

The Obolo (Andoni)-Opobo Socio-Economic Relations in the Eastern Niger Delta, 1869-2000

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Abstract

The thrust of this paper is the assessment of the socio-economic relations between the Obolo (Andoni) and Opobo from 1869 to 2000. The relations began with the Obolo (Andoni) response to the Ibani (Bonny) Civil War of 1869 which led to the Obolo (Andoni) accommodating the Ibani extraction led by Jaja in Obolo territory. Consequently, Jaja was first integrated into Obolo socio-religious and cultural belief system through swearing of oath of allegiance in the sanctuary of Yok-Obolo; the Obolo national deity at Agwut-Obolo. This oath diplomacy consolidated the foundation of Obolo (Andoni) and Opobo relations in the Eastern Niger Delta. With this development Jaja was eventually allocated the Obolo (Andoni) fishing settlement. He formally established his settlement named after Opubo on December 25, 1870. The European merchants corrupted it to Opobo. The oath sworn by Jaja in Obolo (Andoni) and the 1873 Treaty consolidated the independent existence of Opobo in the Lower Imo River. The treaty of 1873 guaranteed Jaja and Opobo economic hegemony in the Lower Imo River and the Ibibio markets. In the treaty Obolo (Andoni) was not affected by Jaja's economic hegemony but was granted free participation in the economic activities in the Lower Imo River and beyond. Obolo (Andoni) and Opobo economic relations was strengthened during the palm oil trade. This paper relied on primary and secondary sources to reinterpret this historical development. The findings of this work indicates that Obolo (Andoni) laid the foundation of religio-cultural relationship with Opobo. Oath taken and the 1873 Treaty consolidated economic relations between Obolo (Andoni) and Opobo. The work concludes that the socio-economic relations between Obolo (Andoni) and Opobo facilitated the peaceful international trade in the sub-region.

Key words: Obolo, Opobo, Socio-Economic, Relations, Eastern Niger Delta

Introduction

Obolo (Andoni)-Opobo relations started when the people that later formed Opobo Town were together in Bonny¹. In reality the relations between Obolo (Andoni) and Opobo predated the Bonny Civil War of 1869. It culminated in the mass emigration of the Annie Pepple section of the royal family and 14 other War Canoe houses led by Jaja out of Bonny to settle first at Minima; one of the villages of Opubu house in ancient Grand Bonny.² The pre-relations were hinged on trading activities during the palm oil trade in Bonny. Up till 1869 Bonny was the undisputed centre of international trade and dominant economic power in the Eastern Niger Delta. So, the economic activities which revolved around Bonny brought considerable Obolo (Andoni) palm oil traders into close contact with Jaja being a prominent and prosperous trader and the head of the Annie Pepple House.

Obolo (Andoni) palm oil traders such as Esuku Ufuile in Bonny and Ikwut, the founder of Ikuru Town were personal friends of Jaja in Bonny. This inter-personal relationship was exploited to facilitate the settlement of Jaja and his group in Obolo (Andoni) territory³. S. J. S. Cookey traced Jaja's establishment of special relationship with the Obolo (Andoni), Ogoni and Ibibio as he toured these areas while in Bonny as the head of the Annie Pepple House. Jaja gave lavish presents to the chiefs of the areas he visited⁴. Similarly, N. C. Ejituwu recorded Jaja's pre-contact with Obolo and that 1867 was the year Jaja established effective contact with the Obolo (Andoni). It marked the beginning of historical relations between Obolo (Andoni) and Opobo⁵.

