

COLONIAL AND POST-COLONIAL EXPERIENCES OF OBOLO AND OPOBO POLITICAL RELATIONS IN NIGERIA: 1900-2023

Romokere Mgbowaji Benson
Department of History and International Studies
Akwa Ibom State University, Nigeria
romokerebenson@aksu.edu.ng
+234(0)8055625838

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.60787/aasd.vol2no2.55>

Abstract

The Obolo-Opobo political relations began in 1867 when Jaja visited Obolo territory. This visit, which was inspired by his European Merchant friends Decardi and McEachean laid the foundation of their political relations as Jaja, established contact with Obolo political leaders. This relationship was explored during the Bonny Civil War of 1869. Jaja and other fourteen-chieftaincy houses deserted the ancient Grand Bonny. Their political relationship with the Obolo, was consolidated through oath swearing at the shrine of Yok-Obolo at Agwut-Obolo. It was in this circumstance that the Obolo political leaders allocated the present location of Opobo to Jaja and his group. Subsequently, Uranta was also allocated a place called Queen's Town in Obolo territory by Chief Ikwut, founder of Ikuru Town. The economic forces of the palm oil trade incorporated most ethnic groups in the Niger Delta including Obolo and Opobo, into a new political entity called the Oil Rives Protectorate and Niger Coast Protectorate respectively. Obolo and Opobo political relations continued till the colonial and post-colonial era which further enhanced their political affinity and integration. However, the focus of this study is Colonial and Post-Colonial Political Relations in Nigeria: The Obolo and Opobo Experience, 1900-2023. This study adopted primary and secondary sources to document their past political development. The paper found out that, Obolo-Opobo political relations was necessary for their peaceful co-operation and co-existence in the Eastern Niger Delta and the political unity of Nigeria. It therefore concluded that, ethnic political relation is necessary for national integration.

Key words: Colonial, Post-Colonial, Political, Relations, Obolo-Opobo, Experience.

Introduction

Prior to the colonial era, Jaja's impact was strongly felt in Obolo as it was in other places both in the Niger Delta, hinterland, West Africa and Europe. In Obolo due to his complex nature, doggedness, obstinate, resolute and unyielding attitude, Obolo formed a saying with reference to Jaja. "Owo ire Jorjor"; meaning "are you Jorjor" that is Jaja. This reference, usually, is necessitates when someone involved in dispute or argument is being approached and appealed to for peace or to resolve the issue, remains obstinate and unyielding. This suggests the character of Jaja in Obolo relationship with him.

However, during the early years of the colonial period, Obolo and Opobo political relations was characterised by animosity and betrayal especially, by the Opobo. This situation did not result in any form of conventional warfare between the two ethnic groups but legal battle. Thus, Obolo instituted legal battle against the Opobo to establish Andoni right of ownership of land, which the Opobo had claimed as theirs. The legal war against Opobo, was necessitated to forestall their over-bearing influence, which threatened Obolo political existence. In those litigations, Andoni won the battles; re-affirming the historical relationship between the two ethnic groups. Justice Webber gave the judgment

in 1925.¹

In another dimension, Obolo agitated seriously against Opobo and other ethnic injustices against them in their various native courts and Obolo requested their own Native Court. Preparatory to the granting of the Native Court to the Obolo, the Resident of Calabar Province, Richard Hargrove appointed nine Obolo indigenes as Warrant Chiefs in 1921 to sit in the Opobo Native Court. In contrast, the Obolo instructed their Warrant Chiefs to boycott sitting in Opobo Native Court to register their grievance and insistence on their own Native Court. The Obolo request was granted and their indigenous court was established on 14th October, 1931.²

The role of Bonny in Obolo litigation against Opobo is significant because it brought Andoni and Bonny leadership in harmonious relationship. They supported Obolo to ensure that Opobo was restricted from their rising political glamour in the new order. To an extent, this petition and legal war against Opobo was not only a victory to the Obolo people but by extension to Bonny. So there was renewal of political relationship and alliance between Obolo and Bonny.

Both Andoni and Opobo progressed into the post-colonial political developments as independent and distinct ethnic groups. Independence political alliance enhanced their political relations even during the Nigerian Civil War. Then, Opobo was instrumental to the liberation of Obolo (Andoni) from the Biafra occupation of the area. The two groups demonstrated their political alliance in 1979 second republic partisan politics. In this regard, Opobo supported the Obolo candidates who contested on the platform of the various parties into the local government council chairmanship and Federal House of Representatives elections. This relationship spanned from the military administration to the fourth republic, which has greatly lubricated their political affinity to their advantage.

From the foregoing, the Obolo victory was dependent on the instrumentality of petition-writing and legal system, as well as Webber's judgment and the famous Jeffreys intelligence report. The combination of these forces enabled Obolo to restore their political sovereignty and recognition as a distinct ethnic group in the British administration. Justice Webber and M.D.W. Jeffreys especially, were to the Obolo "God sent". So, Obolo people who found themselves in Bonny District, Degema Division of Owerri Province and Opobo District, Opobo Division of Calabar Province respectively have been merged into one distinct district. That is, Obolo District in Opobo Division, Calabar province.

