

HISTORIO-CULTURAL RELATIONSHIP OF OBOLO (ANDONI)-KALABARI COMMUNITIES OF RIVERS STATE (1800-2000)

Romokere Mgbowaji Benson
Department of History and International Studies
Faculty of Arts
Akwa Ibom State University
romokerebenson@aksu.edu.ng
+234-8055625838

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Abstract

This study explored Obolo (Andoni)- Kalabari Relations, 1800-2023. The two ethnic groups inhabit the Eastern Niger Delta region which formed the basis of their relations since the ancient times. The study traced the origin of their relationship to fishing, trading, marriage, linguistic influence, culture contact and interactions. Subsequently, their relationship was consolidated by the traditional and colonial political developments, the economic forces of the Trans-Atlantic trade and the colonial economy pulled them together to foster greater ethnic relations between them. The methodology used to document their historical antecedents is primary and secondary sources. The study found out that their relationship promoted economic growth between them. The Obolo helped in the peopling of Kalabari territory which greatly enhanced their political status in the sub-region, Niger Delta and Rivers State. There was diffusion of culture of the ethnic groups within the sub-region. The work concluded that Obolo (Andoni)-Kalabari relations essentially promoted harmonious socio-economic, political development and integration in the Eastern Niger Delta, Niger Delta and Rivers State.

Key words: Obolo-Kalabari, Political, Economic, Cultural, Relations.

Introduction

Inter-group relation is a core component of human historical evolution and existence in the society since the ancient time till date. It therefore becomes imperative to study various ethnic groups to ascertain their relationship and co-existence which essentially promoted corporate economic activities and socio-political development among them. In the Eastern Niger Delta, there are several ethnic groups which straddles three states. The ethnic groups are Nembe in Bayelsa State, Obolo (Andoni), Okrika, Nkoro, Ibani, Kalabari and Ogoni all in Rivers State and Eastern Obolo in Akwa Ibom State.

This study navigates into the relationship between the Obolo and Kalabari. The foundation of their relations was established through natural geographical environment which determined their traditional economy. As coastal dwellers, the people engaged in fishing as a major occupation. River routes served as the natural mechanism that linked many seaborne ethnic groups together and fostered commercial and trading activities among the groups. The Obolo (Andoni) and Kalabari were connected through the waterways. They both fished together on the sea and engaged in long distance trade. Both Obolo and Andoni will be used interchangeably in this work.

Migrant fishing prompted the founding of fishing settlements which attracted both ethnic groups to each other's territory and economic environment. The Obolo (Andoni) found Kalabari territory lucrative for fishing to increase their source of wealth and socio-political transformation. Thus, the Obolo (Andoni) founded some fishing ports in Kalabari area with Obolo nomenclature. They were also attracted by the economic forces of the trans-Atlantic trade. The Kalabari environment was peaceful and conducive for fishing and other economic activities. Consequently, Obolo fishermen and women went in droves to Kalabari territory which strengthened their socio-economic and political relations.

Some emigrants from Obolo territory found refuge in Kalabari land where they established independent settlement called Kala Ido (small Ido) because Kalabari called the Obolo people 'Ido' whereas the larger Obolo is referred to as 'opu Ido' (big Ido). Based on their ancient relationship, the Obolo were accommodated with open arms and were integrated into Kalabari area. This further cemented their relationship.

This study is an attempt to fill the existing gap in inter-group relations in the Eastern Niger Delta. Most literature on inter-group relations are focused on the majority ethnic groups in Nigeria neglecting the ethnic relations in the minority areas. There are copious works on the broad base area of inter-group relations in Nigeria. Notable among these works, are; Olayemi Akinwunmi, Okpeh Ochayi Okpeh, Jr., Je'adayibe, D. Gwamna (eds.), (2006), *Inter-Group Relations in Nigeria during the 19th and 20th Centuries*. This book is a scholarly collection of well researched chapters on inter-group relations from diverse ethnic backgrounds including the Niger Delta. A book of this volume with fifty chapters, did not discuss the Obolo (Andoni) and Kalabari relations in spite of their significant contributions to the socio-economic development of the Eastern Niger Delta in particular and Nigeria at large.

Relevant to this study is the chapter by Gamaliel D. Sokari-George titled "New Calabar and Her Neighbours: A Study of the Niger Delta, C.1850-1950," emphasised the relationship between Kalabari and her hinterland neighbours in the Niger Delta region. The author did not consider Obolo-Kalabari relations even when there are elements of existing historical relations.

In C. B. N. Ogbogbo, R. O. Olaniyi, O. G. Muojama, (eds.), (2012) *The Dynamics of Inter-Group Relations in Nigeria Since 1960 Essays in Honour of Obaro Ikime @ 70*, scholars critically analysed various areas of inter-group relations from different ethnic backgrounds in Nigeria. The relationship between the Obolo and Kalabari was not given scholarly consideration.

A A. Derefaka and Atei Mark Okorobia (eds.), (2005) *History Concourse 2007 The Future of the Niger Delta: The Search for a Relevant Narrative*, discusses topical and broad issues affecting the Niger Delta area and its people. "Inter-group Relations in the Niger Delta: A Case Study of Okrika and Her Neighbours," by Prisca Abiye Gobo focusses specifically on the relationship between Okrika and some riverine ethnic groups; and the hinterland neighbours, not Obolo and Kalabari ethnic nationality.

Another book by John Garah Nengel, (1999), *Precolonial African Intergroup Relations in the Kauru and Pengana Polities of Central Nigerian Highlands, 1800-1900*, focuses on the dynamics of interrelationships among the rural polities of Kaura and Pengana hills in the Central Nigerian

Highlands. It also analyses the relations among these polities as well as their relations with Islamic states. The book being a regional based study did not include inter-group relations in the Eastern Niger Delta with particular reference to the Obolo and Kalabari.

