail.com

**ABSTRACT** This study examines the history of migration and the formation of settled villages of the Bakwele people living in the border region between the Republic of Cameroon and the Republic of the Congo, based on previous studies, administrative documents and oral history. In the southeast Cameroon, there are two groups of Bakwele people, the Djako and the Esel, inhabiting the study area. The former came from the northwestern region upstream of the Dja River, while the latter came from the northern region near Boumba Bek National Park. They came to this region through different routes and assimilation with neighboring ethnic groups. Their migrations occurred on several separate occasions and can be organized in chronological order into four periods: 1. the pre-colonial period; 2. the German colonial period to World War I; 3. the French colonial period; and 4. After the independence of the Republic of Cameroon to the start of logging company operations. These historical trajectories have significantly shaped the current political and economic landscape of the Bakwele in study area, influencing both their relationships and the region's overall development.

**KEYWORDS:** Bakwele; Ethnogenesis; Migration; Oral history; Sedentarization.

## INTRODUCTION

The southeast Cameroon is covered with deep tropical rainforests. Among these, the border region between the Republic of Cameroon and the Republic of the Congo is one of the furthest from the capital city and has not seen much progress in infrastructure development or industrial promotion. However, if we look back into history, we can see that this region has been at the forefront of German and French colonial development and has been the target of negotiations between the two countries. For example, Moloundou, a border town with the Republic of the Congo, has its origins in the early German colonial period at the end of the 19th century (Akolea 1994). At the beginning of the 20th century, World War I broke out in Europe, and its effects reached colonies across the globe. The African colonies were no exception, and southeast Cameroon became a battleground between German and French forces. Thus, the border region of southeast Cameroon was the scene of colonial development and territorial negotiations between Germany

and France. It is not difficult to imagine that the dynamics of these colonizations directly and indirectly affected the people’s lives (Geschiera 2005). After World War II, this region’s abundant timber resources made it attractive to the Cameroonian government, which had just gained independence from colonial rule. The government attracted logging companies to various parts of the Southeast region to earn foreign currency. They brought cash income and social services such as education and health care to the residents living in the surrounding areas and changed their way of life (Kitanishi 2006).

This study aims to trace the history of the Bakwele, a Bantu farmer, based on the descriptions of previous studies, administrative documents and oral histories collected by the author. These information reveals that they migrated multiple times from their ancestral land to present habitation area. Through reviewing the trajectory of their migrations, main factors of them and involved groups, we will discuss about formation process of present Bakwele living in southeast Cameroon.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

I. Study subject and region

This study’s research subject, the Bakwele, is a Bantu agrarian population who speak a language classified A85 by Gathrie (Gathrie 1967). They live in northern Gabon, northern Congo, and southeastern Cameroon. There are five known dialect groups (Figure 1): Mebeeza and Ebit in northern Gabon, Ebaa and Mekuoob in northern Congo, and Esel in Cameroon (Siroto 1969).

The population in southeast Cameroon is divided into about 10 villages along

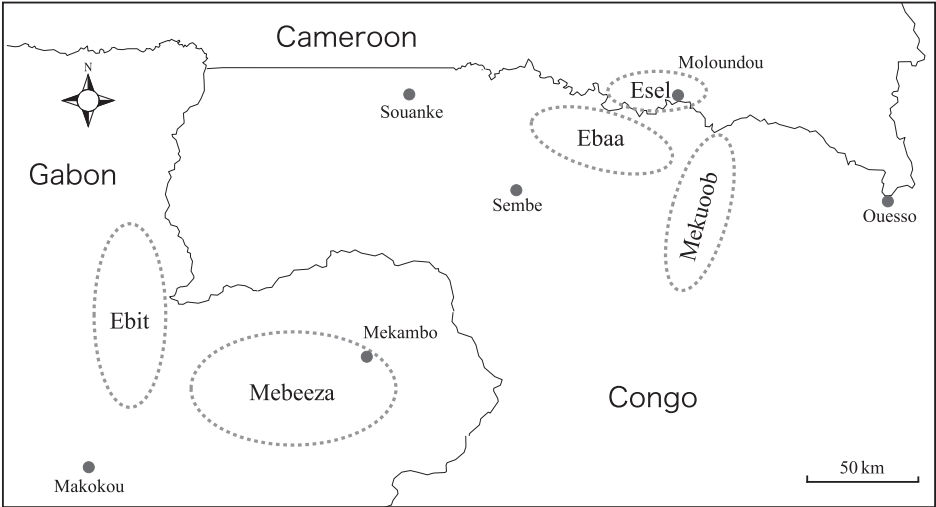
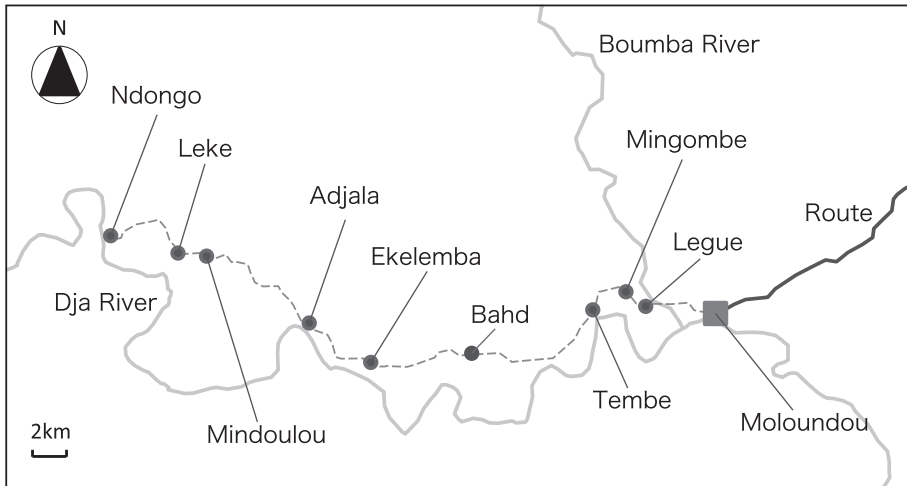


