LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT AND EDO NORTH AS A RESIDUAL ZONE*

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Nigeria's Edo North region reflects features generally consistent with the notion residual zone developed by Nichols (1992). Its topographically complex geographic setting has served as a refugium for diverse peoples, as judged by a constellation of historical, cultural, and linguistic factors. Village vernaculars of this region, with no indigenous majority language, are fast becoming dispreferred relative to varieties of English emanating from a colonial past. There is also evidence that children have begun to rely exclusively on English for speech to mother and father and in even greater numbers have shifted to English for interaction with siblings and peers. It thus appears that an intergenerational shift to a new home language is well underway and that a relatively sudden shift to moribund status for Edo North village vernaculars is near at hand.

La région Edo Nord du Nigeria fait marque de caractéristiques qui s'alignent en général avec la notion zone résiduelle comme développée par Nichols (1992). Sa situation géographique qui est topographiquement complexe, a servi de refuge pour de divers peuples, comme jugé par une constellation d'éléments historiques, culturels, et linguistiques. Les vernaculaires villageois de cette région, qui n'a pas de langage indigène majoritaire, deviennent rapidement moins préférés vis-à-vis de variétés d'anglais survenant d'un passé colonial. Il y a aussi des indices que les enfants ont commencé à se fier exclusivement à l'anglais pour communiquer avec leur mère et père, et en plus grand nombre même fait appel à l'anglais pour l'interaction avec pairs, frères et sœurs. Ainsi il parait qu'une mutation intergénérationnelle à un nouveau langage de foyer est déjà bien établie et un changement soudain au statut moribond pour les vernaculaires villageois de l'Edo Nord est très proche.

0. INTRODUCTION.

Over much of Africa, indigenous majority languages continue to subsume minority vernaculars (Brenzinger 1998). In areas lacking an indigenous majority, minority speech forms are giving way to a European-based speech variety. Such is the case in southern Nigeria's Edo North region, where Nigerian Pidgin English and Nigerian Standard English have a firm grip. To frame discussion of language endangerment in Edo North, we relate its geographic, historical, cultural, and linguistic profile to the notion residual zone. As developed by Nichols (1992), the latter exhibits features distinct from the classic spread zone of historical-comparative analysis. Residual zones also appear to establish conditions that may accelerate endangerment of village vernaculars and their eventual moribund status.

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1. GEOGRAPHIC CONDITION.

Edo North (EN) as a geographic region exists in Nigeria's topographically complex hill country and savanna north of Benin City, south of Okè, and just west of the River Niger. It extends from latitude 6° 30' N to 7° 30' N and from longitude 5° 50' E to 6° 15' E. Its northern boundary is formed by the River Obu and the Igara Formation; its southern boundary graduates from upland plateau into thick rainforest. The Igara Formation of the Afemai Hills rises to 2000 feet above sea level. It consists of a sharp outcrop of high, steep-sided, boulder-strewn ridges that stretch from the River Èdion on the west to the River Niger on the east, with Edion, Inyami, Owan, and Orle rivers carving out valleys within its reach (Hockey, Sacchi, de Graff, and Muotoh 1986). Between EN and the River Niger are approximately 150 villages whose vernaculars show two zones of high mutual intelligibility: Yèkhee toward the north and Esan toward the south (Elimelech 1979, Elugbe 1979).

Within Edo North there are approximately 92 villages. Their topographic setting has tended to reinforce a level of ethnic and linguistic discontinuity that has resisted the sweep of expansionist and centralized socio-political and cultural authority. There is a northern fringe of 20 villages constituting one clan (Okpamheri) but three languages (Ibilo, Somorika, and Ojah clusters) and a southern fringe of 21 villages comprising three clans (Ora, Iuleha, and Emai) but one language (Ora-Iuleha-Emai). Villages on the southern fringe have cognate percentages that are 80% or higher (Schaefer 1987). Villages on the northern fringe have cognate percentages from 50% to 84% (Lewis 2004). In addition, roughly 15 villages representing three clans form a language cluster (Okpella-Atè-North Ibie) along the eastern fringe at longitude 6° 15' E. Approximately 35 or so villages with varying degrees of ethnic and linguistic affiliation lay in a belt between these fringe areas. They are associated with over 16 clans, nine of whom have a village to clan ratio of 1-1 and seven of whom show a ratio of at least 2 to 1. Proposals concerning the number of languages in this middle belt will be taken up shortly.