Considering the work of A. E. Afigbo (1987), *The Igbo and their Neighbour Inter-Group Relations in Southeastern Nigeria to 1953*, clearly depicts the Igbo relationship with the Benin, Annang, Benue Valley, Ibibio, Efik among others from pre-colonial to colonial period in Nigeria. Though the Obolo and Kalabari belonged to the same Eastern Region, they were excluded from the context of discussion. Kalabari was mentioned in passing and as a reference point. These studies have shown the lacuna in the study of inter-group relations especially, micro histories in Eastern Niger Delta. To fill this scholarly gap, this study becomes inevitable.

Origin of Relationship

The primacy of Obolo in the Eastern Niger Delta made them to be reckoned with as the centre of political, social, cultural and economic relationship. Obolo disposition attracted other ethnic groups who later settled in the Eastern Niger Delta close to them, especially through fishing and later trade. Obolo was not only a centre of inter-group relations but also a centre of secondary dispersal in the Eastern Niger Delta and beyond. This essentially cemented Obolo relationship with her Eastern Niger Delta ethnic groups including Kalabari.

The Obolo-Kalabari relationship started through fishing. Both ethnic groups are traditionally fishing groups. They had their contact and interaction in course of their long distance fishing expedition in a house canoe. Kalabari ancestral location at Elem-Ama or Old Shipping near Bonny made them distant neighbour of the Obolo. So they had contact and established inter-group relations with kalabari. Another phase of relationship was through trade. Being close to the hinterland, the Kalabari engaged in trade in food stuffs and distributive trade. The Kalabari traders were the additional source of food supply to Andoni. They brought their food stuffs in house canoe to sell to the Andoni people (Ogbidor, in a personal communication, 2011). However, this trading relation permeated into the palm oil trade of the 19th century and beyond.

Another dimension of established and consolidated relationship between Obolo and Kalabari was evident in the intermittent emigration of Obolo people into the Kalabari enclave where they found new settlements in the remote past. Kalabari territory, from the reign of king Amakiri I especially, became the melting port and save haven to the Obolo people. It was in Kalabari territory that the Obolo emigrants were accommodated and thereby established their autonomous communities with the Obolo cultural identity. In contrast, there were a few emigrants from Kalabari who found themselves in Obolo and were absorbed or fussed into Obolo community. This interwoven relationship and cordiality became the building block of Obolo and Kalabari inter-group relations. Hence Obolo people were integrated into Kalabari ethnic environment through the Kalabari policy of Assimilation and Acculturalization. This created a new socio-cultural identity for the Obolo who were accommodated in Kalabari territory. The Obolo became known culturally and linguistically as Kalabari and Obolo by origin.

Both traditions of Obolo and Kalabari and documented account indicated that Tombia people left Ilotombi in Andoni and were accommodated at Elem-Tombia in Kalabari area. There, king Amakiri I had a 'traditional military pact' with Tombia to defend each other in any military invasion. Based on the traditional military pact, Tombia should not rise against Elem-Kalabari

and Kalabari would not rise against Tombia but co-operate with each other especially, defence of territorial integrity (Dabibi, 2011 and Utong, in a personal communication 2011). Similarly, Utong, (IPC,2011), Iraron, in a personal communication (2014), Ogbidor, (IPC, 2011) asserted that some of the Kalabari towns were really Andoni town by origin. Like Tombia, Abalama, Kula, Kala Ido and many others. The founders of these towns migrated from Obolo to establish a permanent place of settlement within Kalabari territory. The Kalabari ethnic group received these Andoni people.

Alagoa, (2005:163), Ejituwu (1991:28, 41) traced, the origin of some towns in kalabari to Obolo (Andoni) as their prior place of settlement before their onward migration to that territory. Accordingly, Ejituwu (1991:28, 41) recorded the account of Ido migration out of Unyengala to the Kalabari area. These towns include Tombia, Abalama, Bille and Ido. Enemugwem (2006:18) recorded that written document authenticated the founding of Bille, Tombia, Abalama, Kula and Ido by Obolo men. Similarly, he noted that, Kalabari accounts pointed to the fishing and salt-making settlements that dotted Asaramatoru, Bonny and Andoni rivers as the major proximate dispersal centers of the first settlers of Ke, Soku, Okpo, Illelima, Idama, Abissa, Sama, Krakrama, Ifoko and Angulama. They are Kalabari in culture and language of the Eastern Ijaw linguistic group and Andoni in origin. From the above, it is clear that Obolo and Kalabari had established an aged-long or long standing relationship. It is significant to note that the Obolo had contributed to the peopling of Kalabari and expansion of Kalabari area. Obolo historiography exists in Kalabari history. The ancient historical relationship between the Obolo and Kalabari promoted peaceful and cordial relationship throughout their historical existence.

Political Relations

Obolo and Kalabari political relationship was embedded in the indigenous political administration that existed in the Eastern Niger Delta from the remote past. In the Eastern Niger Delta, kingship and war canoe house system was the symbol of their political relations and co-operate existence. Though, the practice differs in the different ethnic and cultural environment. However, the war canoe House became the unit of politics and trade during the 19th century palm oil trade. According to Iraron, (IPC, 2014), hinterland markets were centers of political interactions between the Obolo and the Kalabari as they traded in palm oil. Similarly, the Obolo and Kalabari political agents equally met, interacted and sold their palm oil acquired from the hinterland markets to the European trade merchants and bought European goods at the Bonny trading port. Indeed, the hinterland markets and Bonny trading port became centers of contact, interactions and political relations devoid of conflict, crisis or war between the two ethnic groups.

The political relationship between them continued till the early colonial period which introduced a new pattern of inter-group relations. By the design of the colonial administrative structure, inter-group relation was to be promoted on one hand. On the contrary, it created avenue for ethnic balkanization, marginalization, cultural alienation and emasculation which later resulted in series of agitations by the affected ethnic groups to be merged with their kith-and kin.