Figure 1 Location of Bakwele dialect groups



**Figure 2** Study area

a road extending 50 km west of the border town of Moloundou (Figure 2). Three villages in the west are dominated by people who call themselves Djako, while the majority in the east are Esel. In addition to the Bakwele, the area is also home to the Baka, a Pygmy hunter-gatherer group, and Muslim immigrants from northern Cameroon.

## II. Method

This article is mainly based on interviews by the author and bibliographic survey. Interviews on Bakwele people living in Cameroon had done in January to February 2013 and October to November 2014. The author and field assistant visited 9 villages (Ndongo, Leke, Mindouru, Adjala, Ekelemba, Bahd, Tembe, Mingombe, Legue), and interviewed with 2 or 3 people who know their oral history in each village. The primary references for bibliographic survey are the ethnography by anthropologist Siroto (1969), who researched the rituals and masked associations of the Bakwele in the Congo in the 1960s, and the ethnography by anthropologist Joiris (1998), who conducted a study of the Baka rituals in a village near the study site of this paper in the 1980s and early 1990s, and Robillard (2010) who studied about conservation projects operated in this area in the 2000s.

## RESULTS

### I. Pre-colonial period (until the mid-19th century)

Today's Bakwele live separately in Northern Gabon, the Republic of the Congo, and Southeast Cameroon. Ebit and Mebeeza live in north Gabon, Ebaa and

Mekuoob in north Congo, and Esel in southeast Cameroon. The Esel, the subject of this study, interacts directly with the Ebaa and Mekoob in Congo, but not as closely with the Ebit and Mebeza in Gabon. From oral history interviews in the study area, there was no mention on Bakwele living in Gabon. Fortunately, we can find detailed description on them in the documents by Deschamps (1962), who studied the history of the Bantu peoples in Gabon before and after colonial independence, and by Siroto (1969), who studied the Bakwele of the Republic of the Congo in the 1960s. From those descriptions, Bakwele's homeland was the area that is now northern Gabon to southern Cameroon.

After contact with Westerners during the Age of Discovery, guns were spread to the Bulu (part of the Fang people) in various societies in western Cameroon. Armed with the latest weapons, the Bulu increased their pressure on other ethnic groups in the surrounding area in the late 18th century. As a result, many ethnic groups began to migrate (Siroto 1969; Robineau 1971: 25). At that time, the ancestors of the Bakwele, who lived in the upper Ivindo River basin in northern Gabon, were subjected to invasions by the Nzem, who descended under the Bulu umbrella (Deschamps 1962: 75). They then migrated along large rivers, forming friendly alliances with local populations wherever they went, or plundering their women and children in battle, before continuing their migration further. The directions of migration were east and south. The Bakwele of Cameroon are the descendants of the eastward group. This chain migration of people continued from the beginning of the 19th century until the colonial administration pacified the region with military force (Siroto 1969).