2. HISTORICAL CONDITION.

Edo North populations reveal a complex history as judged by their tales of origin. According to Eboreime (1996, 1998), EN oral history shows three tale-of-origin types. Dynastic traditions reflect descent from a Benin Oba (king) and associations with the powerful Benin (Edo) Kingdom of pre-colonial Africa, well known for its bronze casting and ivory carving traditions (Ben-Amos 1980, Crowder and Abdullahi 1979). Non-dynastic, migration histories reveal non-Edo origin for ancestors who settled in the Igara Formation after migrating from the confluence of the Niger and Benue rivers near present day Lakoja. And a third tale-of-origin type represents autochthony; village settlers were aboriginal with no migration and no dynastic association.

Actually, EN tale-of-origin types appear more complicated. Dynastic traditions are not confined to Benin. Oral interviews we conducted with EN villagers from 2001-2004 revealed claims of Ife origin, thus linking EN populations to the Yoruba. Some village populations maintained that ancestors arrived from nearby Edoid speaking villages. Moreover, migrations were not confined to the Niger-Benue source.

Given the range of sources mentioned in our interviews, we undertook a review of published accounts of EN origins. We scrutinized Bradbury (1957), which is based in large measure on intelligence reports compiled by the British colonial administration in

the early 20th century. These reports create their own problems as historical documents; nonetheless, they provide a record pre-dating Nigeria's independence and political influences that impact contemporary oral history. Using Bradbury, we analyzed tales of origin that encompass not only EN but also the YÈkhee and Esan communities to its east (Schaefer 2004).

Among the YÈkhee and Esan, dynastic tales of origin clearly dominate. Forested Esan speaking areas reveal primarily dynastic tales of origin, with scattered mention of autochthony near the River Niger. YÈkhee speaking plateau areas tend primarily toward dynastic tales linked exclusively to the Benin Oba. Only one village among the YÈkhee maintained a possible Yoruba origin; none associated with the neighboring non-Edoid Igala or Akokoid groups.

EN localities presented a more diverse range of tale-of-origin types. Dynastic traditions occurred, some linked to Benin but not exclusively. For example, there were villages that claimed Ife origin in the Yoruba tradition. Still other villages held to a mixture of Benin and Ife (Yoruba) origin. Oral histories for some villages conveyed non-dynastic migration traditions, but there was also a mixture of migration and dynastic origins. Some villages revealed migration traditions from nearby Edoid speaking villages. Other villages claimed that ancestors migrated from locations that are neither Edoid nor Yoruboid and, indeed, are not confined geographically to the Niger-Benue confluence area: Akokoid to the west and Ebira to the immediate north. Neither dynastic nor migration traditions held for still other villages. They asserted a supernatural origin (ancestor emergence from the River Niger) or an oral history characterized by autochthony, and even autochthony mixed with non-Edoid origins or with dynastic origins.

EN tale-of-origin types suggest a complex history for the region. Apparently, it involved a period of domination by, or at least subservience to, the Benin Empire's Oba. Linkage to a Yoruba Oba may reflect incursions of the 19th century. And the admixture of non-Edoid groups, Akokoid, Igala, and Ebira further complicates EN history. Since EN tales of origin link to populations from the east, west, north, and south, one arrives at the distinct impression that the history of EN has been shaped by the continuous influx of people from various ethnic and linguistic groups. As well, the variable nature of this influx reflects the lack of a single historical hub and its concomitant centrifugal drive.

3. CULTURAL CONDITION.

Cultural profiles among Edo North populations are also diverse. There is evidence of cultural layering and mixing, especially when compared to the more uniform dynastic profile of Benin. Ogbomo (1997) provides a basis for assessing cultural admixture in EN as well as the nature of Benin influence.