During the provincial system of 1902, Kalabari, Okrika, Bonny, Nembe and others were in the Degema Division, Owerri Province. In this administrative set up, Ataba was the only Andoni town that was included in the Degema Division (Enyekit, 2011, John, 2011, Akpankpa, 2011, Igbifa,

2012, Iraron, in personal communications, 2014). So, the colonial political relationship of Andoni and Kalabari was minimal and that of dominance since Ataba was a conspicuous minority in the Degema Division. Igbifa (2015: 380-383) noted that Ataba and her satellite villages were lumped together with Bonny Native Court Area in Bonny District under Degema Division against the wish of Ataba people. In essence, there existed unequal political relations till Ataba agitated and demanded that they be merged with their Andoni kith and kin in the Obolo District in Opobo Division, Calabar Province. Bonny people opposed Ataba demand but it was granted on 14 October, 1931.

The existence of fishing settlements as a miniature political institution also promoted inter-group relations in the Eastern Niger Delta. By the 19th century, fishing activities took the Obolo fishermen out of their territorial waters to the Kalabari fishing environment where they stayed in their fishing settlements. Some of these fishing settlements are Chokorocho, Ekweboko, Orukiri, Ibot Okpon-Namasibiri, Wilcox, Sikaka, Tomgbolosigi, Pamasinba, Bekenekiri and others. Obolo named one fishing port in Kalabari area as Ibot Okpon Namasibiri (Akpankpa, 2011, Briggs, in personal communications, 2013). This automatically brought Andoni fishermen under the Kalabari political administration, thus their relationship was cordial. Both ethnic groups were involved in the administration of the various fishing ports. Again, if there was any problem, the Kalabari involved the Obolo in the discussion, especially issues affecting the generality of the inhabitants of the fishing ports. Obolo people were given leadership positions at the fishing ports (Utong, 2011, Akpankpa, 2011, Ogbidor, IPC, 2011).

Kalabari traditions recorded that their existed representative political relationship between Andoni fishermen and Kalabari people. Briggs, (IPC, 2013) stated that any fishing port settled by the Andoni people probably as founders or dominant ethnic group, an Andoni man was appointed as "Kiriyanabo"; that is chief of that fishing port. The Kiriyanabo represents the Andoni fishermen and traders at the fishing port in the main Kalabari town. He reports to the chiefs of any incident at the fishing settlements. Kalabari on the other hand reach out to the dwellers at their fishing ports. Notably, both Andoni fishermen in Kalabari fishing territory and Kalabari community leadership were working co-operatively to sustain their political relationship. It should be noted that, majority of Andoni people stayed at the Kalabari fishing settlements than the Kalabari stayed in Andoni river for fishing activities.

Andoni-Kalabari cordial relationship snowballed into an alliance during the Andoni-Bonny wars. Kalabari people through their traders supplied not only food to the Obolo before and during the war but as well canoes of cannon balls hid under yams, plantains and other goods. They paddled through the Bonny water ways to Unyengala in Obolo to supply the weapons. Obolo defeat of the Ibani cast them into a state of severe hardship and near starvation since they blocked their access to the hinterland markets. Similarly, in another Andoni-Bonny war in the 19th century, Otu Ogboloakang found the Kalabari again ready to assist Obolo to ensure Bonny power was weakened in the Rio Real.

Obolo traditions recorded that the Obolo have robust relationship with the Kalabari to the extent that they joined them in curbing the excesses of the Bonny in their imperial expansion (Iraron, IPC, 2014). It should be noted that, at this time Bonny had started their desperate expansionist policy and imperialist tendency as to dominate every other trading and political powers in the Eastern Niger Delta. Bonny ambition to be the leading economic and political power in the Delta

compelled several ethnic groups especially, in the Eastern Niger Delta to enter into alliance.

This was intended to checkmate Bonny in order to have a smooth and balanced competitive economic atmosphere that will promote healthy and peaceful relationship among the Eastern Niger Delta ethnic groups. The idea of maintaining the “balance of power” in the sub-region by the various ethnic groups resulted in series of trade or commercial rivalries. In this situation, the Kalabari and Andoni regarded Bonny as their arch enemy that must be destabilized and subdued economically and politically. With this development there existed a non-permanent alliance in the Eastern Niger Delta.

Obolo as well had an informal alliance with the Kalabari in the 20th century (1948-1950) during the Kalabari-Okrika war. Utong, (IPC, 2011) and Benson (2025: 180-181) noted that during the Kalabari-Okrika war, Obolo in their war-like nature had fought on both sides. It was not a unanimous agreement by the Obolo to support either side. May be those cut off in Kalabari and Okrika areas were the mercenaries. In the course of the war, some Andoni people especially, Ataba fishermen resident in the Kalabari territory who were trapped there by the war, volunteered their military support as war mercenaries. These men were late Mr. Igwe, Abili Mathais, Ibikinakorobofori Kaiza and Rowland Ibani. They were not only war mercenaries but also taught the Kalabari warriors the war tactics of the Andoni; that is the “guerilla warfare” *enunu*.

he Andoni guerillar warfare method was actually used by the Kalabari against the Okrika. Ogbidor (IPC, 2011), (Benson and Benibo, 2023:67) stated that during the massacre, the Okrika fishermen went out for fishing at night because of the abundance of sardine fish (sungu) in the Kalabari river where the Okrika fishermen stayed. Kalabari people laid ambush against the Okrika people on fishing that night and massacred them. Meanwhile, the Kalabari applied some Obolo war tactics in the night encounter against Okrika. The sudden attack on Okrika and the rate of casualty made the Okrika suspect Andoni involvement in the war because they were conversant with both Kalabari and Obolo war tactics.

Based on their suspicion, they reported to the colonial government and indicted some Ataba fishermen in Kalabari territory. Consequently, these men were arrested by the police along with Kalabari people and later released. When some of these Andoni men who escaped police arrest and those released by the police later returned to Kalabari fishing ports, they were given heroic reception. They were given the right and privilege to stay and fish freely in any Kalabari territory without paying any rent to them. That was how they were honoured and rewarded because of the strategic and important role they played during their war with Okrika (Akpankpa 2011, Ogbidor, 2011, Shedrack, in personal communications, 2012). However, the proximate reason for Obolo involvement in the war was economic. Being their economic environment where they derived their income and livelihood, they resolved to defend this territory. It could also be regarded as a reciprocal alliance as earlier stated.