## II. German colonial period and World War I

### 1. Colonization in southeastern Cameroon

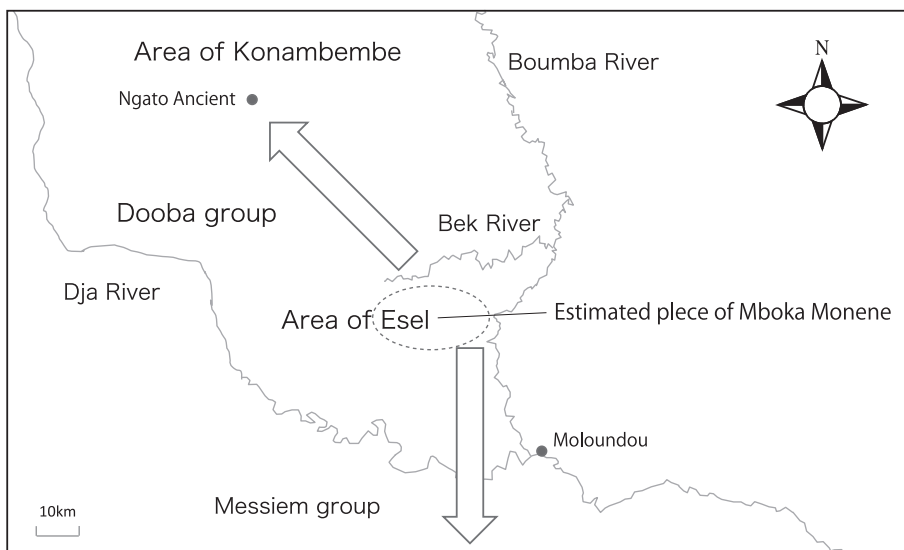
Bakwele, who headed eastward, had reached the northwestern part of the Republic of the Congo by the end of the 19th century and had contact with Europeans during this period. This contact brought them wealth and Western products, namely clothing, metal goods, and guns (Siroto 1969: 66–70). The German Empire made Cameroon a protectorate in 1884 and began its invasion from the coast to the interior (see also Appendix). The influence of colonial policy in the study area began in 1886 when the development of the town of Moloundou started (Akolea 1994). The current capital, Yaoundé, was built in 1888 as a hub for the ivory trade. The fact that development began in the southeastern tropical rainforest region at the beginning of the colonial administration shows the high level of interest of the colonial administration in this area.

Meanwhile, France extended its influence from the coast up the Congo River to the interior, building Brazzaville in 1880 and using the Congo River for trade. It then reached Bangui, the current capital of the Central African Republic, in 1889 and colonized Chad and Gabon one after another. French colonial development took the concession method, in which they leased a certain number of plots to patent companies, which were then allowed to develop and operate the land. A patent company existed at the confluence of the Dja and Sanga rivers and used the Congo River to trade in ivory and rubber (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1972).

Thus, the Dja River area near Moloundou was the front line of contact between French and German colonial developments. This region attracted the attention of both countries because of the expected abundance of natural resources, especially natural rubber. The rapid industrialization of Europe in the 19th century, particularly the development of the automobile industry, created an unprecedented demand for rubber. According to Geschiere (2005), the tropical rain forest of the Dja River basin were expected to contain substantial amounts of natural rubber, which attracted German and French interest. An analysis of the French colonial administrator's reports by Oishi (2016) shows that 140,000 raw rubber flanges (collected rubber sap coagulated in bamboo tubes) were brought to Moloundou in 1938 (Oishi 2016: 28). Adding to rubber, ivory was abundant in this region. Natural rubber and ivory were the two main products of German colonial development in Cameroon. This trend continued under the French colonial system and greatly affected the relationship between the Bakwele and the Baka hunter-gatherers (Joiris 1998).

## 2. Migration of Esel

Some of the oral histories referred to episodes of the German colonial period. According to a man in his 60s from the village of Ekelemba, the migration from “Mboka Monene” (“big village” in Lingala, Figure 3) was triggered by the following reasons. “White people came to Mboka Monene, or Baabis, and there was a war. When our ancestors first saw the whites, they thought they were children because of their white skin. At first, the whites offered our ancestors gifts such as salt and cloth, but Molokabel, a great sorcerer, refused to accept them, and a battle ensued. They were severely defeated and went through the Bangandou