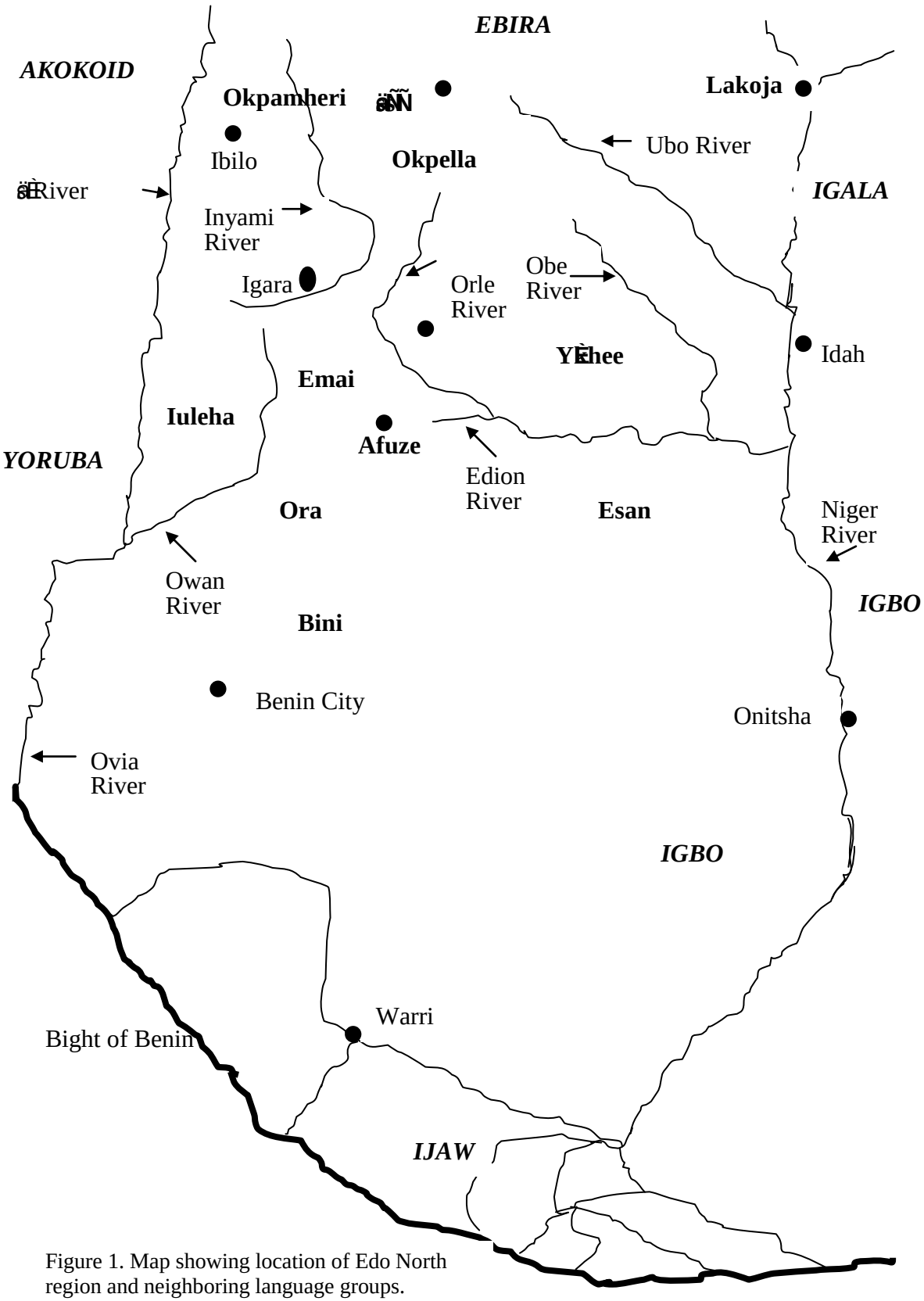

Figure 1. Map showing location of Edo North region and neighboring language groups.

For selected EN communities, Ogbomo assessed totemic prohibitions with a questionnaire methodology found useful in Africa (Cohen 1972, Erim 1981). He built on Thomas' (1915-16) early colonial era investigation of totems that represented items various Edoid populations prohibited at mortuary and marriage rituals or at mealtimes. A totem is an animal, plant or other natural object that symbolizes inclusion within a cultural unit defined by common biological ancestry. As a marker of kinship, it signals the group within which marriage is prohibited. Biological totems in EN apply at the sub-village, ward level. Political totems, on the other hand, apply at the village or clan level; they signal a socially defined allegiance.