The changing political development of the colonial era became the platform for political co-operation and enhancement of inter-group relations in the Niger Delta in general and Eastern Niger Delta in particular. Regional government was created by Sir Arthur Richard and Central Niger Delta and Eastern Niger Delta people were in the Eastern Region (Alagoa and Enemugwem, 2015: 293, 295, Ojo, 2021: 73). This constitutional creation pulled people from

different ethnic groups together irrespective of their divisional and provincial affiliation. Andoni and Kalabari belonged to different division and province, yet they were united to fight against issues that threatened their political identity and co-operate existence. One of the major galvanizing issues was the minority problem and the agitations of the Rivers people for the creation of Rivers State. This created political harmony among the Niger Delta ethnic groups especially, the Eastern Niger Delta.

Both Andoni and Kalabari were in the vanguard of political agitations through the various indigenous organizations and associations during the colonial politics. Another instance was the motion moved by Hon. Ekeneokot of Andoni, representing Opobo South Constituency in the House of Representatives. This motion was supported by Hon. Winike Briggs representing Degema (Kalabari) Federal Constituency (Eneeyo, 1996:12). Interestingly, the ethnic parochial interest did not affect their corporate political relations. Hence they succeeded in achieving political victory as the state they jointly demanded was created for them on 27 May, 1967. This achievement further cemented the inter-group relations in the Eastern Niger Delta including Andoni and Kalabari.

Again, during the Nigerian Civil War, Obolo (Andoni) and Kalabari who were in the defunct Eastern Region, became close ally. Both ethnic groups who were minorities suffered marginalization in the Eastern Region dominated by the majority Igbo. Thus, they declared their support for Nigeria and fought in large numbers on the side of the Nigerian soldiers to sustain and promote the unity of the country. Those who escaped from the stronghold of the Biafra into each other's ethnic group were accommodated and protected. This was applicable to Andoni escapees into Kalabari territory and vice versa, particularly those at the fishing settlements. Indigenes of Andoni and Kalabari were in the Nigerian army that liberated Calabar and finally the Eastern Niger Delta area. They fought in defense of their territory against the Biafra soldiers as a show of solidarity to uphold one Nigeria (BlackDuke, in a personal communication, 2013). In the circumstance, both Andoni and Kalabari people also fought on the side of Biafra because they were in the enclave of Biafra, former Eastern Region when the war started. The Biafran soldiers eventually occupied the Andoni and Kalabari territories; and conscripted the indigenes of the two ethnic groups who they used as espionage and military men (Enemugwem, 2023: 37-56).

About a decade after the Civil War, Nigeria was on the path to second republic. Political activities therefore began in earnest. There existed political alignment and re-awakening particularly as the Andoni ethnic group was reintegrated into Rivers State in 1976. Thus, Obolo (Andoni) re-established their political relations and affiliations with Kalabari in terms of national politics. Andoni along with Kalabari and other ethnic nationalities belonged to the various political parties. Andoni people supported Kalabari's candidate for the senatorial seat during the 1979 general elections. Majority of Andoni and Kalabari indigenes belonged to the ruling party; National Party of Nigeria (NPN). In essence, political party promoted Andoni-Kalabari relations. This political relation continues till the present. At the State House of Assembly and the National Assembly, Andoni and Kalabari representatives always identify with one another on the issues that affect their corporate identity such as resource control and rotational presidency.

Cultural Activities and Ethnic Relations

Historically, cultural relations between Andoni and Kalabari indicated a cultural imbalance. There are several elements of Kalabari culture in Obolo than Obolo culture in Kalabari area

comparatively. Linguistically, the Kalabari adopted the policy of upholding their language amidst other languages in their territory. They do not like to speak other ethnic languages but their own. That was how they Kalabarise" other ethnic groups resident in their environment to carry out their socio-economic activities (Akpankpa, in a personal communication, 2011). This was similar to the French policy of Assimilation" which compelled Africans to be Frenchised linguistically and culturally. The Obolo indigenes who emigrated to Kalabari enclave were first made to abandon their indigenous or native Obolo language for Kalabari language which remains their dominant language of communication and transaction. However, the Kala Ido (small Obolo) still speak scanty Obolo language till date in Kalabari territory. They as well sustain the knowledge of Obolo language there.

Similarly, the Andoni fishermen and women resident in Kalabari territory had no option than to learn the language of their landlord. This influenced the Obolo indigenes to learn to speak Kalabari language to enhance communication and commercial transactions (Akpankpa, IPC, 2011). In this circumstance, the Andoni people in Kalabari area learnt, understood the language and became fluent speakers of Kalabari language. Thus, Obolo people became bilingual. This gave them security advantage among the Kalabari since they cannot discuss any evil plan against the Obolo or plan to harm them in the public without they knowing or understanding it. The knowledge of Kalabari language had helped in stabilizing and promoting peaceful relations between the two ethnic groups.

Kalabari language was further projected when a paradigm-shift in economic power occurred in the Eastern Niger Delta from the late 19th century. Before then Bonny and Kalabari were the two major contending economic powers. Economic power of Bonny dwindled from the late 19th century and shifted to Abonnema in Kalabari. Most of the European companies based in Bonny relocated to Abonnema. With the relocation to Abonnema and its proximity to the hinterland area, and the establishment of sea port there, Abonnema became an attractive commercial centre to both Europeans and Africans, and other ethnic groups in the Eastern Niger Delta. By this period, Kalabari became more conscious to promote and project their cultural identity beyond their vicinity. Kalabari language was the dominant native language of communication and transaction at Abonnema. Obolo became conditional speakers of Kalabari language. Andoni fisher folk, businessmen and women also adapted to the linguistic culture of the Kalabari.