All these assertions point to the fact that Jaja had established relations with the Obolo (Andoni) people who occupied the trade routes and became familiar with the geographical terrain of Obolo (Andoni) before their emigration. When Jaja and his group were forced out of Bonny due to the wanton destruction and devastating consequences of the 1869 Civil War on them, he quickly exploited the pre-existing relations with Obolo (Andoni) for accommodation and settlement in Obolo (Andoni) territory.⁶ Similarly, Opobo oral traditions and documented evidence attest to the fact that Jaja took refuge in Obolo (Andoni) and entered into a covenant of allegiance, peaceful co-existence and protection with Obolo (Andoni).⁷

This gesture was an outright display of Obolo (Andoni) usual hospitality even to an aged long arch enemy who ran to them for refuge and protection in times of distress or war. In Obolo (Andoni) traditions, it is a taboo to eject refugees or strangers even though the refugees were the enemy of Obolo (Andoni) in warfare. Provided they were in Obolo (Andoni) territory during the war, they remained safer and protected than their fellow indigenes exposed to the destructive attacks of the Obolo (Andoni) warriors. They cannot be killed by any Obolo (Andoni) warrior while in Obolo territory. This is contained in Obolo adage: *kpi ki lap ene isotop*; a stranger is

always accepted. It was on this premise that Jaja and his group were accommodated temporarily in Obolo (Andoni) before a permanent location was given to them by the then Obolo (Andoni) leaders.

The Obolo (Andoni), conscious of Jaja and his group as a component of Bonny and the protracted enmity with them, naturally adopted traditional diplomatic measure of oath taking to guarantee Jaja's submission and peaceful co-existence with the Obolo (Andoni) as well as Obolo (Andoni) protection and defence of their new tenant. Jaja and Obolo (Andoni) leaders swore to an oath of protection and mutual co-existence. The swearing of oath was sealed with *Nfi Yok-Obolo/Igba*; dust of Yok-Obolo or ritual necklace fastened on Jaja's neck with the instruction not to remove it.⁸

Obolo (Andoni) sources asserted that Jaja was paying annual token of allegiance in material items to Obolo (Andoni) till his exile in September 1887. Jaja's successor, his first son, Sunday Jaja continued the payment for a while and stopped thereafter in the early 20th century. Their refusal to continue the payment of the annual token of allegiance to Obolo (Andoni) caused some disaffection between the two groups. Opobo people had wanted to assert their autonomy as an independent ethnic group without any allegiance to other ethnic group. In this circumstance, the Obolo (Andoni) instituted a legal action against the Opobo insisting their continuous payment of the token of allegiance. The court did not uphold their request.⁹ It is instructive to note that the payment of a token of allegiance in material objects or items which Jaja agreed to be paying annually was not done as a conquered people but as a "tenant" in modern term. It was part of the pact entered into between Obolo and Jaja. These items were meant for annual sacrifice to *Yok-Obolo* (Obolo deity) at the sanctuary to appease the gods of Obolo (Andoni). With this development, Obolo (Andoni) territory served as a strong defensive screen between Opobo and Bonny. Obolo (Andoni) became the indispensable allies of Jaja and Opobo.¹⁰

Social-Cultural Relations

Institutional relations between Obolo (Andoni) and Opobo was firmly established through Ikwut (Ikuru) the founder of Ikuru Town and friend of Jaja. Ikwut the father of John Ikuru, with his trade contact, exposure and personal relationship with Jaja, realized the importance of education, quickly sent his son John Ikuru to the school established by Jaja. John Ikuru acquired his primary education from Opobo in the 19th century before his father sent him to Lagos for post-

primary education. John Ikuru trod the part of his father to give Western education to his children and relatives. He sent them to Ikuru Town and Opobo for schooling respectively. With the formal establishment of the St. Simon's Church in Ikuru Town in 1910, as a branch of the Anglican Mission in Opobo, mission school was also introduced. The school started effectively in January, 1911 in Ikuru Town. Thus, it became the first mission school in the entire Western Obolo (Andoni). Meanwhile before the establishment of primary school in Ikuru Town some early Ikuru Town elite attended primary school in Opobo.¹¹