Colonial Political Relations

The establishment of British colonialism in Nigeria took a dynamic and complex form such as military conquest, gunboat diplomacy, signing of treaties of trade and protection with the coastal chiefs; and eventual incorporation of non-conquered people. It should be emphasized that the British adopted a selective approach of invasion and conquest of Nigeria to enthrone colonial rule. Obviously, the British conquered not all the ethnic nationalities. Not all the ethnic groups signed the treaties of trade and protection. They concentrated on centres of trade that promoted their economic interest and other transactions. The British selective conquest was through the coastal areas and hinterland territories. The coastal areas include Lagos 1851, Itsekiri 1894, Okrika 1896, Akassa 1895 while the hinterland territories were conquered through Yoruba 1892, Benin 1897, Igboland 1902 and Hausa 1903.³ The rest ethnic

¹ A.F.C. Webber. *Nigeria Law Report (NLR)*, (Vol.6, 1925), 24-33

² N.C. Ejituwu. *A History of Obolo (Andoni) in the Niger Delta*, (Oron, Manson Publishing, 1991), 181.

³ Toyin Falola, Abdullahi Mahadi, Martin Uhomoibhi, Ukachukwu Anyanwu, *History of Nigeria 2 Nigeria in the Nineteenth Century*, (Ikeja, Longman Nigeria Limited), 189, 194, 201-202, 207, 209. Charles Organ, *Okrika: A Kingdom of the Niger Delta* (Port Harcourt, Onyoma Research Publications, 2008), 98. A. E. Afigbo, "The Eastern Provinces under Colonial Rule," Obarokime (ed.), *Groundwork of Nigerian History* (Ibadan, HEBN Publishers Plc, 1980), 413. Sa'ad Abubakar, "The Northern Provinces under Colonial Rule," in Obarokime (ed.), *Groundwork of Nigerian History* (Ibadan, HEBN Publishers Plc, 1980), 454.

groups that were not conquered were incorporated via geographical location within the stretch of the conquered people. However, the British conquest brought all the ethnic nationalities in Nigeria under colonial rule beginning from 1900 to 1960.

In colonial history, Obolo was one of the ethnic groups that had no previous encounter with British colonialist prior to the introduction of colonialism in Nigeria. Obolo territory was not conquered militarily by the British but was incorporated into the British colonial government and system. This became possible through the pre-colonial administrative structure instituted by the British metropolitan government. These were: Oil Rivers Protectorate, Niger Coast Protectorate, Royal Niger Company, Southern Protectorate and amalgamation all laid the foundation for the establishment of British colonial rule in Nigeria.⁴ It was on this basis that Obolo became incorporated into the colonial administration since they were a constituent of the former Oil Rivers Protectorate, which subsequently metamorphosed into a colonial entity.

All the ethnic groups lost their sovereignty and were subsumed under British foreign rule. For convenient administration, Nigeria was divided up into provinces, divisions and districts as sub-units. In Southern Protectorate, the Obolo found themselves in two separate provinces, Owerri and Calabar provinces. Under the provincial system, Obolo suffered balkanization and marginalization propelled by the Ibani of Bonny and Opobo because of their vantage political position in the colonial government. So, Ataba (Andoni) and her satellite villages were fused into Bonny District in Degema Division, Owerri Province. The rest Obolo communities were classified under Opobo District, Opobo Division in Calabar Province. N. C. Ejituwu in his account recorded that, Obolo were grouped into six court areas such as Eket, Ukam, Essene, Kono, Opobo Town and Bonny court areas. For the purpose of this study, emphasis is on Opobo. Obolo communities classified under Opobo Town court were Ngo, Ikuru Town, Ekede, and Ebukuma.⁵

The court system was also one mechanism the colonial government introduced to further destabilize Obolo political unity. Opobo influence in the colonial administration was detrimental to the Obolo political benefits. In this situation, however, Obolo had no representation on the six native courts till 1921 when Richard Hargrove, the Resident of Calabar Province appointed nine Obolo men as Warrant. By the warrant status, these nine Obolo men were entitled to sit on the bench of the Opobo Town Native Court.⁶ To the Obolo, this was a landmark political victory which gave them not only recognition and voice but also the beginning of Obolo political inroad into the colonial government and sustenance of Obolo-Opobo political relations.

This colonial administrative structure was the beginning of Obolo political problem with her Opobo neighbor. The Obolo considered the colonial arrangement as outright injustice to them. Moreover, as they were the landlord that relinquished their fishing location to Jaja and his group. They also perceived it as the colonialist connivance with Opobo to undermine them in the new political era especially, as they subsumed Obolo, the majority ethnic group under Opobo, the minority ethnic group in Opobo District and Opobo Division respectively. This political imbalance generated animosity, agitation, claims of ownership and incursion into Obolo territory by Opobo, which the Obolo vehemently resisted them.