This linguistic relation made the Obolo people to be "carriers of Kalabari identity". This identity was reflected through the Kalabari names Andoni people bear since the remote past till date. Obolo people resident at Kalabari fishing settlements gave birth to most of their children there. Thus, they were attracted and influenced by Kalabari language names which they gave to their children. Some of them named their children after their Kalabari good friends. Interestingly, some children giving birth to in Obolo home town were also named in Kalabari language. Such names like Ibikinakorobofori, Erewari, Erefori, Derimiefori, Sara, Siboderima, Opuene, Igbikinakorobo, Ibiofori, Iderima, Derifama, Amakiri exists in Obolo till date. For instance, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries some Obolo people like Ibikinakorobofori who hails from Ataba and stayed at Kalabari fishing settlement was awaited to return to Ataba to name children delivered at home. He usually named children in Kalabari **language and interpreted the meaning of the name in Obolo language**. On the contrary, it is the kalabari names that usually prevailed over the Obolo name. This was how the Kalabari sphere of influence extended to Obolo ethnic group.

Obolo knowledge of Kalabari language and name identity was an essential element of relationship between the two ethnic groups. This, aligns with submission of Enang, Uruzian, Udoka (2013), which fostered greater bond and integration of the Obolo into Kalabari cultural environment, as pointed out in studies, such as, Akpankpa, (2011), Ogbidor, (2011), Josiah, (2011), Utong, (2011), in personal communications. Akpankpa (IPC, 2011) noted that the Kalabari names bore by Obolo earned them favour from Kalabari who regarded such persons as their kith and kin. In contrast, Obolo names were not answered by Kalabari people. Even those who married Andoni women their children were christened in Obolo (Andoni) names alongside Kalabari but it is the Kalabari name that is the dominant one.

Another aspect of establishing cultural inter-group relations between the Obolo and Kalabari was marriage. Inter-ethnic marriage existed between them (Asawo, in a personal communication, 2013). Kalabari men married more Obolo women than Obolo men married Kalabari women. The Kalabari men preferred Obolo women to their fellow Kalabari women because of their marital unfaithfulness to their spouses and the expensive marriage system of Kalabari. While Obolo women were faithful to their husbands, remain with their husbands till death and were productive. Obolo marriage was less expensive and affordable comparatively (Utong, IPC, 2011).

Obolo and Kalabari traditions affirmed that Kalabari embarked on indigenization policy of Obolo people in their enclave. Thus, the men were instructed and encouraged by King Amakiri I to marry off the Kala Ido, Tombia, Abalama and other women (Enemugwem, 2006:17-18). Based on the above instruction, there was massive marriage of Obolo women by Kalabari men into the various core Kalabari towns. This marriage relationship existed as well in the 19th century and beyond (Utong, 2011, Briggs, IPC, 2013). It is worthy to note that, the rate of marriage relationship involving Obolo men and Kalabari women increased in the late 20th century. The marriages contracted by both ethnic groups had created a bicultural or dual cultural identity through the offspring of the marriage. This eventually has established eternal blood bond that consolidated Obolo-Kalabari ethnic relations. Thus, they regarded themselves as one people (Utong, 2011, Josiah, IPC, 2011).

Another area of cultural similarity occurs in the burial rites and ceremonies of both ethnic groups to the deceased. Remarkably, these ethnic groups regarded the dead as sacred, such that they honour the dead based on their traditional belief in life after death and ancestral worship. Thus, there are similar traditional burial rites performed by the people depending on the age and personality of the deceased. From the available Kalabari documentary evidence and Obolo oral traditions the burial rites and ceremony of the aged and chiefs last for a minimum of six days in Kalabari and seven days in Obolo.

Erekosima et al (1991:155-156) recorded the burial rite of traditional rulers in Kalabari which include cannon shots at night to officially inform the people. The room and parlour for lying-in state of the deceased are decorated with cloths (wrapper) of traditional value from the ceiling to the walls. The bed too, is dressed in attractive design. This pattern of dressing the deceased bed and decoration of the inner room and the outer room (parlour) with the traditional cloths is also obtainable in Obolo. This demonstrated their cultural tie and cultural diffusion (Benson, 2017:327).



Photograph showing a typical example of Traditionally Decorated Bed for lying-in-state in the Eastern Delta.
Photo Credit: Nkere Cyril, Ataba, 2011.

According to John (in a personal communication, 2011), in Obolo, information about the death of a chief is first reported to the council of chiefs of the particular community of the deceased chief by the family with some drinks. Thereafter the council of chiefs ordered that the information be relayed to the public through cannon shot. Then, the deceased chief's family will give two bottles of gin to the various compounds and war canoe houses as custom demands.

With this drink, the compounds and war canoe houses will hoist the flags of their chieftaincy houses in the deceased chief's family square for the period of the burial ceremony. Another two bottles of gin will be given to remove the flags. Canoe regatta also form part of the chief's burial ceremony in the two ethnic groups. In Obolo, for the chiefs, the burial remains for 21 days in the ancient time but now only seven days. Both ethnic groups alert the people of the death of a chief with cannon shot. During the period of the burial ceremony cannon shots will be fired morning and evening. When the corpse of the chief is brought and during interment cannon will be shot.

Another sphere of cultural influence and identity that has enhanced Obolo and Kalabari relationship was dressing. Every ethnic group in the Eastern Niger Delta has their peculiar traditional dressing pattern. With culture contact, Andoni indigenes resident in Kalabari territory adopted the traditional dressing culture of the Kalabari. The Kalabari dressing was actually emulated by the men. The men in addition to their Andoni traditional dressing method tie their george in Kalabari pattern. The people are quickly identified by their dressing. This dressing promotes cultural blend and association since the Obolo men in Kalabari traditional dressing can hardly be distinguished. Obolo and Kalabari have the same category of dressing among the men, young men, women and traditional rulers (Abanile, in a personal communication, 2011).

Obolo and Kalabari traditions indicated that they have class or category of dressing. Their dressing was classified into three; young, middle age and traditional rulers. The various categories have specified and peculiar pattern of dressing. The young men tie george with shirt (shiot), middle aged men tie george with etibo and the traditional rulers also tie george with don. Don is exclusively the dressing attire of the traditional rulers. These dressing are for ceremonial functions, which are not worn commonly (Abanile, 2011, Asawo, IPC, 2013). This Kalabari dressing pattern is transplanted in Obolo to exhibit their cultural tie. This does not suggest that the Obolo did not have their indigenous dressing code but an expression of external culture contact. Asawo (in a personal communication, 2013) asserted that this dressing pattern has gained wider publicity and popularity in Nigeria. It is now popularly known as "Niger Delta" and has become one of the national attires in recent times.