To the people of Ikuru Town, Opobo Town was their centre of influence and enlightenment. This made Ikuru Town people the first Obolo (Andoni) community that acquired Western education and became enlightened.¹² So, through education there existed greater relations between Ikuru Town of Obolo (Andoni) and Opobo of Ibani since the late 19th century till date. It should be noted that before Obolo (Andoni) got its first Government Secondary School at Ngo in 1974, Ikuru Town indigenes were attending secondary school within and outside the Eastern Niger Delta area especially, in Igbo, Ibibio, Lagos and Calabar. On the other hand, when secondary education was established in Opobo, Ikuru Town and other Obolo (Andoni) people turned to Opobo for their secondary education.¹³

At this time Ikuru Town people preferred schooling in Opobo to schooling in Ngo. Two reasons could be advanced for their action. One, they already have ancestral relationship with Opobo. Two, is their proximity to Opobo Town. This relationship made Ikuru Town to be the most integrated Obolo (Andoni) town into Opobo socio-cultural system. It is worthy of note that this fundamental relationship was derived from Opobo as earlier mentioned and expanded by John Ikuru.¹⁴

The institutional relations between Obolo (Andoni) and Opobo continue to grow harmoniously from the late 19th century to 1991 when there was crisis between them as a result of Opobo's claim of ownership over Down-Below, an Andoni territory. The cordial relations between the two groups was strained because of the 1991 national census. In October, 1991 crisis broke out when Opobo people dispatched a team of enumerator led by Opobo indigenes to Down-Below to conduct head count as one of the villages under Opobo. The Obolo people resident there considered Opobo action as an encroachment on their territory and a subtle means of claiming ownership over that Obolo (Andoni) land. Hence, Obolo (Andoni) people attacked both the enumerators and Opobo indigenes; and chased them away. Obolo (Andoni) people angered by the

claim of Opobo, embarked on mass destruction of the houses and properties belonging to Opobo people who were also staying at Down –Below doing their fishing, fish trading and other economic activities. The incident affected Obolo (Andoni)-Opobo social relations because both groups were exposed to the risk of losing their lives.¹⁵ Up till 1991 the Obolo (Andoni) students' had a considerable population in Comprehensive Secondary School, Opobo. Obolo (Andoni) teachers were also teaching in the primary and Secondary Schools in Opobo. Their relations with the community went beyond the school environment. The Obolo (Andoni) teachers and students made friends with the indigenes of Opobo.¹⁶

Gospel A. Johnson Abanile who was a teacher in the Opobo secondary school from 1985-1991, stated that one Mr. Dairus was very good with them and the Obolo teachers regarded him as their 'father' there. He always bought palm wine for them to drink together. Some of the Obolo teachers serving in Opobo then included G. A. Johnson (now a Chief), Irikana Godpower (now a Professor), Ogonte, Asuk and many others. Their commitment to duty enhanced the educational standard of the school and it was highly rated. This endeared them the more to the community. Thus, G. A. Johnson was not only the school Games/Sport Master but to the entire Opobo Town.

Abanile also stated that during the 1991 Obolo (Andoni) and Opobo crisis, some of the Obolo (Andoni) teachers, students and other Obolo (Andoni) people trapped in Opobo remained there for three days in their hide-outs. They were hidden by their various landlords, because Opobo people were desperate to attack Obolo (Andoni) indigenes. They were later smuggled out of Opobo Town. It was on the basis of their good relationship that their lives were spared. One consequence, of the crisis was that the standard of the secondary school dwindled with the compulsory transfer of the Obolo (Andoni) teachers and the Obolo (Andoni) students re-admitted into other primary and secondary schools in Ngo in Obolo (Andoni) and elsewhere.¹⁷

In 1993 there was a reversal trend in the centre of study. Obolo (Andoni) was accredited as one of the centres of National Teachers Institute (NTI) for the training of teachers. NTI was established in Obolo (Andoni) because of the Ogoni-Andoni war in 1993. The war frustrated Obolo (Andoni) students on NTI programme in Bori. Others affected were students on National Diploma and Higher National Diploma programmes in Bori Polytechnic. This institute sited in Ngo attracted more Opobo people interested in the teaching profession to acquire higher level education in Andoni. This further cemented their institutional relationship as they were accommodated by Obolo (Andoni) people during the period of their education in Obolo (Andoni).¹⁸