In all these developments, the Obolo were not silent. They protested against the Opobo political marginalization and efforts to obliterate Obolo as a political entity. Obolo employed the instrumentality of petition writing and court litigation since warfare was no longer the mechanism of external relations

⁴ Godwin OnuhOdeh, *The 1914 Amalgamation of Nigeria as a Precursor to Integration at a Crossroad: One Hundred Years After*, (Makurdi, Gwatex Publishers, 2015), 15-18. Ejituwu, *A History of Obolo (Andoni)*, 158-159. S. O. Okafor, *Indirect Rule: The Development of Central Legislature in Nigeria* (Hong Kong, Thomas Nelson Ltd., 1981), 24-30.

⁵Ejituwu, *A History of Obolo (Andoni)*, 167.

⁶Ejituwu, *A History of Obolo (Andoni)*, 177.

in the new era of colonial rule. In their wisdom, the Obolo initiated a legal warfare against Opobo over their unfounded claim of ownership over Obolo territory. Justice A. F. C. Webber decided the case in favour of Obolo in 1925.⁷ By 1929, Obolo began with passion to unify all Obolo communities segmented into different ethnic entities. A typical instance was Ataba in Bonny District of Degema Division. Ataba suffered deprivation, denial and utter neglect in Bonny District. They did also benefit from the colonial development provisions despite the huge taxes Ataba male adults paid and court fees charged on the cases Ataba instituted in the Bonny native court. All these injustices prompted them amidst internal opposition from the centrifugal force to agitate to be transferred to Opobo Division to join their kith and kin where they enjoyed relative political recognition and identity. The result of this agitation was the recommendation of H. Webber, the then District Officer of Degema that Ataba should be transferred to Opobo Division to join her other Obolo communities. Ataba was officially transferred from Bonny District to Opobo Division on October 14, 1931.⁸

It is instructive to note that, the consistent or unrelenting efforts of the Opobo to obliterate Obolo political identity and sovereign existence was not only negative but has some positive impact on the Obolo people during the colonial era. In effect, it aroused Obolo consciousness in defence of their political identity, corporate cohesion and territorial integrity which ultimately earned them some degree of political recognition by the British colonial government as one of the distinct ethnic groups in the then Opobo Division, Calabar Province. Probably, Obolo would not have come to limelight in the colonial era at the time because *ab initio* there was no relationship between the British colonialist and Obolo. Obolo was distant from the colonial centre until September 1, 1904 punitive expedition on Obolo led by Mr. A. A. Whitehouse. He carried out the utter destruction of the Yok-Obolo shrine at Agwut-Obolo.⁹

Irrespective of the antagonistic political relations between the two ethnic groups, the colonial obnoxious tax policy of 1929 united them to agitate against the unproductive economic policy. Consequently, the Women War of 1929 was one force that pulled the women of the various ethnic groups of Opobo Division together to challenge and fight against the taxation of women and men at Egwenga (now Ikot Abasi) the headquarters of Opobo Division. Obolo women also joined their counterparts from other ethnic groups in the Division such as, Annang, Ibibio, Ogoni and Opobo¹⁰ in the war against colonial taxation policy and other detrimental socio-economic policies, which they perceived as economically destructive to their sources of income and livelihood. Not only that, the women collectively demanded for the removal of Chief Arthur Mark Pepple Jaja as the head Chief of Opobo Town because he voted in the Legislative Council for the imposition of tax on men.¹¹

The women war indeed strengthened the political relations of the Obolo and Opobo. Obolo women participation during the war had significant implication for Obolo. Soon after, Obolo began to experience colonial impact in their territory. Significantly, the colonial government embarked on administrative reformation and re-organisation of the ethnic groups.¹² As in other ethnic groups in the Eastern Province, Mr. M. D. W. Jeffreys was appointed to produce Intelligence Report on the Obolo in 1930. This report stressed Obolo distinct identity as against the Opobo earlier claim that were their

⁷ Webber, *Nigeria Law Report*, 24-33

⁸ Esuiku Eric Igbifa, *A History of the Ataba Kingdom, 1225-2009* (Nigeria, Mind-Quest, 2015), 382-383. Ejituwu, *A History of Obolo (Andoni)*, 181.

⁹ Ejituwu, *A History of Obolo (Andoni)*, 167-169.

¹⁰ Monday B. Abasiattai, Violetta I. Ekpo, Chukwurah Ezebube (eds.), *IkotAbasi-The Aluminium Town: A Socio-Economic Transformation of a Nigerian Community* (Essen Germany, Bacht GmbH, 1997), 188.