Ogbomo's (1997) assessment of totemic prohibition allows one to postulate essentially four cultural types grounded to totemic character: nature totems like water and trees; snake totems; plant totems; and animal totems. More important, his assessment of totem types correlated with contrasting sets of socio-cultural values. Animal totems associated with centralized political authority, patrilocal marriage (wife moves to husband's village), patrilineal descent of children and property, and dynastic myths of origin through a royal lineage. Plant, snake, and nature totems, in contrast, correlated with decentralized authority, matrilocal marriage (husband moves to wife's village), and matrilineal descent of children and property. While nature and snake totems associated with myths of supernatural origin, plant totem groups held to non-dynastic, migration myths.

Oral interviews that we conducted with village populations throughout EN as part of fieldwork from 2001-2004 revealed mixed cultural profiles. Villages nearest the Igara complex showed decentralized political authority through a council of elders (as in Iuleha), matrilineal descent of children and property (Ikpeshi's six wards require marriage outside ward, children revert to mother's ward) or matrilocal marriage (husband moves to wife's village in Atè). Other villages on the periphery, Afuze for example, displayed centralized political authority, patrilineal descent of children and property, and patrilocal marriage (wife moves to husband's village).

To probe cultural expression of totemic character further, we sought a means of investigation less direct than a questionnaire. We found it in the characters of oral tradition narratives and their role in resolving storyline tension or conflict. While talking animals and plants can initially be attractive for their fabulous nature, they may, on reflection, represent cultural types. Non-historical, prose narratives have the potential to bring perspective to formulations of the past encoded in oral history and provide an avenue for assessing the depth of a cultural paradigm encoded in traditions of oral history.

What do EN prose narratives reveal about totem types and their associated cultural paradigms? How does the patriarchal, hereditary, and centralized kingship of Benin relate to the matriarchal and decentralized communities of EN? To begin addressing these questions, we analyzed EN prose narratives from the oral tradition of the Emai clan we had previously transcribed and translated (Schaefer and Egbokhare 1999b). Animal characters in Emai narratives include the leopard, bush pig, elephant, chicken, goat, and tortoise. Of these, the leopard is the totem of the Benin Oba, as also indicated by the famous Benin bronze plaques in the British Museum and elsewhere. It seemed reasonable, therefore, to expect the leopard to resolve storyline tension in Emai prose narratives. This was never the case however. Overwhelmingly, it was the tortoise that outwitted all other animals, including the leopard, and resolved storyline tension.

Perhaps one should not make too much of the relationship between the leopard and tortoise. Narratives of this type are often construed as simple animal stories. But we have

already seen that various EN clans claim ancestry from the royal court of Benin. Among the Emai for example, the link between clan oral history and the royal lineage of Benin is evident. Oyakhire's (1965) presentation of oral history reveals an Emai clan founded by Ima, who, though related to the Benin Court through matrilineal descent, fled Benin City for what is now Emai country after a charge of murder. Ignoring relationships between EN communities and the Benin Royal Court expressed in oral narrative tradition seems shortsighted. One would expect non-historical oral narratives to reveal deference toward the Oba. As a character in prose narratives, the Oba should be revered and respected, an ideal character to resolve storyline tension.

In Emai narratives, the Oba never resolves storyline tension. Oral narratives show the Oba to be a fool, one easily duped by other characters, and one who lacks essential human qualities valued by villagers. Indeed, the character who triumphs in resolving storyline tension with the Oba is the orphan. A socially abandoned character with no mother, no father, no kinship, and no lineage, the orphan consistently outwits the Oba of Benin. Just as the orphan is a socially displaced character, so too is the tortoise displaced. He is a creature of the water on land, a terrestrial turtle. And it is also the tortoise who confronts the Oba in Emai narrative storyline, revealing him for what he is. Interestingly, the tortoise and orphan never encounter each other in Emai narratives.