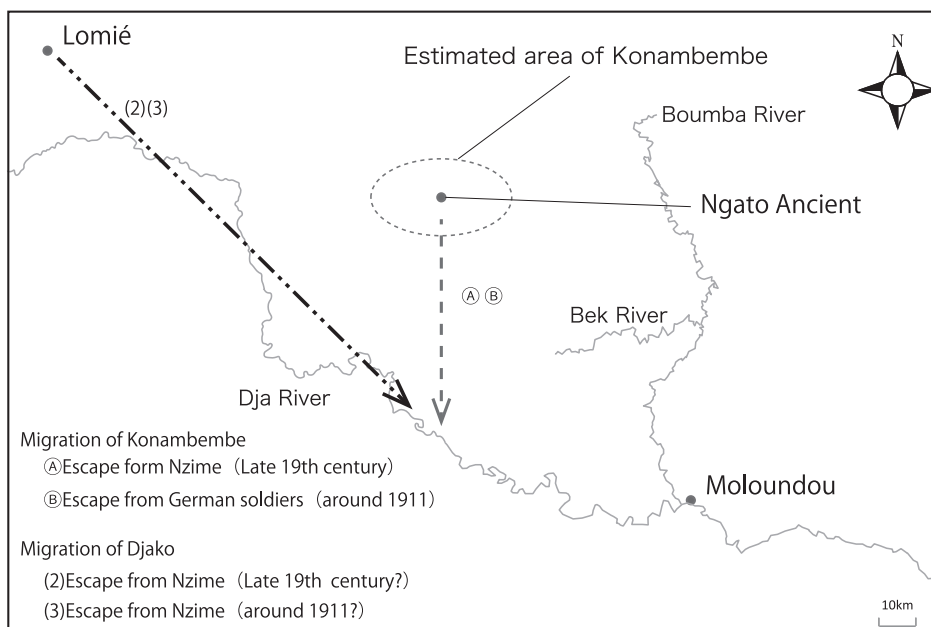
**Figure 3** Migration of Esel

region in the north of Moloundou to the village of Messok, from where they crossed into the Congo at the bridge of Kelelong (a magical bridge). In Congo, they first created a village called Alangon, then divided into three groups led by Ngbala, Old Gouogoua, and Bagouma.”

According to an interview with a resident of Adjala village (a man in his 60s), the people split into two groups at the time of the collapse of Mboka Monene (Figure 3). The group led by Messiém escaped across the Dja River toward Congo, while the group led by Dooba fled toward Ngato. The group led by Messiém is the direct ancestor of the present-day Adjala inhabitants. Dooba’s group intermarried with the local Konabembe in Ngato and assimilated with them. This informant described descendants of Dooba as having “forgotten the Bakwele language as they repeatedly intermarried with the Konabembe in Ngato.” He then called them Konabembe while acknowledging that they have common ancestors with him. Joiris (1998), relying on administrative archives, estimates that the above encounter with the Germans and the collapse of the Mboka Monene occurred around 1915 (Joiris 1998: 251).

### 3. Migration of Djako

Djako means “upper reaches of the Dja River” in the Bakwele language. Their ancestors are mainly descendants of the Konabembe who lived around Ngato Ancient and near Yokadouma. They migrated to the Dja River basin on two separate occasions (Figure 4). The first group migrated south to the Dja River watershed between the late 19th and early 20th centuries to escape from Nzime’s attacks



**Figure 4** Migration of Konabembe and Djako

and settled there (Joiris 1998: 424–425). Later, the rest of the group also migrated south to escape from the Germans and settled in the Dja River basin (Joiris 1998: 424). According to an elderly Djako man described in Joiris (1998), there were Germans in Ngbala (a town in northern Congo) at the time when he moved to the Dja River basin with his parents (Joiris 1998: 424–425). The northwestern region of the Republic of the Congo, including Ngbala, was ceded from France to Germany as the outcome of the Moroccan Crisis fought between Germany and France in 1911. German rule continued until the World War I, and Cameroon became a French mandate in 1922. Thus, the presence of Germans in northern Congo means that the second migration of Konambembe from the Ngato Ancient to the Dja River watershed occurred after 1911. Other episodes in Joiris (1998) description told by Djako elders include the massacre of Djako residents by Germans (Joiris 1998: 426), a Djako man who escaped from Ngato Ancient by killing German Soldiers (Joiris 1998: 426) seems to have occurred between 1911 and 1916.

In an interview conducted by the author in 2014, a Leke village chief told us about an inter-ethnic war, corresponding to the description by Joiris (1998). His narrative is quite interesting for considering how the “Djako” group has formed; Robillard (2011) has reported a story of the same motif told by the same person and several others. However, the details of the interviews by the author differ from that of her. There are three groups in the following narratives (Figure 4). (1) a group of people originated from Konabembe, near Ngato. (2) a group that lived near Lomié, a city in southern Cameroon. (3) a group that was captured and enslaved by Nzime. The above description by Joiris (1998) focused mainly on group (1). The group in (2), which resided in the Lomié area, was defeated in battle with Nzime, then some fled, and some were taken captive and assimilated into Nzime. The latter group is group (3), and the theme of the chief of Leke village narrative is how this group (3) escaped Nzime’s rule and joined the group (1), which had already moved to the Dja River watershed at that time. This escape story took place in the period after 1911. The following is a translation of the narrative by Leke village chief.