¹¹ Abasiattai et al, *IkotAbasi- The Aluminium Town*, 188. John H. Enemugwem, "The Women's War of 1929: Its Implications for Niger Delta," in N. C. Ejituwu and Amakievi O. I. Gabriel (eds.), *Women in Nigerian History: The Rivers and Bayelsa States Experience* (Choba, Onyoma Research Publications, 2003), 125.

¹² Abasiattai et al, *IkotAbasi-The Aluminium Town*, 161

subjects and the territory theirs. Again, in 1931, two remarkable political achievements were recorded in Obolo: re-unification of Obolo earlier mentioned and the creation of both Native Council (Oru) and Native Court in Obolo¹³ respectively.

In the new era of administrative reformation and re-organisation, Obolo and Opobo related as equal and distinct political ethnic groups. This brought about Obolo political liberation from the subservient status in Opobo Native Court. Their new status gave them political relevance in the colonial and post-colonial politics. Obolo became a catchment area that politicians and political parties could not ignore their canvassing for membership and votes. Then, major political parties such as NCNC, AG and UNIP went to Obolo for their campaigns in 1957, 1959 and 1963. Another factor that endeared the Obolo to political leaders in Nigeria was the mass voting pattern. Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe of NCNC, Chief Obafemi Awolowo and Dr Udo Udoma both of AG visited Obolo.¹⁴

Colonial partisan politics and creation of Regional system of government by Sir Authur Richard in 1946, Andoni and Opobo belonged to various political parties especially NCNC, AG and the UNIP. Partisan politics opened another era which encouraged and emphasized majority rule through election of credible candidates. It was a deviation from the old order of appointing Warrant Chiefs as representatives of the people in which some illiterate ethnic groups like Obolothen, encountered severe political alienation and marginalization in the hands of more literate ethnic nationalities such as Opobo.

Under this new political climate, political relationship between Obolo and Opobo witnessed a new form of alliance in political parties. They worked co-operatively to achieve the goals of the party on one hand and the advancement of their ethnic socio-economic interest. In this new changing pattern of relationship, there was the necessity for greater ethnic co-operation and political interdependence since one ethnic group cannot be self-sufficient and self-sustaining. They needed each other. Moreover, their realization that they belonged to Calabar Province and later Uyo Province dominated by the Ibibio informed Andoni and Opobo to redefine their relationship so as to remain relevant in the polity.

It is on this basis that Obolo people began to contest elective positions in the then United Opobo Constituency. This constituency comprised Ibibio, Opobo and Obolo. Probably, to balance the political equation; since the name of the constituency bears "Opobo", the NCNC Party in 1957 decided to favour Obolo by nominating Mr. U.O. Ekenekot (later Chief Igbemi Adaka V) who is now late, to contest for the House of Assembly against Mr. A.J. Ekpe of Ikwa (Ibibio) of the UNIP for United Opobo Constituency. Mr. Ekenekot narrowly lost the election and Mr. Ekpe represented the Constituency in the Eastern House. By the time of the Federal Election in 1959, the United Opobo Constituency was split into Opobo North and Opobo South constituencies. A segment of Ibibio, Opobo and Obolo were in Opobo South constituency. The previous scenario occurred. Mr. Ekenekot was also nominated by the NCNC to run for Federal Election in 1959 because of his closeness to victory in the previous Regional House of Assembly Election.¹⁵

In this scenario, Obolo chiefs and opinion leaders in their dogged determination to win the election, embarked on intensive and extensive sensitization campaign within Obolo, Opobo and Ibibio. This time Ekenekot (Obolo) of NCNC contested against Dr Udo Udoma (Ibibio) of Action Group. This election brought a notable significance in Obolo and Opobo political relationship. According to Opobo traditions as narrated by Alaminio Kuma, that Opobo and Andoni agreed that they will both support the Andoni candidate to the Federal House of Representatives and later Andoni will support Opobo candidate to the Eastern House of Assembly.¹⁶ Obolo indigenes too, saw it as an opportunity to promote

¹³Ejituwu, *A History of Obolo (Andoni)*, 181.

¹⁴Ejituwu, *A History of Obolo (Andoni)*, 218-219.

¹⁵Ejituwu, *A History of Obolo (Andoni)*, 218.

¹⁶ Interview with Godwin Josseph Alaminio Kuma, 78 years Retired Civil Servant in Opobo Town, Rivers State, 10/6/2013.

their ethnic nationality at the national level. In their usual manner, Obolo returned their “block vote” to their son irrespective of party affiliations to ensure his victory.

The Opoboupheld the terms of the agreement and voted for Ekenekot too. With their support Obolo man, Ekenekot eventually emerged the winner of the election into the Federal House of Representatives. He defeated Hon. Dr Udo Udoma in that election in 1959. From then on, Obolo people became known at the Federal level and their name written in the political map and history of Nigeria.¹⁷ This victory may not have been actualized if not for the mutual support and co-operation of the Opobo with the Obolo.