From our perspective, the orphan and tortoise represent a cultural type, a world view expressed in oral tradition that stands opposed to the Oba and leopard. Our interpretation of these totemic elements is that the orphan and tortoise represent a non-dynastic, decentralized world view that stands triumphant over a cultural paradigm dominated by the dynastic tradition of the Oba and leopard. Since prose narratives do not present the Oba as a figure of authority and respect, the purported historical relationship to Benin should be different from what oral history tells us or there existed a different kind of relationship with Benin obscured by the royal lineage genealogy of the past 150 years or so. At the very least, EN cultural profiles as represented by the Emai reveal populations in a state of resistance to a centralizing cultural and socio-political authority.

4. LINGUISTIC CONDITION.

Edo North village vernaculars have received scant historical-comparative attention within the Edoid language group. The seminal investigation of EN was Williamson (1968). She expanded field notes not incorporated in Bradbury (1957) and merged 20 village vernaculars into fourteen languages: Ora, UnÈmÈ, North Ibie-Okpella-AtÈsÑ, Ikpeshi, Sasaru, Üuwa, Makeke-Unumo-Ojirami, àah, Lamkpeshe-Ibilo-Ugbosi, Somorika, Akuku, àpÈ, and OtuÑ. In later investigation focused on Edoid as a language group, Elugbe (1973) identified three EN languages: Okpamheri, OtuÑ, Ora-Iuleha-Emai. Elugbe (1989) amended this analysis to include six languages: Okpamheri, Somorika, UnÈmÈ, Idesa-Akuku-àpÈ, OtuÑ, and Ora-Iuleha-Emai. However, Elugbe was highly conservative in the selection of village vernaculars for study. Since he did not survey data from the entire set of Edoid-speaking villages, his apparent goal was not to assess internal relationships among village vernaculars within and across the entire Edoid group and so conduct a comprehensive examination of vernacular relatedness within those boundaries. Rather, it seems that Elugbe's aim was to identify the boundaries (north/south/east/west) of the Edoid language group and its general structural organization.

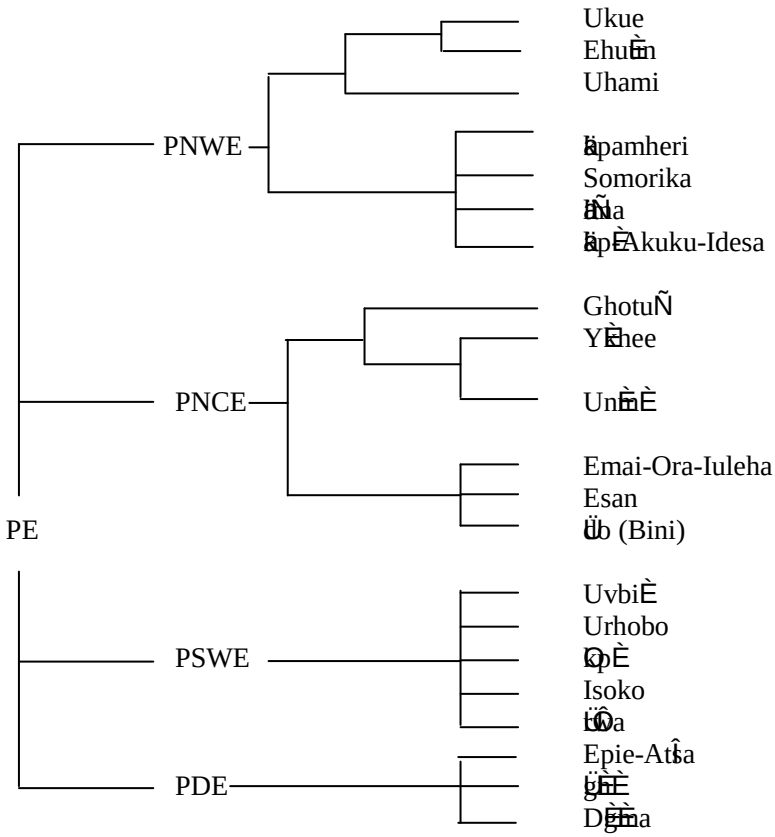

Figure 2. Family tree for Edoid group according to Elugbe (1989). Abbreviations represent the following: PE=Proto Edoid, PDE=Proto Delta Edoid, PSWE=Proto Southwestern Edoid, PNCE=Proto Northcentral Edoid, PNWE=Proto Northwestern Edoid.