Another community in Opobo Kingdom where teachers of Obolo (Andoni) indigenes also taught, is Kalaibiana. According to Benedict Eric Igbifa, an indigene of Obolo (Andoni), he was posted to Community Secondary School, Kalaibiana as the pioneer principal. Obolo teachers who taught in the above school were Benedict Eric Igbifa, Hanson Ogbulija, Richard Simon Ogbologugo and many others. As teachers, they had cordial relations with the leadership of the community and the indigenes respectively. The Obolo (Andoni) teachers being the pioneer government teachers in the school contributed enormously to the development of the school and grooming of the students morally and academically. It is instructive to note that, the Obolo teachers' dedication to duty, hard work and educational training of the students promoted social relations between the two groups.¹⁹

Not only Obolo teachers that taught in Opobo. Teachers from Opobo also served in several primary and secondary schools in Obolo (Andoni). Some Obolo communities where teachers of Opobo origin taught are Ngo, Ataba, and Eastern Obolo. Opobo teachers started teaching in Obolo (Andoni) from the early 1970s to 1997. According to the oral account of my informant, Obolo people in their usual hospitality, provided free accommodation to the Opobo teachers posted to Obolo (Andoni). At Government Comprehensive Secondary School, Ataba, the teachers contributed significantly to the academic excellence of the students, whose majority were indigenes of Obolo. One of them was Epelle Belgam. These teachers from Opobo further bonded and sustained the social relations between the ethnic groups.²⁰

From the cultural perspective, Obolo (Andoni) sources asserted that the carved mask heads used by the various age grades and groups to play their *uke* were gotten from Queenama that is Queens Town.²¹ Also, from the Opobo axis, there was a strong wave of cultural influence which engulfed the Obolo (Andoni) area particularly through Ikuru Town and Okoroboile. They thus became integrated into the Opobo cultural environment and gradually became agents of Opobo culture diffusion in Obolo (Andoni) land. This cultural assimilation by the people of Ikuru Town created a cultural link between Opobo and Obolo (Andoni). Thus, Ikuru Town adopted the *egerebite* ceremony of womanhood from Opobo. This cultural ceremony permitted women who performed it to tie two pieces of George wrapper. Any woman who did not do it was not permitted by tradition to tie two pieces of George wrapper in Opobo. This was the state of fulfillment of womanhood rites among the Opobo and Ikuru Town women respectively.²²

To this, Abanile asserted that culturally, the influence of Opobo Kingdom was so much felt

in Obolo. Ikuru Town and all the communities around there including Okoroboile, the masquerade they played were patterned after Opobo. Obolo and Opobo played *Owuogbo* very well, which was one of the popular masquerades played in the Niger Delta. For the people of Obolo (Andoni), the *Nwoatam* they played was not originally Obolo (Andoni) cultural heritage but a borrowed culture from Opobo in the late 20th century. Abanile concluded that the Obolo (Andoni) and Opobo relations gave birth to this cultural assimilation.²³ Edubio and Iraron attested to the fact that *Nwoatam* cultural play was emulated from Opobo by Obolo people.²⁴ Some Obolo called their own *Nwoatam Ekwukwuacha*, an Obolo nomenclature.