By 1963, the Regional House of Assembly election came up. It was now the turn of the Opobo to produce the representative at the Eastern House of Assembly. At this time, the Opobo people could not present a consensus candidate and the Andoni people exploited that division to vote in their son again into the Eastern Regional House of Assembly. Again, Alaminiookuma explained the cause of another Obolo man emergence as the representative of the area in the Eastern House of Assembly in Enugu. He posited that when the time came, Opobo brought out two candidates. They were Mr. D. Iwarimie-Jaja of the NCNC and Barrister William Pepple Dappa who became an independent candidate. So, because of Polo (compound) politics, the Jaja brought out Iwarimie-Jaja who was not the popular choice of the town. The community brought out William Pepple Dappa. In this political imbroglio, the Jaja and Andoni teamed up and voted against Dappa. On that platform Opobo lost out.¹⁸

Obolo oral history recorded that, based on the agreement; Ekeneokot led the NCNC campaign to Obolo where he presented Iwarimie-Jaja of NCNC to them as the party candidate to be voted for. Though Ekeneokot championed the party’s campaign to Obolo, he left a political message in parable to the Obolo. He said that the Obolo should not allow someone who was already clothed to go naked (*ikachere ebon okwunekwutijenjak*). Obolo people became inspired by his parable and couple with their population, voted for their son Chief Rowland Oke.¹⁹

In contrast, Chief Rowland Oke (Obolo) of the Action Group won the election into the Eastern House of Assembly. Since then Andoni has been dominating the politics of the area essentially because of their population. For the Obolo, this victory was a “political harvest”. The tide of political relationship in the Opobo South Constituency turned favourably to the Obolo ethnic group. Obolo represented Opobo South Constituency in both the Federal House of Representatives and the Eastern Region House of Assembly. This demonstrated the political cooperation and alliance between Andoni and Opobo which greatly enhanced Ekenekot’s victory over Dr Udo Udoma who had earlier represented the constituency. However, the electoral victory of Mr. Ekenekot earned him and Andoni national popularity, and eagerness to know the man who defeated Dr. Udo Udoma.

It should be noted that, Honourable Ekenekot did not tread the path of Chief MacPepple-Jaja of Opobo when he represented the Oil Rivers in the Legislative council from 1922-1933. Then he used his position and romance with the British to obliterate the Obolo nation as a distinct political entity in Nigeria. Interestingly, Ekeneokot did not retaliate but ensure the even development of his constituency. Abanile, Edubio stated that, Honourable Ekeneokot was more conscious of developing his entire constituency without tribal sentiment. He therefore embarked on his constituency project by constructing three floating Jetty at Ngo in Obolo, Opobo and IkotAbasi.²⁰ Before he became a parliamentarian, he agitated against the exclusion of Andoni and Opobo from the proposed Rivers State

¹⁷ Interview with Clinton Z. Utong, 65 years Retired Civil Servants in Rumualogu, Rivers State, 2/7/2011.

¹⁸ Interview with Alaminiookuma.

¹⁹ Interview with Chief Esuiku Eric Igbifa, 63 years in Ataba, Rivers State, 4/5/2014.

²⁰ Interviews with Chief Gospel A. J. Abanile, 58 years Civil Servant in Ozuoba, Rivers State, 26/8/2011. Finomolko-Owaji Edubio, 55 years Civil Servant in Iwofe Rumuolumeni, Rivers State, 4/2/2014.

and presented the position of Obolo to the Willink's Commission.²¹ He used his position to ensure the unity and co-operate existence of both ethnic groups in a marginalized and deprived political environment.

Post-Colonial Political Relations

Another striking impact of Hon. Ekeneokot in the Federal House of Representatives was that, he became the first Niger Delta parliamentarian to move the first motion for the creation of Rivers State with Opobo inclusive without any sentiment.²² Hon. U.O. Ekeneokot as a political leader determined to champion the leading struggle of the Rivers Chiefs and Peoples Conference in the parliament, decided to enter into a serious political relationship with other political parties and ethnic groups in the House even against the position of his party NCNC and their threat of expulsion. He got support of the NPC parliamentarians and Wenike Briggs of the Action Group representing Degema Federal Constituency who signed the motion for the creation of Rivers State. Unfortunately, the motion died a political death in the parliament because of the stiff opposition of the NCNC leadership and the Eastern Nigerian Guardian propaganda.²³

However, the consistent struggle for the creation of the Rivers State by the various ethnic groups in the Central and Eastern Niger Delta became a formidable platform that promoted cordial relationship between Obolo and her Eastern Delta neighbours. The dogged agitation which earned the area the creation of Rivers Province in 1947 culminated in the ultimate creation of Rivers State on May 27, 1967 by the then Military Head of State Gen. Yakubu Gowon. The delegation to the then Head of State in Lagos to demand for states including Rivers State and the signatories to the petition are Chiefs H. J.R. Biriye, E.J. Oriji and Mr. Wenike Briggs, Mr.N. Nwanodi, Mr. Edward Kobani, Dr. Fiberesima and Mr. Graham Otoko of Andoni.²⁴