In food culture as well, Obolo and Kalabari share in some food they eat. Like native and fresh fish soup, pepper soup, cooked yam and ripe plantain pounded together was blended with palm oil. Obolo people called it "Opopo" while Kalabari called it "Onunu". The Obolo ate it with pepper soup and the Kalabari ate it with native stew peculiar to them. The native soup is prepared with basic seafood which includes periwinkle, oyster, cockle, whelk, shell razor, dry fish and dry crayfish.

Obolo trado-religious practices are still upheld by the Kala Ido people in Kalabari area. The Ido people who migrated from Andoni to Kalabari area and established their settlement, went there with their Obolo deity called Yok-Obolo and other religious cult like Ofiokpo. These religious practices and activities influenced the religious life of the Kalabari people. The Yok-Obolo deity was consulted not only by the Ido people but also Kalabari people seeking spiritual security and fortune. The existence of the ancient Obolo traditional religious practice by Ido people of Obolo origin in Kalabari area is a demonstration of religious tolerance. This evidently enhanced their ethnic relations.

Some Obolo people at the fishing port helped to promote the cultural plays of the Kalabari.

During their festive period, Obolo people also constituted the crowds that were entertained by the cultural plays and masquerades display. In this regard Obolo people in Kalabari territory encouraged and promoted cultural tourism and as well improved their knowledge of Kalabari cultural milieu. The idea and knowledge of Kalabari culture were cultivated in Obolo cultural environment.

The resultant effect was that Obolo became a theatre of culture where varieties of masquerades were displayed, cultural plays of diverse cultural backgrounds in the Eastern Niger Delta were showcased (Akpankpa, 2011, Utong, IPC, 2011). Utong, (IPC, 2011) asserted that, in the riverine area some culture spread through culture contact with one another especially at the fishing settlements. Each group adopted it when they got home. This was applicable to Obolo fishermen at Kalabari fishing settlements that returned to their towns and villages and introduced or adopted Kalabari culture in the form of masquerades and other cultural plays.

Beyond the cultural relationship, there existed also inter-ethnic relationship between Obolo and Kalabari through social institutions like school and church. The introduction of Western education in the Eastern Niger Delta created a new pattern of socio-economic relations in the sub-region. This social institution played significant role in promoting inter-group relations between these two ethnic nationalities. There was greater ethnic contact and social interaction as a result of schooling in each other's ethnic environment.

The missionaries and the colonialist used Western education as a veritable source of achieving their religious, political, social and economic policies. The Eastern Niger Delta people saw it as the bedrock of future development of their environment as well as human capital development. In this perspective, mission schools were established in some areas to provide elementary education. Influenced by the impact of the education in other ethnic groups, Obolo people sent their children and wards to school in different parts of the Eastern Niger Delta including Kalabari area. Moreover, some of them at the fishing settlement sent a few of their children to school from the early second half of the 20th century.

At a time, secondary education became a priority and prerequisite for employment as well as higher education. There was none in the Eastern Niger Delta except Enitonia High School in Port Harcourt. The curiosity compelled the three major Kalabari towns; Abonnema, Buguma and Bakana to pull resources together to establish a community based secondary school. Erekosima et al (1991: 61-64) recorded the historical antecedents leading to the establishment of the Kalabari National College (KNC) in 1940. It became the first Community Secondary School in the old Rivers State.

With the establishment of this Community Secondary School, Kalabari National College became the nexus of inter-group relations in the Eastern Niger Delta and beyond. Many students enrolled in the school from different cultural environment such as Ikwerre, Ogoni, Bonny, Brass, Ijaw, Umuahia, Aba, Ahoada, Okrika and the entire neighbouring ethnic groups including Obolo. Obviously, KNC became a centre of social interaction and integration into families in Kalabari in general and Buguma in particular through the students. Significantly, it created a "second home" status which fostered more ethnic cohesion among the ethnic groups including Obolo and Kalabari.

As more secondary schools were established in the Kalabari area, more Obolo people sent their children to those schools in Kalabari. Asawo, (IPC, 2013), Blackduke, (in a personal communication, 2013) indicated that after Kalabari National College was established in Buguma it triggered off the establishment of more community owned secondary schools in Kalabari especially, the other major Kalabari towns. Abonnema established Nyemoni Grammar School and Bakana, Obuma Boys School (Briggs, IPC, 2013). Some Obolo indigenes attended primary and secondary school in Abonnema and Bakana since there was no secondary school in Obolo then. For instance, late Sir, Chief Edward Akpa A. Ayanchan attended school at Bakana and Miss Justinah Frank now Dr Justinah Ogbuluijah attended Kalabari Girls High School in Buguma (Enyekit, 2011, Briggs, IPC, 2013, Ogbuluijah, 2020: 123). This trend continued till date as Obolo parent resident at the Kalabari fishing settlements enrolled their children in schools in Kalabari because of proximity. Obolo students attended schools from their various fishing port. Some students stayed with their parent's friends in the Kalabari towns or rented accommodation.

With the establishment of secondary schools in Obolo, there was a reverse in the attainment of schools in Kalabari area by the Obolo. By 1977/1978 the Rivers State Government established secondary school in Ataba, Andoni. The school was named Government Comprehensive Secondary School, Ataba. The school was granted during the tenure of late Prof. Tam David West, incidentally an indigene of Kalabari who was the then Commissioner of Education in the old Rivers State. It was regarded as an element of Kalabari-Obolo relations. This school as well attracted people from different parts of old Rivers State including Ikwerre, Okrika, Kalabari, Ogoni and many others. This reciprocal gesture cemented Obolo and Kalabari relationship.