The disparity in previous studies with respect to number of EN languages is perhaps not surprising given the impact of colonial era linguistic practices. As already mentioned, clan affiliations across villages in central EN are few. Colonial and subsequent governments forced villages showing no allegiance to one another into clan confederations. Villages with vernaculars distinct from one another were subsumed under a single confederation for purposes of administrative efficiency, thereby ignoring and obscuring language distinctions (Ogbomo 1997). Today for example, the villages of Ikhin, Uroe, Arokho, Iru-Oke, Ohami, and AkÈconstitute the Evboi-MiÑ clan, although historically these villages held no particular allegiance toward one another. It is also in this central area that one finds totemic organization identified as indigenous by Ogbomo (the 3 Bs boa, bean, and bead) and cross-village consensus about particular central Edoid villages as the earliest regional settlements. To be sure, this high linguogenetic diversity has left no room for a single indigenous vernacular to evolve as a cross-region lingua franca.

5. DISCUSSION.

How might we relate the linguistic, cultural, and historical complexity of Edo North to its geographic setting? Nichols (1992) developed the polar notions spread zone and residual zone to better understand typological diversity among languages of the world. For her, a group of contiguous languages may be limited by geography but not defined by it. Her features of analysis are center/periphery, homogeneity/diversity, and direction of movement. A spread zone is characterized by low linguogenetic diversity over some substantial landmass where single language dominance exists across successive temporal eras and where a center of innovation is evident. In contrast, a residual zone shows no center of innovation and no dominant language but high linguogenetic diversity.

Let's briefly consider each zone type. A spread zone exhibits relatively low linguogenetic diversity. Often a single language dominates, thus leading to low structural diversity in the zone. Language families in spread zones are relatively shallow by historical standards. They show the rapid expansion of a single language over geographic space, with a succession of languages playing the dominant role and serving during their reign as lingua franca for the entire zone. A dominant spread-zone language reveals classic dialect geography with a core that innovates and a periphery that conserves. The center of linguistic innovation also serves as center of cultural influence, shifting as required by political and economic power. Over time, spread zones show little long-term increase in linguistic diversity. In Africa, a classic spread zone is the central sub-Saharan field through which Bantu spread from west to east.

In contrast, a residual zone shows a dense grouping of linguogenetically diverse languages within a more limited geographic space. Accompanying this is high structural diversity. By historical standards, language families in residual zones are deep. There is no spread of a single language over a spatial area and no single language dominates over temporal eras. There is no succession of dominant languages, thus no lingua franca. There is also no center of linguistic innovation; rather, innovation occurs at zone periphery. Linguistic change occurs through areal feature spread, leading to language admixture and a long term increase in linguistic diversity. And residual zones show no cultural, political or economic center. A classic residual zone in Africa is the Ethiopia/Kenya highlands.

Applying these features to the village vernaculars of EN is illuminating. First of all, they show a certain degree of linguistic diversity, both structural and linguogenetic. One finds languages of the Ebira and Edoid group, with traces of Akokoid, Igala, Yoruboid, and Igboid influence also evident. At least some vernaculars have occupied their locale for the period of village memory; for example, Somorika and Ivbiaro show autochtononous and supernatural origin myths, respectively. For communities whose oral histories claim migration, the place of origin is often within a few kilometers of the present village site, not some distant location.

Among EN vernaculars, there is no identifiable center of linguistic diffusion. Vernacular features in the Igara complex, such as breathy voice and fortis/lenis contrasts (Elugbe 1979), have not radiated outward to vernaculars of the lowland plains such as Emai or Ora. Linguistic innovation has tended to arise in vernaculars at the periphery, while archaisms are retained in the highland or interior vernaculars. Archaic noun class and gender systems are characteristic of Ibilo, Ojah, and Somorika villages of the Igara complex but manifest only a vestigial form in the rainforest periphery where the villages of Eme and Afuze are located.