The delegation and the signatories to the petition for the creation of Rivers State demonstrated the ethnic cohesion and representation as against the disunity suffered in the House of Representatives, which destroyed the motion by Hon. U.O. Ekeneokot in 1962 for the creation of Rivers State. Worthy of note, is the signatory of Mr. Graham Otoko of Andoni, which Iraron asserted that, he represented both Andoni and Opobo in the Opobo South constituency.²⁵ Unfortunately, when the Rivers State, which Obolo and Opobo actively participated in the struggle, was eventually created, both ethnic groups were conspicuously excluded from the newly created Rivers State. They were instead included in the Southeastern State and later Cross River State with the capital at Calabar. The reason was political; the creation of states then was based on the former provinces, particularly Rivers Province. However, they participated in the struggle and agitation for the creation of the Rivers State but Obolo and Opobo were not constituents of the then Rivers Province.

Both Andoni and Opobo continued to exist in the Southeastern State as distinct entities until the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War. They experienced marginal impact in the area of socio-economic development especially Obolo which was farther away from Calabar. This development created that consciousness in them of their ethnic minority and the need for them to emphasize their ethnic bond in order to survive among the Ibibio and Efik majority who probably regarded them as strangers. They co-existed in the alien state till the outbreak of the thirty months of the Nigerian Civil War from June 6,

²¹ Silas Eneyo, *Ekenekot: 1928-1996* (Port Harcourt, Benco and Associate, 1997), 5.

²² Interview with HRH N. L. Iraron, 63 years Retired Civil Servant in Elekahia, Rivers State, 19/2/2014.

²³ Eneyo, *Ekenekot: 1928-1996*, 12.

²⁴ E. D. W. Opuogulaya, *History of the Creation of the Rivers State of Nigeria*, (Portt Harcourt, the Government Printer, 1973), 12.

²⁵ Interview with Iraron.

1967 to January 15, 1970.

The Civil War, which occurred because of the socio-economic and political crisis in Nigeria resulted in the declaration of the State of Biafra on May 30, 1967. The Eastern Niger Delta, Niger Delta minority, as component of the former Eastern Region were not consulted but incorporated by force. This advancement propelled the immediate occupation of the riverine ethnic communities of the Eastern Niger Delta by the Biafran soldiers. This sub-region was initially under the defunct Eastern Region controlled by the Igbo. It was intended to guarantee the Igbo control of the waterways and the oil rich region of Nigeria. Eventually, all the ethnic groups in the Eastern Niger Delta became Biafra enclave begging for liberation by the Nigerian Army. The Nigerian Civil War was a source that promoted ethnic bonding and harmonious relations among the heterogeneous groups in Eastern Niger Delta including Obolo and Opobo.

Biafran soldiers had by 1967 occupied Opobo through Egwenga (now Ikot Abasi) and Obolothrough Ataba-Ija (kaa). Interesting to note is that, the Nigerian Civil War did not endanger the ethnic relationship between Andoni and Opobo. It rather facilitated their relationship, since these ethnic groups believed so much in the united Nigeria project. Thus, as usual Biafra received minimal support from them due to the Igbo marginalization of the minorities in the Igbo dominated Eastern Regional Government. With this political consciousness Opobo people did not betray the Obolo people as they arrived Opobo Town to seek the Nigerian soldiers' might to liberate Obolo territory.²⁶

The hostile relationship between the Andoni people and the Biafran soldiers and the influence of the liberation of Opobo, inspired some Andoni personality who undertook the liberation journey to Opobo to invite the federal troops to liberate Andoni area as well. The Obolo emissaries from Unyead, Egendem, Asarama, Ngo and even Nkoro who spent a couple of days in Opobo were accommodated by Opobo indigenes that had already been liberated. Opobo then served as the centre of liberation and a place of refuge to those nearby ethnic groups such as Obolo and Nkoro. The Nigerian soldiers quickly responded to the Obolo liberation appeal. Major Isaac Jasper AdakaBoro led the Nigerian soldiers to Ngo (Obolo) where the federal troops were dispatched to different communities of Obolo. From the period Obolo was liberated in early 1968 Maj. Boro resided in Ataba till his death in a liberation mission at OguinOkrika area. He made Ataba the headquarters of the Nigerian Army in Obolo. Also of note is that, it was the Three Marine Commando, which came through Calabar to Egwenga that liberated the Eastern Delta ethnic groups.²⁷ Alaminiokuma in his oral account stated that Opobo, Andoni and even Nkoro took refuge in one another's ethnic enclave especially where they have blood relationship and social contact.²⁸