Opobo oral account stated that *Nwoatam* spread from Opobo to Obolo (Andoni). According to Jones M. Jaja, *Nwoatam* cultural play was introduced into Opobo from the Ndoki area in 1931 and since then it became an annual carnival staged every New Year Day in Opobo. Its influence spread to other ethnic groups in the Niger Delta such as Bonny and Egwenga. These groups play their *Nwoatam* in the Christmas season. The Obolo (Andoni) joined during the celebration of *Nwoatam* and learnt the pattern of play from Opobo. They modified their own based on their purpose and environment.²⁴ According to Alaminikuma it was *Ejeselem* and *Ogelenkpa* that took *Nwoatom* to Obolo (Andoni) area. Obolo (Andoni) and Opobo also share similarity in some of their indigenous cultural plays such as *uke*. Both have the same pattern of play.²⁵

To further strengthen Obolo (Andoni) relations with Opobo, Obolo (Andoni) bore Opobo (Ibani) names. Some Andoni people desired to answer Opobo (Ibani) names because they wanted to belong to a group that has already made name; that is class identity. Like in Ikuru Town they answer Jaja and wrote Jaja on their flag. Alaminikuma and Abinye Morgan Ogolo stated that even in names, Andoni called their children Opobo (Ibani) names like Ereforokuma, Fubara, Jumbo and many others.²⁶ This shows the extent of Obolo (Andoni) relations with the Opobo.

Jaja further strengthened his relationship with Obolo (Andoni) by contracting marriage with some Obolo (Andoni) women and encouraged his chiefs and nobles to marry Obolo (Andoni) women. He married most of his Obolo (Andoni) wives from Ikuru Town. One of whom was the elder sister of Ikwut, Jaja's friend. Likewise, Ikwut the founder of Ikuru Town also married about four Opobo women. One of such wives from Opobo married by Ikwut was Obirigana who was the mother of John Ikuru.²⁷

The marriage of Jaja to the elder sister of Ikwut further integrated him and Opobo into Obolo (Andoni) social cycle and help to consolidate his influence in Ikuru Town in particular.

Though that marriage was not blessed with children, Jaja built a place called Uzeferere by Opobo and Ukefek by Obolo (Andoni) for his Ikuru Town wife who insisted she will not live in Opobo but to live near his brother Ikwut. In this circumstance, Jaja bought slaves, both male and female for her to project her lineage in both Opobo and Ikuru Town. One of the major slaves was Akra whom Ikwut gave his first daughter to marry. His lineage is now living in Ikuru Town till date and bears the name Akra Jaja and other slaves who left Ukefek returned to Jaja's family in Opobo.²⁸

Obolo (Andoni) peopling of Opobo kingdom was mainly through marriage of Obolo (Andoni) women by Opobo men. Other sources included Jaja captives from Ibeno during Jaja's expedition War against Ibeno in 1881. According to Opobo sources, the Obolo (Andoni) people are at Fubara's compound doing fishing.²⁹ They were moved from there to Jaja's compound in Opobo during the Ibeno expedition and they never went back. Alaminiookuma also stated that there were traces of people from Ikuru Town in Sunday Jaja's family. They have dual citizenship and have full right and opportunity in Sunday Jaja's family.³⁰ This demonstrates the ancestral linkages between Ikuru Town of Obolo (Andoni) and Opobo.

From Ikuru Town axis, Christianity did not spread from Opobo to Ikuru Town. In 1910 John Ikuru invited Rev. J. A. Pratt who was of the Anglican Mission in Opobo to formally open a branch of the Anglican Mission and as well establish a Mission primary school in Ikuru Town. Christianity spread from Opobo to Eastern Obolo through the trade routes. Christianity spread to places such as Okoroete, Obianga, Emeroke, Amadaka, and Okoroinyong.³¹ The Pentecostal church is not left out in the spread of Christianity. In the same vein, documentary and Obolo oral history traced the origin of The Apostolic Church in Obolo (Andoni) to Opobo. Through Late Deaconess Dorcas Ogbodo, The Apostolic Church was established in Ngo in 1960. The Apostolic Church spread from Ngo to other parts of Obolo (Andoni).³²

Economic Relations

Economic activities constitute one of the fundamental areas of inter-ethnic relations.³³ Before the establishment of Opobo in its present site and Jaja's commencement of the palm oil trade as well as control of the trade on the Lower Imo River, Obolo (Andoni) people were doing their traditional fishing occupation there. Jaja's occupation of the area and transfer of commercial activities there brought the lucrative economy to the enclave of Obolo (Andoni) which was closer to them too. By this proximity and the prosperity of the palm oil trade, Obolo (Andoni) palm oil traders especially Ikwut of Ikuru Town and those from Ikuru Town axis relocated their palm oil

trading out-fit from Bonny to Opobo. This created greater Obolo (Andoni) participation in the palm oil trade on the Lower Imo River and more wealthy people emerged in Obolo (Andoni).