As well, there is no accepted center of political, cultural, or economic influence within EN. The strongly centralized and hereditary Benin Obaship with its legion of chiefs

and sub-chiefs was not mirrored in populations speaking EN vernaculars at the time of British conquest and in subsequent years when British administrative authority had not yet fully asserted itself (Bradbury 1957). As judged by oral tradition texts, Benin hegemony is more fiction than fact. EN communities were politically decentralized and accepting of rotating, age-based village leadership. Finally, cultural elements from the periphery have tended to influence highland villages, since the Benin Oba features in oral traditions of many EN clans. Nonetheless, transmission of these features was not accomplished through political, cultural, and economic hegemony that would sustain linguistic dominance.

It appears more likely that EN served as a refugium, attracting speakers, if not whole languages from adjacent lowlands, particularly the Niger-Benue confluence and plains to the east and west of that juncture. Witness the quarter of ä Ñ that is still recognized as Ebira and the à p È quarter of Otuo cited by Elugbe (1979). Oral histories from the region make no mention of one dominant language being replaced by another. Rather, speakers and their languages have been added to existing ones, with extant linguistic systems absorbing the properties of intruding systems and thus changing their structural character over time. This would lead quite naturally to linguistic descriptions characterized by typological mixture. Indeed, this appears to be the case at least for Emai and its predicate phrase (Schaefer 1988, Schaefer and Egbokhare 2002b), where directional path notions (e.g. *through, onto*) surface within either a verb (**shan** 'move through' in **òjè lá shán É É n ìwè** [Oje run move.through inside house] 'Oje ran through the house') or a satellite grammatical element (Ñ 'onto' in **òjè nwú émà Ò bì ìtébù** [Oje take.hold yam onto LOC table] 'Oje put yam onto the table') to illustrate Talmy's (2000) verb-framing and satellite-framing language types.

No single lingua franca has dominated the entire EN region. At various times different languages found a niche, such as the extensive use of Yoruba in the markets before the 1970s and in western religious rituals in more contemporary times, or the use of Igbo among blacksmiths of the Emai (Schaefer 2003). But Bini, the language of the Benin Kingdom, certainly has not served as lingua franca. Moreover, EN shows various forms of local bilingualism with an evident vertical orientation, as Nichols claims for residual zones. Speakers of upland village vernaculars understand lowland varieties but speakers of lowland vernaculars tend not to know upland ones. Around the Igara Complex, speakers of the Akuku vernacular understand neighboring Ojah, Unè È and ä Ñ speakers but all the latter fail to understand Akuku speakers.

Also consistent with refugium status are tale-of-origin types and the complex history they reflect. Apparently, there was a period of domination by, or at least subservience to the Benin Oba, with some linkage to Oba traditions of the Yoruba. But there was also a continuous influx of people from various ethnic and linguistic groups, not simply Edoid or Yoruboid. Tales of origin suggested a continuous admixture of peoples from the Akokoid group in the west, the Igala in the east, and the Ebira in the north.

In addition, refugium status helps us understand the cultural profile of EN prose narratives. The centrality of orphan and tortoise characters in Emai narratives suggests a culture type that has privileged those affected by spatial displacement and unwanted relocation. And the resolution of storyline tension by orphan and tortoise vis-à-vis Oba and leopard reflects the continued resistance of a non-dynastic, decentralized world view to dynastic and centralized traditions of authority. It is quite reasonable to assume that over time a cultural paradigm has evolved that reflects the way of life in a refugium.

6. ENDANGERMENT CONDITION.

To assess the endangered status of Edo North vernaculars, we consider data from the Emai clan. Emai is spoken across 10 villages by approximately 20-30,000 people. Over ten years ago, we sought to ascertain language preference inside and outside the home in primarily rural, Emai-speaking country. Although large urban centers in south-central Nigeria revealed widespread reliance on Nigerian Pidgin English as mother tongue (Marchese and Schnukal 1982), its rural areas were assumed immune to home-language change (Myers-Scotton 1982). Nonetheless, we attempted to construct an initial sociolinguistic profile of language use for the rural village of Afuze. We developed a questionnaire in Emai that assessed language choice across sociolinguistic settings such as home, church, market, and school. Egbokhare then conducted one-on-one oral interviews with 8-11 year old children, and administered group questionnaires to 13-20 year old teenagers as well as adults.