“Djako ancestors lived in the direction of Lomié. ‘*Lo mie*,’ means ‘head of the Mie River.’ The Nzime people were armed with muskets, so the Djako ancestors escaped from them. Some of them failed to flee and were captured and enslaved. Now, these enslaved people consulted a man named Ambo, who was born of a Djako woman named Megnum and a Nzime man. He was a great sorcerer and liberator of Djako. Ambo killed an old woman, removed her brain from her head, and filled it with a potion. The effects of this potion kept Nzime asleep for several weeks, allowing the enslaved Djako to escape. The people built a large canoe, which they took down the Mie River to join the Dja River, and Ambo, have betrayed his Nzime father left the village with them. Some of them took muskets from Nzime as they fled. These Djako ancestors came beyond the Nki waterfalls. They had two destinations. The first was around what is now called Ngato Ancient. There was a Djako woman there who married a man named Gato. The second was Ngola in which a man called Mbabiong lived. He had a big village with other Djako people. He had a gun and was a great warrior. The people went on



to these two places. The Nzime, who had awakened, pursued them, and they often fought. On one island (in the middle of the Dja River), the last battle between Nzime and Djako took place. Therefore, this island was named Sanga Zim (Island of Nzime). After the battle, Ambo lay down and stretched his penis. It reached the other side of the river, then people of Djako passed on it and fled to the Congo side. We call this bridge Kelelong. There was no fighting in Congo, as Nzime men did not know how to cross the river and gave up chasing. Ambo then left Djako people and died standing between the two rapids of the Nki. There is a banana tree standing there. Ambo left a parting message: 'Djako must not build a village beyond the Kudu River (a river in northern border area of Congo); everything on the other side of the Kudu River will come to this side.' Djako people searched for Mbabiong, establishing small villages such as Langombot. Finally, they found the village of Ngola and were able to join him."

Based on the description by Joiris (1998), we can assume that the Mbabiong established the village of Ngola in 1911 or later, which means that the 'people who came down the Mie River,' as described by the chief of Leke village, did not arrive in Ngola until after that year. On the other hand, the people who went to Ngato Ancient in the above narrative also headed south, eventually relying on Mbabiong in Ngola. We continue with the narrative of the chief of Leke village.

"The group that went to Ngato was driven out due to problems with women and resumed moving in search of Mbabiong in Ngola. They first arrived at the village of Nzokepiyak. This name means 'the elephant took a rest.' Next was Mapoma village where they found a person called Gba. Next was Bomeges village, the original of Leke village. When they passed by the village founded by Ababuwa and Tango, they found Mbabiong and his people came to pick them up right next to the village. Thus, they safely reunited with Mbabiong."

As described above, the Djako ancestors who fled Nzime's rule reunited at Ngola after splitting into two groups. However, according to the Leke village chief, after Mbabiong's death, the Djako residing in Ngola split up. Each of them began to live in their villages. These villages were the origin of the present Djako villages. From the description by Joiris (1998) and the narrative of the Leke village chief, we can see that at least the following three types of groups were involved in the migration of Djako from the German colonial period to World War I. (1) a group whose ancestors were Konabembe of Ngato Ancient, (2) a group that lived around Lomié, and (3) a group that was captured by the Nzime. The groups in (1) were those who migrated to the Dja River basin in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Their migration was triggered by their encounter with Nzime and the Germans; Mbabiong, who created Ngola, was of (1) origin. The description of group (3) relying on women married to Ngato Ancient as escapees also indicates that a part of the group (1) remained in the area. As for group (2), the actual situation is unknown because clues are scarce. The only information we have from the Leke village chief is that they left the area after a battle with Nzime. The group in (3) was the main group in the Leke village chief's narrative. Nzime was likely trying to assimilate this group through inter-marriage and adoption. As a result, Ambo had a Nzime father and a Djako mother, and saved this group.

It is important to note that the narrative of the Leke village chief refers only to the people who were Nzime's captives. The path taken by the group (2) who escaped first remains unknown, and we will have to wait for a detailed comparative study of the oral histories of the Bakwele living on the Congo side and the Konabembe living around Ngato Ancient, as well as Nzime.

### III. French colonial period

#### 1. Establishment of the villages of Esel

After fleeing across the Dja River to the Congo around World War I, the Esel returned to the Cameroonian side because the French colonial government in 1921 began to gather labor from all over to build a railroad connecting Brazzaville to Pointe Noire on the Atlantic coast. A man from the village of Ekelemba described to the author how his grandfather crossed the Dja River again. "The white men came to Mindjam (a village near the Dja River) to gather labor for the construction of the railroad and ordered them to send their energetic and strong young men to work for them. My grandfather was about to have his only son taken away and escaped by crossing the Ngoko River (Dja River)."

These refugees like him created Adjala village. Interviews with an inhabitant born in 1927 revealed that he grew up north of the river. This information means that Esel returned to Cameroon around 1927. The village of Tembe, to the east, was also created during this period. According to the residents, 'Adjala' means 'we will never bow down to the whites again,' and 'Tembe' means 'we doubt the whites.' The names of these two villages reflect Esel's history.