However, the cordial economic relations that existed between the two groups of the Eastern Niger Delta, centred on the oath Jaja swore with the Obolo (Andoni) to promote their well-being and the provision of the 1873 peace treaty between Bonny and Opobo which guaranteed Obolo (Andoni) people right of free trade in all the markets in all the area. The 1873 Treaty was signed for political and economic reasons. It recognized Jaja as the king of Opobo with rights over Opobo River while Bonny was given six markets of the Imo River which were Akwete, Obunku and four Urata markets and Opobo was granted the rights to trade in the rest markets.³⁴ With this development Jaja was controlling the Opobo River and the markets within his jurisdiction. That brought Jaja into closer economic contact or trading relations with other Eastern Obolo communities.

In compliance with article V of the Opobo and Bonny 1873 Peace Treaty, Jaja allowed the Obolo (Andoni) palm oil traders direct access to the British merchants on the Imo River. Obolo (Andoni) people were allowed to sell their palm produce to the white traders without any Opobo middlemen.³⁵ The booming economic (palm oil) transaction in the Imo River opened another vista of economic opportunities for Obolo (Andoni) which further enhanced their economic tie. Obolo (Andoni) people then became the major suppliers of foodstuffs and fish in large quantities to Opobo people. Obolo (Andoni) traders acquired the food stuffs from the hinterland markets of Ogoni and Ibibio. This venture was neglected by the Opobo traders who were more interested in the foreign trade than the internal or local trade. Again, Opobo people were not zealous about fishing. Thus, they did not engage in fishing as a major occupation but only as a minor one. It should be pointed out that, only a few Opobo men were doing casual fishing.³⁶

Against this backdrop, Obolo (Andoni) exploited this opportunity and became prosperous and wealthy long distance traders. Obolo (Andoni) eventually emerged as the major source of sustaining the growing population of Opobo kingdom as well as the source of supplying their dietary and protein needs. Consequently, this created more Obolo (Andoni)-Opobo integration based on their socio-economic interdependence. Opobo depended on Obolo (Andoni) for food and fish supply while Obolo (Andoni) depended on Opobo as an additional source of income generation. In the area of fishing, which is the major and traditional occupation of the Obolo (Andoni) people, they became the major suppliers of fish to the Opobo. Thus, some Obolo

(Andoni) fishermen relocated to Opobo to explore their territorial waters, fishing to earn their living.³⁷

The supply of fish attracted Obolo (Andoni) women traders to Opobo area as they took their fish to sell on specific days in the week. The Obolo (Andoni) women also took their fish to sell in Opobo and bought European wares or goods from Opobo and took them back to Obolo (Andoni) for sell and domestic use. They usually arrived on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday of every week. As traders, some Obolo (Andoni) people who could not exhaust their sales usually stayed back in Opobo and were accommodated by their customers, friends or relations. Through such trading relations, marriages were consummated which further cemented the inter-group bond.³⁸

It should be emphasized that, Obolo (Andoni)-Opobo economic relations was very cordial within the first decade of their existence as Jaja faithfully observed the provision of the treaty of January 3, 1873 earlier mentioned. However, towards the end of the 1880, Jaja's relations with the Obolo (Andoni) started to deteriorate probably because of the European canvass for free trade or trade liberalism and their trade negotiation with the Ibeno. According to John H. Enemugwem, Watts entered into trade agreement with the Ibeno monarch, King Uko Utong and his chiefs on Wednesday, December 1, 1880.³⁹ By this agreement Jaja may have felt that he had lost his trade monopoly in the Imo River. Jaja may have also considered this development as an infringement.