Another social institution that had widespread influence on Obolo and her neighbour's relationship is Christian religion. Asawo (IPC, 2013) noted that Christ Army Church spread from Kalabari area to Obolo. For the Obolo, the establishment of Christ Army Church by Prophet Garrick Braide, a native of Bakana had tremendous impact on their relationship. This church no doubt introduced additional wave of religious relationship between the ethnic groups. Garrick Braide indeed took his movement to some places in Obolo to carry on his crusade. He went to Ataba with his team in 1915. He won converts from the Anglican Church and the community. Christ Army Church disappeared from Ataba between January and February, 1916 (Igbifa, IPC, 2012).

Ejituwu (1991:191-192) recorded that Braide went to Agwut Obolo in 1916. The news of his healing and miracles came to Obolo which attracted some of them to the Christ Army Church. Some of these converts established Christ Army Church in Obolo. Kalabari (Bakana) became the spiritual headquarters where the Obolo members sought their spiritual solution to their problems. It is on this premise that the Christ Army Church wielded together greater relationship between Obolo and Kalabari; as Obolo members attended Church activities together in Kalabari and elsewhere. Also, Obolo and Kalabari belong to the same Niger Delta Diocese of the Anglican Church. The members of the two ethnic groups attended religious activities and Diocesan programmes in each other's area. A typical example, is the Diocesan Synod hosted by the Kalabari and Obolo respectively which exposed the two neighbours to their individual environment

In the era of Pentecostalism, Obolo Christians also promoted Christianity in Kalabari territory. They established The Apostolic Church, Nigeria under Andoni Sub-Territory in Bakana and at

Achobelema in the second decade of the Twenty-First century which attracted membership from Andoni resident there and Kalabari indigenes. Another Assembly of The Apostolic Church under Maritime Territory was established in Buguma in 2018. This Assembly is populated by Obolo members mainly from Ataba (Ngor, IPC, 2025). Benson and Williams (2023:132) noted that Greater Evangelism World Crusade founded by late Apostle G. D. Numbere, a Kalabari indigene, is one of the Pentecostal Churches established first in Ataba and spread to other Obolo communities. Beyond attending church programmes, the clergy men from the two ethnic groups were posted out to serve in their respective territories. These churches have become a strong source that consolidates Obolo and Kalabari relations. Apostle Numbere while alive frequently visited Ataba where he felt at home. In all his episcopal visits to Ataba, he usually hunts particular species of bird called "Abah" (heron) that abounds in the area without any harassment from the community. Their services further calibrated their ethnic bonding.

Kalabari as Trade Route and Centre of Economic Relations

The interplay of economic activities formed an aspect of inter-group relations that existed between the Obolo and the Kalabari. Such economic activities as fishing, trading (long distance trade and distributive trade) are the basis of ethnic contact and interaction that strengthened their relationship. As riverine people, their fishing expedition took them to the rivers, fishing settlements where they have had initial contact and as well established economic relations. Obolo fishing contact with the Kalabari began from Elem-Ama close to Bonny and down to their present settlements.

Economic activities such as fishing and trading are the cardinal factors and builder of inter-group relations among ethnic groups in Eastern Niger Delta. In this context, the theory of interdependence succinctly explains the dynamics of economic relations. In essence, this theory emphasizes that since no one ethnic group is self-sufficient in its economic and material needs, the ethnic groups depended on each other or one another for their survival. It therefore indicates that there should be ethnic co-operation which promote inter-ethnic relationship.

Thus, for the Obolo who are core fishermen, they depended on the Kalabari fishing environment to do their fishing exploit. They left Obolo shores for Kalabari fishing settlements where they engaged in their economic venture (fishing). The income generated from fishing was invested in the education of their children, sustenance of their families and development of Obolo in general. Few Kalabari fishermen also resided at Obolo fishing settlement. Another important area of economic relations is trade. Both ethnic groups engaged in slave trade, palm oil trade and long distance trade in various products. They met regularly in the hinterland areas of the Igbo, especially where they carried out their trading transactions in slaves and palm produce. On the other hand, their economic transactions at Bonny shores where they sold their goods to the European merchants promoted neighbourly relations between Obolo and Kalabari.

However, Obolo oral traditions indicated that Obolo and Kalabari geographical location made them distant neighbours. This did not affect their relations since they fished and traded together and it spanned centuries of relationship (Iraron, IPC, 2014). Utong (IPC, 2011), stated that, concerning trade, Obolo and Kalabari have had trade relationship since the ancient time. Kalabari traded in food stuffs such as garri, plantain and yam in Obolo. In fishing and other marine occupation, Obolo dominated Kalabari fishing settlements. Kalabari traditions also affirm the above assertion (Briggs, IPC, 2013).

Though the Kalabari traditionally acculturated the Obolo people in their territory linguistically, they were not acculturated economically rather the Obolo-Kala Ido who later became Kalabari, introduced their fishing culture to the Kalabari fishermen who adopted it. So it became an additional fishing method to the Kalabari which further enhanced their relations. The Obolo fishing culture is called "*odik*" (fish fence). It is constructed in a curved shape with two major apartments and a major entrance. The fish and other marine resources are trapped in the inner apartment. This fishing method is peculiar to the Obolo people who also introduced it in Nembe fishing territory. They modified it with slight variation.

According to Kalabari traditions, the Andoni do deep sea fencing but the Ido (Obolo) in Kalabari do their fencing in deeper water. Tombia also were doing fish fencing before they adopted net casting. The Kalabari are no longer doing the fish fencing now (Dabibi, IPC, 2011). Asawo, (IPC, 2013) stated that all these fishing technology emanated from the Andoni, especially the fish fence. They do more of the fishing with different types of materials. The Kala Ido (Small Obolo) and Opu Ido (Big Obolo), they use the fish fence. Kula people also use it. The Kalabari emulated fish fence method from the Andoni and they call it *Ogbokoro*. Obolo water tenure system was also practiced in the Kalabari fishing area.

It should be pointed out that this fish fence technology being alien to the Kalabari, required a period of apprenticeship for them to understudy the Andoni fishermen on how to weave the fishing gear as well as the techniques of setting or constructing the different patterns of the fence and scoping of the fish from the fence. This fosters greater bond of togetherness, socio-economic interaction and improved relationship. Since the Andoni fishermen resident in Kalabari fishing settlements tutored the Kalabari fishermen on the fishing method.