After these two villages, some residents left Adjala village and created Ekelemba village. The following is a narrative from a representative of Ekelemba village. "(The inhabitants of Ekelemba) used to live in Adjala village... My grandfather was originally the chief of Adjala village. But because he possessed many skulls, he was sent to prison in Moloundou, and Messiem took his place as chief." It is unclear whether his grandfather was the original chief of Adjala village as he tells the story since there are no available documents. We can assume that the skull owned by his grandfather was a kind of magic potion. According to Deschamps (1962), who conducted interviews with Bantu people in Gabon in the mid-20th century, there was a custom in Bakwele to pour the blood of a chicken over the skull of a particularly influential person and place it under his pillow. By doing so, he dreamed of predicting the future (Deschamps 1962). There is a description of Ekelemba village in the records of the colonial administrator written in 1932. According to this record, a group from Adjala created Ekelemba village because of suspicions of witchcraft against the chief of Adjala village. They were taken under the control of the Tembe village by order of the colonial administrator in 1931. However, their suspicions about the witchcraft of Tembe village residents led them to reestablish their relationship with Adjala village (Cameroon 1933).

It is usual for residents to disperse, as was the case with Ekelemba village. Although the timing is unknown, some residents of Adjala and Ekelemba villages once left together to form a settlement further east near the Boumba River. According to their descendants, it was caused by suspicion of witchcraft among the

brothers. The new village also called itself Adjala, so there were two Adjala villages at this time; the 1966 ORSTOM map shows ‘Adjala I’ and ‘Adjala II.’ According to a descendant of new Adjala village, the new one was also divided again after. “When they opened the cacao fields, the residents from the Congo installed a medicine for a good harvest. However, this medicine made the land unsuitable for cacao production. Some of the inhabitants returned to the old Adjala village. Later, they changed the name of the new one to Legue, after the name of the river that flows nearby. They were under the supervision of Tembe village.”

## 2. Formation of Djako

After World War I, Djako residents, as Esel mentioned above, were sent to forced labor (Joiris 1998: 427–428). During this period, a group of Njem, led by a man named Baminjoum, came from the direction of Souanke, a town in northern Congo, to the areas of Djako (Joiris 1998: 429). They established a village called Messok near the Nki waterfall. At some point before Cameroon’s independence, the Njem joined the Djako and intermarried with them. In other words, the Djako group at this time consisted of at least three groups: the fleeing Lomié group mentioned earlier in the narrative of the Leke village chief, the Konabembe group from the Ngato Ancient, and the newly arrived Njem people.

The Djako villages have been frequently disintegrating and fragmenting, and its process is very complex. A survey and analysis of abandoned villages in the upper Dja River basin by Oishi (2016) shows that the prototypes of the present Djako villages, namely Ndongo, Leke, and Mindourou, were established around the 1930s (Oishi 2016: 31–42). At any of these points, Djako’s intermarriage with Ebaa dialect-speaking group of Bakwele in northern Congo has progressed gradually. The Djako today call themselves ‘Bakwele’ only because the area in which they live was a Bakwele residential area. After the three groups mentioned above joined up, they married and deepened their relationship with the Bakwele of Congo. This progress is like the path followed by the group of Esel that escaped from Mboka Monene and headed to Ngato, intermarried with the Konabembe there. Djako also reached the Bakwele residential area and, through repeated intermarriages with them, came to speak the Bakwele language and to call themselves Bakwele.

## IV. After the independence of the Republic of Cameroon

### 1. Arrival of logging companies and road construction

French Cameroon gained independence in 1960, and in the following year, 1961, a part of British Cameroon, which had gained independence, joined to create the Federal Republic of Cameroon. The UPC (*Union des Populations du Cameroun*), a communist group that had been active as guerrillas since 1955, was based in Brazzaville, the capital of the Republic of the Congo, and began to appear in Ouessou and the surrounding forested areas in the north, and even crossed the border into the forest of Southeast Cameroon (Rupp 2011).

According to Akolea (1994), rumors of UPC guerrillas (*maquisards* in French)

began to spread around Moloundou around September 1965. In fact, neither Djako nor Esel were involved in the fighting between UPC guerrillas and government forces. However, the administration saw a problem with Djako living upstream on the Dja far away from Moloundou and recommended them to come downstream. Therefore, the Djako people moved their villages closer to their current location. Also, at an unknown time, a Djako man married a woman from Ekelemba and established Bahd village between Ekelemba and Tembe. That man named his new village after an old Djako village far upstream on the Dja River. Today, Bahd village is the only Djako village in the Esel residential area. The date of establishment of Mingombe village is unknown and supervised by Tembe village.