These later developments resulted in a strained relation between Jaja (Opobo) and Obolo (Andoni). Jaja no longer granted Obolo (Andoni) traders free access to the hinterland oil palm markets rather, they passed through him to acquire the products. Henceforth, Jaja became the middleman to the Obolo (Andoni) on the Imo River trade transaction with the European traders. In essence, Jaja wanted to control everything economically. Jaja used his power of trade monopoly and attempted to annex the entire Obolo (Andoni) territory as his and the people his subjects.⁴⁰ Obolo oral source depicts that after Jaja had consolidated himself on the Lower Imo River, Obolo (Andoni) relations with him and his people began to witness a new dimension in the economic activities. Since they occupied a strategic location that bordered the Lower Imo River, Jaja monopolized the trade there.⁴¹

Jaja's punitive action against Ibeno and some Eastern Obolo communities; and his further attempt to prevent the European traders from penetrating the hinterland oil palm markets were the building forces against his continued control of the trade and his revered Opobo Town. His resolute

and unyielding attitude to the British trade liberalism policy on the Imo River earned him the British punishment by deportation in 1887⁴², after 17 years of kingship over his territory. Then, if the Andoni traders wanted to go and trade with the Europeans on the Imo River, they were restricted and had to pass through Jaja and his people. From then, the Opobo people began to see themselves as superior to the Obolo and other ethnic groups because of their vantage opportunity of being the centre of oil palm trade and interacting with the Europeans in course of the Atlantic trade. However, the Obolo have acquired greater wealth, exposure, education and interaction through Opobo.⁴³

The economic relations between Obolo (Andoni) and Opobo was sustained after the deportation and death of King Jaja (1887-1891). By 1913 there was a significant turn of event in palm oil trade on the Opobo River. The trade began to wane in Opobo area basically because of the emergence of Port Harcourt in 1913. Port Harcourt eventually became the municipal city. In this regard, European companies trading on the Opobo and Lower Imo Rivers relocated to Port Harcourt because geographically, it is central to most ethnic groups and can accommodate various office complex. This development ultimately deprived Opobo of the trading monopoly on the Lower Imo River. Palm oil and other forest produce trade were diverted to Port Harcourt. Port Harcourt became the new commercial centre. Since then Opobo ceased to be the trading centre of palm oil.⁴⁴

Notwithstanding, Obolo (Andoni)-Opobo economic relations took another dimension. In the new era of economic development, Opobo still remained relevant to Obolo (Andoni) trading activities which enhanced their relations. The Obolo (Andoni) palm oil traders still used Opobo River as trade route to purchase palm oil and other forest goods from the hinterland Ibibio. Palm oil in particular, purchased from the Ibibio and Ndoki areas by Obolo (Andoni) and Opobo traders were sold in Port Harcourt. Both Obolo (Andoni) and Opobo palm oil traders also related in Ibibio and Ndoki palm oil markets; and Port Harcourt markets respectively, where they interacted regularly⁴⁵.

In the early 1960s, there was a great innovation in fishing occupation in Obolo (Andoni) territory. The Ghanaian's fishermen introduced deep sea fishing method at Down-Below, one of the viable fishing settlements owned by the Obolo (Andoni). The deep sea fishing required the use of big size outboard engine boat and net to catch fish. The interesting thing to note, is that, the bountiful catch of fish through the above fishing method opened another vista of economic

relations between Obolo (Andoni) and Opobo. Deep sea fishing became a lucrative venture which attracted various ethnic groups to Down-Below. Some of the ethnic groups included Opobo (Ibani), Ilaije of Yoruba, Igbo and others. Obolo (Andoni) and Opobo businessmen invested in the deep sea fishing. The businessmen had their fishing boats which they engaged fishermen from the two groups to fish for them and were paid. Another group of people that evolved there were the fish traders from both ethnic groups. The fish traders bought fish in commercial quantity from each other and this created a huge trading relations between the two groups. The fish trading was built on great mutual trust among the traders. Based on the mutual trust, fish were sold on credit to their customers on agreed terms of payment.⁴⁶