Obolo-Kalabari economic relation was highly cemented with the establishment of a Seaport at Abonnema towards the closing years of the 19th century. The seaport was established probably when the U.A.C. Trading Deport was established at Abonnema in 1886. Then in 1929 the B.O.P. for produce evacuation was established (NPC, 1973:7-8). As a seaport, Abonnema became a commercial city and centre of local and international trade. Trade in palm oil and timber existed at Abonnema. Thus, it pulled people of diverse ethnic groups together as they engaged in the prevalent economic activities.



African Trading Company's Warehouse at Abonnema
Photo credit: Mr. Uduak Akpan (12 September, 2013).



G.B. Olivant Warehouse at Abonnema
Source: Field work 2013. Photograph by Mr. Uduak Akpan 12 September, 2013.



Thomas Wells Warehouse at Abonnema
Photo Credit: Field work 2013. Photograph by Mr. Uduak Akpan 12 September, 2013.



B.O.P. Tanks for Oil Storage and Reservoir at Abonnema
Source: Field work 2013. Photograph by Mr. Uduak Akpan 12 September, 2013.



B.O.P. Premises for Oil Milling and Processing at Abonnema.
Photo Credit: Mr. Uduak Akpan 12 September, 2013.

The above photographs show the facilities used by the different trading companies during the hey-days of

Abonnema Seaport.

The Andoni traders mostly at the fishing settlements carried out their business transactions at Abonnema and other Kalabari towns and villages. They were buying European goods from Abonnema. Again, as the European companies relocated from Bonny to Abonnema, many people were employed by the trading companies. Some of these trading and oil milling companies include African Trading Company (A.T.C), G. B. Olivant, Thomas Wells, B. O. P. Blackduke (IPC, 2013) noted that the Andoni people in Abonnema area mostly sold their fish to Kalabari town dwellers and bought European goods to sell at their fishing settlements and by extension Andoni. The employees including Andoni rented accommodation in Abonnema and its suburb.

The seaport at Abonnema created a new socio-economic order among the Kalabari. There was a drastic shift from fishing to white collar jobs. With this situation, Obolo fishermen became the dominant fishing group and major suppliers of fish and marine resources to the Kalabari. While the Kalabari depended on Andoni fishermen for fish supply, the Andoni people depended on the Kalabari people as the source of their monetary income (cash). This new economic order strengthened inter-ethnic relations between them. Thus, it created a customer- relationship as the Obolo supply Kalabari fish.

The Kalabari waterways became the gateway and trade route of the Obolo gin and canoe traders up till 2015. The Obolo gin and canoe traders passed through the Kalabari territory to Ijo communities of Arogbu, Olodioma, Egbema and Apo where they purchased their canoes. Obolo (Andoni) gin traders bought gin from some Ijo communities such as Peremabiri, Diobu, Ekewo, Kianbiri, Egbematoru, Olugbobiri and others. By this time canoe (hand pulling) was the main available means of transportation (Enemugwem and Benson, 2016: 47-49). So, due to the long distance, the traders at interval stopped at Kalabari fishing ports and villages along the trade route to regain energy and strength to continue. Their stopover was mostly determined by the water tide. All through their years of transaction in the commodity, Obolo merchants were not ambushed or attacked by the Kalabari people. The security and safety along the trade route, not only demonstrated mutual understanding and improved economic relations, but contributed to Obolo continuity in the trade. The same is applicable to the Obolo canoe traders.

Conclusion

The above discussion indicated that Obolo-Kalabari relations began since the ancient time. Their relationship predates the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The Obolo had earlier contact with the Kalabari at Elem-Ama or Old Shipping through fishing expedition on the high sea. The foundation of their relations was established first, through natural geographical environment which determined their traditional economy. They were connected through waterways or river routes. Through fishing both ethnic groups firmly initiated contact, interactions and relationship. Some Obolo migrant fishermen embarked on fishing activities in Kalabari territory where they generated their wealth for social transformation and family upbringing and vice-versa.

Another source of economic relations that bonded both ethnic groups was trade. Being close to the hinterland, the Kalabari traded in foodstuffs and were involved in distributive trade which took them to Andoni territory to sell their goods. Kalabari became additional source of food supply to the Andoni people. This inter-ethnic trade cemented their relationship. Eventually, when Abonnema in Kalabari became a seaport, some Obolo people resident there, traded and

also worked in the area which enhanced their relations. Kalabari territory was significant to the Obolo economy as their area became the Obolo trade routes. The trade routes promoted Obolo trading activities such as canoe and gin trade in Nembe and relations with Kalabari.

Politically, the primacy of the Obolo in the Eastern Niger Delta made them as both centre of inter-group relations and secondary dispersal in the sub-region. Kalabari ancestral location at Elem-Ama or Old Shipping near Bonny made them distant neighbour of the Obolo. Their political relationship was consolidated through the establishment of autonomous and permanent communities in Kalabari territory by the Obolo emigrants. The settlements contributed to the peopling of Kalabari territory, increased population and political status in Nigeria till date. In essence, Kalabari area became the melting port and safe haven to the Obolo people. Similarly, few Kalabari emigrants who found themselves in Obolo territory were absorbed and fused into Obolo communities.

Based on their relationship, both ethnic groups formed alliance in the 19th century and fought against Bonny their arch rival during the Andoni-Bonny war. In the mid 20th century the Obolo reciprocated the Kalabari alliance gesture as they joined them to fight against Okrika which led to several casualties on the Okrika. During the colonial period, a minute part of Obolo (Ataba) was politically integrated in Degema (Kalabari) Division.

From the social dimension, there existed inter-change of cultural property or elements that shaped their relationship. Obolo historiography was evident in Kalabari, likewise Kalabari linguistic evidence existed in Obolo. Marriage, social institutions such as school and church were strong sources that promoted their relations. The two ethnic groups were good allies and had no history of inter-ethnic hostility. The cordial relationship that existed between the Obolo and Kalabari bolstered social, political and economic development in the Eastern Niger Delta.

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