In the 1970s, commercial logging companies began operations in various areas in southeast Cameroon (Joiris 1998: 29; Ichikawa 2002). In the region from Adjala village to the Boumba River, a logging company called SOTREF (official name unknown) had a base in Ekelemba village. In the same period, another logging company called CCGS (*Campagne Camerounaise des Grumes et Sciages*) came to Ndongo village in 1973 (Kitanishi 2003). Both companies hired local people to build their base and began cutting and transporting timber by raft. However, they found difficulties in the Dja River's flow since there were many unpassable shoals during the dry season. Because of this reason, SOTREF changed its place to downstream near the Boumba River. Then, they decided to open a road to Moloundou. SOTREF began to build a road from Moloundou, CCGS from Ndongo village. It is not clear at which point the CCGS and SOTREF groups met. Some residents said it was around Ekalemba village where SOTREF had their base, while others said they met around Boumba River, or each company built roads separately.

## 2. What logging companies and the road brought

The arrival of logging companies changed this area. Primarily, people began to gather along the roads. Before arriving of logging companies, the essential means of transportation and logistics were by canoe and people usually formed villages along the river. Once they finished the road construction, people moved their settlements along it. They sought the opportunity of employment and daily labor by the logging companies. "The trucks for transporting workers would pass by every morning around 5:00 a.m., so we had to come out along the road in order not to miss them" (Baka man in his 50s, Ndongo village). Consequently, most of the villages moved their location from the riverfront to the roadside. Second is the spread of the cash economy due to the regular payment of salaries. According to the chief of Ndongo village, the CCGS paid salary twice a month: the one around the 15th was called *quinzaine* (French for 'two weeks' salary'), and the one at the end of the month was called *paye* (French for 'salary'). They totally earned between 12,000 FCFA and 60,000 FCFA, which varied depending on the work, but it was a fairly large sum. At that time, with 12,000 FCFA, one could buy clothes full of a suitcase in Moloundou.

The salaries paid by the logging companies stimulated commercial activity within the area, and immigrants began to appear for it. This is the third point. For example, they opened the restaurants to serve the workers. Muslim traders

also came to Ndongo village to run their stores. They made profits by selling goods to the residents, who were now living on salaries from logging companies, while at the same time making investments such as acquiring coffee and cacao fields (Kitanishi 2006; Oishi 2012).

In the 1980s, however, the overall economic situation in Cameroon worsened, and in 1982 CCGS went bankrupt and withdrew from this region. However, Muslims in Ndongo village expanded their agricultural business. Their coffee and cacao fields became a kind of migrant labor camp, and we can assume that this facilitated the migration of Muslim residents who engaged in activities other than commerce. Even as they cultivated larger areas of cash crops, they could employ Baka hunter-gatherers as laborers because there were many populations of Baka around Ndongo village. These situations gave Ndongo its unique position as the most populous and economically 'prosperous' village in the region, despite its location at the end of the road, i.e., farthest from the town.

While the area inhabited by the Djako people was economically revitalized by CCGS logging activities, the area inhabited by the Esel people had limited economic impact. Another logging company, SOTREF, had moved to an area closer to Moloundou, which also had limited impact, although SOTREF had a large concentration of people during its operations, including worker and their families and some merchants. However, after the withdrawal of SOTREF, workers returned to their own villages. The fact that they operated far away from the existing settlements made the difference between the Djako area and the Esel area. Although the economy was not as strong in Esel as in Djako, a political turning point occurred in 1983, when the 'Canton Dja'ako et Esel,' an administrative unit was established. They held the election of Canton headman, and the chief of Adjala village won the place. This created a twisted situation in which the Djako region was economically dominant while the Esel region was politically dominant.

## DISCUSSION

This paper describes the complex history of the Bakwele inhabiting southeast Cameroon. The Bakwele in this region includes people of two distinct origins: the Djako and the Esel. They have merged with various ethnic groups and sometimes assimilated through intermarriage in a chain of ethnic migrations triggered by the influx of guns and colonial situation. These historical dynamics had various direct and indirect effects on these two groups. Interviews conducted by the author on the history of village formation revealed that villages have moved frequently, beginning with the first contact with Europeans escape from them during the German colonial period, followed by sedentarization policies after Cameroon's independence, and then by the activities of logging companies since the 1970s.

Although the residential areas of the two groups are relatively distinct, with the Esel in the east and the Djako in the west, intermarriage between them is not uncommon, and their relationship remains amicable. However, tensions arise due to a socio-political and economic disparity rooted in their respective historical trajectories: the Esel hold political dominance, while the Djako enjoy eco-

conomic superiority. Since the establishment of the Canton, the administrative unit of the region, in 1983, the head of the Canton has consistently been a resident of Adjala village, an Esel settlement. The Chief of Canton wields considerable discretionary authority, handling matters that exceed the capacities of village leaders (Hirano-Nomoto and Lendja-Nguemze 2016). Adjala village also hosts a clinic capable of inpatient care, whereas the Djako region has long lacked staffed medical facilities. Similarly, road maintenance often ends in Adjala village due to budgetary constraints, leaving the Djako region underserved. These disparities have fueled dissatisfaction among the Djako, who have persistently called for greater equity in the distribution of political resources (Robillard 2011).