In other words, because of the Igbo marginalization, sentiment and treating Niger Delta as strangers to the minority course they were fighting then it became a rallying point for the Niger Delta to stand their grounds. So, the civil war helped to bring unity among minority people politically, socially than ever before as it increased vigorously the actualization of their demand for the creation of Rivers State which eluded them over the years. Rivers State was at last created among other states to primarily forestall the Igbo secessionist agenda.²⁹ The Obolo and Opobo who were either cut off by the war or fought as Biafran soldiers still regarded themselves as people from the same sub-region (Eastern Niger Delta). Eye witness account stated that, the indigenes of the two ethnic groups in Biafra territory

²⁶John H. Enemugwem, *The Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970: An Outline History* (Port Harcourt, Onyoma Research Publications, 2023), 44. Romokere Benson Sara, "Impact of the Nigerian Civil War on Obolo (Andoni), 1967-1970" (B.A Project, University of Port Harcourt, 1998), 49. RomokereMgbowaji Benson, "The Obolo and Her Neighbours in Eastern Niger Delta, Nigeria, 1800-2000" (PhD Thesis, University of Port Harcourt, 2017), 239.

²⁷John H. Enemugwem and Romokere B. Sara, "Obolo (Andoni) Women in The Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970," *LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research*, Volume 6 (2), December, (2009), 95, 97. Sara, "Impact of the Nigerian Civil War," 50.

²⁸Interview with Alaminiokuma.

²⁹Interview with Iraron.

provided accommodation for their fellow natives who were stranded and had nowhere to go. Their stay in distant and strange land bonded them more closely during and after the Nigerian Civil War. They therefore cared for and protected their common interest in faraway Igboland, headquarters of Biafra. After the Nigerian Civil War, the groups were reintegrated into the Nigeria-nation state especially those that declared support for the Republic of Biafra that returned to their various ethnic areas. Their corporate solidarity during the war had long term influence on their participation in secular politics.³⁰

The cordial relationship that existed between the two ethnic groups was strained because of the 1991 census. Crisis broke out between the Obolo and Opobo in October, 1991 during the census period. It was during this period that Opobo attempted to renew their territorial expansionist tendency over Andoniland. Thus, they included Down-Below on Andoni main land as part of their territory. What ignited the crisis was that Opobo people dispatched the team of enumerators to Down-Below to conduct the head count as one of the villages under Opobo. So, the enumerators and the Opobo indigenes that led them there were attacked and chased away by Obolo people resident there.

This prompted the Ikuru Town people to issue a fourteen-day ultimatum to Opobo people who were resident there, doing their fish trading and other economic activities to desert the place. Obolo angered by the claim of Opobo, embarked on mass destruction of Opobo houses. This incident affected the socio-economic relationship between the groups. They were both exposed to the danger of losing their lives since they were resident in the areas of crisis. This crisis did not persist with the timely intervention of the government. Therefore, normal peaceful relationship was restored between them and economic activities thrived on.³¹

Nigeria's second republic opened another vista for political realignment which further promoted ethnic relations. This was demonstrated through formation of political parties in Nigeria. Indigenes of Obolo and Opobo aligned with the different political parties and promoted corporate interest of the party. National Party of Nigeria (NPN), Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), Great Nigeria Peoples Party (GNPP), Peoples Redemption Party (PRP), National Advance Party (NAP), all these parties provided the platform for enhanced ethnic interactions and political relations. During the second and third republics, Obolo people had always represented the former Bonny Federal Constituency. Hon. Shem Asuk and Hon. Gilbert Ego represented their constituency in the second and third republics (1979-1983, 1992-1993) respectively. In the various elections, the Obolo had enjoyed the political and cooperation of the Opobo which enhanced their victories in 1979 and 1992 National Assembly elections.³²

Unfolding developments in Nigeria's political landscape continue to pull Obolo and Opobo closer. One of such areas is the creation of local government areas and states. This restructuring greatly integrated both ethnic groups into a minute political entity for better benefits. In September 1991, Andoni/Opobo Local Government Area was created by Gen. Ibrahim B. Babangida. The trend continued, in 1996 the late military Head of State, Gen. Sani Abacha restructured the country into Six geopolitical zones; Northwest, Northeast, Northcentral, Southwest, Southeast and Southsouth. More states and local government areas were created. Nigeria became a thirty-six state country with seven hundred and seventy-four local government areas. This creation gave Opobo and Nkoro a distinct local government area called Opobo/Nkoro but it did not end Obolo-Opobo political relations. With this outstanding political identity, both ethnic groups interface as two independent local governments in Nigeria polity. More so, they belong to the same Federal Constituency: Andoni/Opobo/ Nkoro Federal Constituency and South East Senatorial District.³³

³⁰Interviews with Alaminiookuma and Iraron, Milton G. Dabibi, 73 years, Port Harcourt, 20/6/2011. Enemugwem, *The Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970: An Outline History*, 38, 50.

³¹Interview with Abanile.

³²Interview with Edubio.