Our principal finding concerned the preference for English (Nigerian Pidgin English or Nigerian Standard English) as mother tongue (Schaefer and Egbokhare 1999a). We found that 16% of the older 13-20 year olds relied on English when at home with parents. This amount doubled with younger children. 33% of 8-11 year olds used only English with mother and father. Moreover, 75% of the 8-11 year olds employed only English with home-related siblings.

Outside the home, 100% of 8-11 year olds and 13-20 year olds employed English in school, while upwards of 80% relied principally on English at the market and in church. At the same time, 80% of 8-11 year olds and 96% of 13-20 year olds expressed a willingness to learn how to write Emai, displaying thereby a positive attitude toward the vernacular. Consequently, we hypothesized that an intergenerational shift to a new home language was well underway in the absence of negative mother tongue evaluation.

We also assessed the threatened status of Emai's storytelling tradition. Comparing texts produced by speakers of different ages (60 year old, 40 year old and 20 year old), we identified evidence of a generational divide in narrative learning (Schaefer and Egbokhare 1997). More so than elders, our Emai speaker in his 20s relied on content words borrowed from English, e.g. **ìbùrẽ́dì** 'bread,' as well as English grammatical forms with no Emai counterpart, e.g. **ànì** 'and' as sentence conjunction and **musi** 'must' as deontic modal (Schaefer and Egbokhare 2002a). In addition, our 20 year-old storyteller no longer employed logophoric third-person grammatical pronouns (**yÑ** 'he' **yan** 'they') to identify a text speaker indirectly, replacing them with first person pronouns (**i** 'I').

Over the past two decades we have thus found evidence that younger Emai speakers restructure the vernacular and in a growing number of cases abandon it. Both Nigerian Standard English and Nigerian Pidgin English play a dynamic role directing this grammatical change and its accompanying language shift. Looking toward the future, we view the Emai situation as representative of a broader trend in which children throughout EN will no longer acquire indigenous vernaculars as mother tongue.

7. CONCLUSION.

Residual zone status for Edo North raises intriguing issues for endangerment in Africa and its impact on village vernaculars. Brenzinger (1998) and Brenzinger et al. (1991) interpret endangerment in Africa as the replacement of minority vernaculars by indigenous majority languages. This is not the case among EN vernaculars however. Since language replacement was a defining feature of Nichols' spread zone, it might be more

useful to view Brenzinger et al.'s generalization as limited to spread zone areas of Africa, not its potential residual zones. Within the East African spread zone including Tanzania, for example, the indigenous majority language Swahili has replaced the minority vernacular Zaramo.

Residual zones or refugia might also lend themselves to endangerment more quickly than spread zones and to a relatively sudden shift from endangerment to moribund status, i.e. the absence of children learning the village vernacular as mother tongue. There is clearly evidence of the incipient stages of moribund status in our data from the Emai village of Afuze. Further evidence of moribund potential across EN communities is the relative absence of knowledgeable storytellers under 50 years of age.

EN communities evolved in an era when local authority met the socio-political and economic aspirations of villagers. Education was grounded to local traditions; religious practices were circumscribed by the village; and markets were geographically immediate. Events beyond the village or clan setting did not continuously impinge on survival. Indeed, nonlocal, centralizing forces, as judged by the historical record, were a continuous threat.

Today in EN, different circumstances exist. Economic well being depends on roads and means of transport that access nonlocal markets. This economic system is not sustained by a single village vernacular. Similarly, socio-political aspirations are met through communication that obviates the vernacular of a village or clan and necessarily involves peoples speaking distinct, sometimes unrelated speech varieties. Although similar circumstances of the contemporary world may propel language replacement in a spread zone, in a residual zone there is no convenient and trusted indigenous medium of communication available. In EN, it has been necessary to reach beyond indigenous village vernaculars for a lingua franca. Nigerian Pidgin English and Nigerian Standard English have secured for the rural populations of EN a more extensive socio-political and economic grasp than any of its village vernaculars.

As a refugium and absent a majority indigenous language, the diverse and dense collection of village vernaculars in Edo North exist in an endangered condition and, we project, will undergo a relatively sudden generational shift to moribund status. The source of this condition rests with a geographic setting in which a constellation of historical, cultural, and linguistic features grounded to the physical displacement of diverse peoples has thrived.

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