Economically, however, the Djako, particularly Ndongo village—the westernmost settlement—hold a dominant position. In contrast, the Esel region, including Adjala village, has seen only limited settlement by wealthier outsiders, such as Muslim merchants from other regions. Even today, most newcomers bypass the Esel area entirely, heading directly to the Djako region, especially Ndongo village.

This inversion of political advantage and economic prosperity, coupled with the overwhelming dominance of Ndongo village, complicates the power dynamics among the villages in the region. Politically, the western Djako are positioned as challengers to the eastern Esel, demanding fairness and balance. Within the Djako group, however, significant disparities exist between Ndongo village and the other two Djako villages in terms of population size and economic activity, leading to resentment from the latter. Moreover, the Djako community itself is marked by historical complexities, as it was formed through the amalgamation of several ethnic groups. This has led to tensions based on residents' differing origins. As a result, conflicts of interest arise not only between the Esel and Djako but also within the Djako community, making unity difficult to achieve. Similarly, the Esel settlements are not monolithic, as several smaller villages have split off from Adjala village due to internal disputes. These historical trajectories have significantly shaped the current political and economic landscape of the Bakwele in this region, influencing both their relationships and the region's overall development.

## CONCLUSION

We traced Bakwele history living in Cameroon. Much of this process, however, remains a mystery. One of these is how the Esel moved to Southeast Cameroon. There is a legend that the ancestors of the Bakwele lived in the Ivindo River basin from northern Gabon to southern Cameroon (Deschamps 1962). From there, some migrated eastward, but Esel's oral histories do not recall that time; the earliest memory traces to a village called Mboka Monene, located along the Boumba River in southeastern Cameroon (Joiris 1998). The name of this village clearly derives from the Lingala language, and there is no doubt that at least some of the inhabitants came from Congo. Oral histories of a wide range of people will help us to understand how Mboka Monene was founded and where its inhabitants came from. A detailed study of the groups that fled eastward and intermar-



ried with the Konabembe at the time of the collapse of Mboka Monene, and of the inhabitants of northern Congo is anticipated. Depending on the results, it may be possible to fill in the missing link between the Esel and the Bakwele who fled to the east from Gabon.

On the other hand, what is striking about the Djako population is the diversity of their ethnic identity. They have at least three separate origins: Konabembe, Njem, and Bakwele in Congo. They refer to themselves collectively as Djako and identify themselves as Bakwele at the same time. This multilayered nature of their identities has been noted in previous studies (Robillard 2011; Rupp 2011). For situating the history they followed, it is necessary to approach the history of the Konabembe and the Njem. In addition, since all the three groups are classified as Makaa-Njem languages by Guthrie, it is expected to contribute to elucidating the historical dynamics of this language group.

In dealing with the history of either the Esel or Djako populations, it is essential to elucidate the inter-ethnic relations. Therefore, unraveling the history of the Bakwele of southeast Cameroon should not only fill in the missing link of the Bakwele of the east but also contribute to clarifying the historical dynamics of the Bantu populations of southeast Cameroon and northern Congo.

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**Appendix** Chronological table of Bakwele history in Cameroon

|           |  |
|-----------|--|
| 1884      | Ruled under German Empire  |
| 1886      | Construction of Moloundou  |
| 1900s?    | The first migration of Konambembe from Ngato Ancient to Dja River watershed (Djako)                    |
| 1911?     | The Second migration of Konambembe from Ngato Ancient to Dja River watershed (Djako)                   |
|           | Mbabion established the village of Ngola? (Djako)  |
| 1914      | Beginning of World War I   |
| 1915?     | Collapse of Mboka Monene (Esel)  |
| 1916      | End of World War I   |
| 1921      | French colonial government in Congo started railroad construction between Brazzaville and Pointe Noire |
| 1922      | Cameroon became French mandate   |
| 1927?     | Esel returned to Cameroon side. Created Adjala and Tembe villages (Esel)                               |
| 1930s     | Prototypes of Djako villages established in the upper Dja River (Djako)                                |
| 1931      | Some people escape from Adjala, established Ekelemba village (Esel)                                    |
| 1960      | Independence of Cameroon   |
| 1965      | UPC guerrillas around Moloundou,   |
| Late 60s  | Djako moved downstream of Dja River (Djako)  |
| Early 70s | Logging company SOTREF started operation at Ekelemba (Esel)  |
| 1973      | Logging company CCGS started operation at Ndongo   |
| Late 70s  | Logging road was opened from Moloundou to Ndongo   |
| 1982      | CCGS Bankrupt  |
| 1983      | Administrative unit ‘Canton Dja’ako et Esel’ established   |