This development created a turning point in the centre of economic activities in the Lower Imo River. There was a switch from commercial palm oil trade in Opobo to fishing and fish trading in Obolo respectively. According to Oko Jaja, Opobo businessmen invested in deep sea fishing and fish trading at Down-Below before the Nigerian Civil War which began from 1967 to 1970. The deep fishing and fish trading activities continued till 1991 Census crisis involving Opobo and Obolo (Andoni). Consequently, fishing and other economic activities were grounded as different ethnic groups resident there deserted the place.⁴⁷

The census crisis affected economic relations between the two groups but did not completely destroy it. Expectedly, crisis strain relations between ethnic groups but economic forces restore broken relations which becomes stronger again. Such was the case with Ogoni and Andoni during their war in 1993. Economic activities remain one source that re-invigorated their relations.⁴⁸ This was applicable to Obolo (Andoni) and Opobo. Shortly after government intervention and normalcy restored, Obolo (Andoni) women embarked on long distant trade to Opobo and its environs to sell fish, crayfish and food stuffs to the indigenes there.⁴⁹

Another area of controversial economic relations was in the aspect of compensation paid by Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria to the host community. The flow stations erroneously named Opobo Flow Station by SPDC originally belong to Obolo (Andoni) and not Opobo. This generated serious dispute between them when the Obolo (Andoni) people protested against the nomenclature as well as the recognition of Obolo (Andoni) as the rightful owner and the payment of subsequent compensation. The issue was later resolved in favour of Obolo (Andoni) people.⁵⁰

Conclusion

The socio-economic relations between the Obolo (Andoni) and Opobo predated the establishment of Opobo. It was consolidated as a result of the Bonny Civil War of 1869. The oath of allegiance for peaceful co-existence sworn to by Jaja at the sanctuary of *Yok-Obolo* at Agwut-Obolo fostered social relations between the two groups in the Eastern Niger Delta. Their relations were further enhanced through intermarriage, shared culture and social institutions.

Significantly, the foundation of social relations became a bridge which economic activities revolved. As Opobo was established in 1870, it became the trading centre and trade route where the Obolo (Andoni) and Opobo palm oil traders sold palm oil to the European trading merchants. The two groups witnessed another phase of economic relations as the centre of palm oil trade was relocated from Opobo to Port Harcourt. Opobo being the trade route in the Lower Imo River, fostered economic relations between the two groups since both groups used the route to purchase palm oil from Ibibio hinterland markets.

Subsequently, there was interwoven economic relations between the Obolo (Andoni) and Opobo in the 1960s when deep sea fishing method emerged leading to commercial fish trading in larger quantity. Thus, Obolo (Andoni) became the new centre of fish trading in the Lower Imo River. This development attracted Opobo businessmen to Obolo (Andoni) who invested in the lucrative fishing and fish trading. In the circumstance, both groups had cordial economic relations with mutual benefits. The economic relations continued till 1991 Census crisis between the two groups. Despite the crisis and the attendant consequences, the groups still sustained their socio-economic relationship up till the opening year of the 21st century. The socio-economic relations transcended the phases of historical antecedents experienced by the two groups.

Endnotes

¹Interview with Godwin Joseph Alaminiookuma, 78 years, in Opobo Town, Opobo/Nkoro L. G. A., Rivers State, Nigeria, 10/6/2013. See also E. J. Alagoa. *A History of the Niger Delta*, (Port Harcourt, Onyoma Research Publications, 2005), 169

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³Interview with Finomo Iko-Awaji Edubio, 55 years in Iwofe Rumuolumeni, Obio/Akpor L. G. A., Rivers State, Nigeria, 4/2/2014, N. C. Ejituwu. *A History of Obolo (Andoni)*, 143.

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