³³Interviews with Chief GogoDandesonAyachan, 65 years, in Port Harcourt, 16/1/2024, Dr E. Obomanu, above 50

In the fourth republic, there was greater political collaboration between the Obolo and Opobo people. There was a revolutionary impact in this dispensation. The Opobo people produced the Deputy Governor of Rivers State from 1999 to 2007 on the platform of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) while the Obolo took their turn from 2007 to 2015. This was demonstrated as the Obolo people voted en mass for Dr. Peter O. Odili and Sir Dr. Gabriel Tobi as they contested the Rivers State governorship election in 1999 and 2003 respectively. Apart from Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area, Andoni Local Government Area gave them the highest votes. This political gesture was necessitated because no Obolo indigene contested election at that level.

Again, since Sir Gabriel Tobi as the Deputy Governor hails from Opobo an Obolo neighbour, he enjoyed the political support of the Obolo. As the Deputy Governor, he did not use his office to undermine the Obolo socio-economic and political rights and identity especially, in boundary demarcation. In fact, the most beneficial project of their administration to the two neighbours is the Ogoni- Andoni Unity road, which links the Ogoni, Andoni, Nkoro and Opobo ethnic groups. This road promotes transportation, socio-economic and political activities among these ethnic groups. These riverine ethnic areas are now easily accessible by land.³⁴

In the same vein, Senator Adawari Pepple from Opobo and Honourable Jeffreys Moses Owor who hails from Ataba in Andoni represented Rivers South East Senatorial District including Andoni and Opobo/Nkoro Local Government Areas; and Andoni/Opobo/Nkoro Federal Constituency respectively. Senator Adawari Pepple represented the Senatorial District from 1999 to 2003 while Hon. Jeffreys Moses Owor was in the Federal House of Representatives from 1999 to 2007. Through the National Assembly, Andoni and Opobo consolidated their political relationship and contributed to national development and their constituents.

The Opobo reciprocated the Obolo political gesture, as they voted for Rt. Hon. Chibuike Rotimi Amaechi and Engr. Tele Ikuru in the Rivers State Governorship election in 2007 and 2011 respectively. Engr. Tele Ikuru who hails from Ikuru Town (Andoni) was the Deputy Governor to Rt. Hon. Chibuike Amaechi, Governor of Rivers State from 2007 to 2015. Hon. Dakuku Adol Peterside from Opobo was appointed Commissioner of Works by Rt. Hon. Chibuike Rotimi Amaechi from 2007 to 2011. He ensured that the unity road which includes his hometown, Opobo was not abandoned considering its relevance to the socio-economic development of the neighbouring ethnic groups. As a commissioner, he incorporated some Andoni youths to work with him. These Andoni youths were empowered by him and therefore maintained political relations with him and by extension their home towns. Some of them are Mr. Idan Owaji Erasmus Ntegun (now Chief I. E. Ntegun), Dr Emmanuel Alfred, Mr. Jephthah Alaka and many others.³⁵

By 2011, through political understanding with the Andoni who are the majority in the Andoni/Opobo/Nkoro Federal Constituency, the Obolo endorsed the candidature of Hon. Dakuku Adol Peterside to contest election into the House of Representatives under the Peoples Democratic Party. Andoni people benefited from his representation through some constituency projects and human capital development. He organised constituency conference that embraced Andoni, Opobo and Nkoro. The conference was intended to brainstorm on the socio-economic and political development of the constituents.³⁶

In contrast Hon. Dakuku Adol Peterside in the spirit of Opobo marginalization, subjugation and alienation of the Andoni political identity and sovereignty, changed the name of the constituency from Andoni/Opobo/Nkoro Federal Constituency to Opobo/Nkoro Constituency. The Obolo uncovered this

years in Port Harcourt, 28/1/2024.

³⁴Interviews with Alaminokuma, Edubio, Abanile

³⁵Interviews with Edubio, Abanile

³⁶Interviews with Alaminokuma, Edubio, Abanile

deliberate act and it became a veritable instrument of campaign against him by the Andoni people during his governorship election in Rivers State. It reminds the Andoni of Opobo earlier attempt to subsume them under their control and to annex Obolo territory during the colonial period.³⁷

The 2023 was a remarkable year of Opobo great political upliftment in Rivers State³⁸. In the history of civilian administration in Rivers State, no sitting governor was able to produce or install a substantive successor in office except the ex-governor of Rivers State Nyesom E. Wike, who ruled from 2015 to 2023. However, through his political mechanism, he installed a successor, His Excellency Siminalayi Fubara who hails from Opobo Kingdom. Indeed, the fourth republic remains a period of political fortune for the Opobo that has produced the incumbent governor of Rivers State. As he emerged the sole candidate of the ruling party, Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) in the state, the Obolo Traditional Rulers, other well-meaning people of Andoni encouraged Obolo people to vote massively for PDP and by extension Sir Siminalayi Fubara irrespective of Opobo ancient attempt to obliterate Obolo from existence. Based on the assurances of the Andoni traditional rulers, Obolo in their usual political culture returned their “block vote” to PDP and Sir S. Fubara in the 2023 Governorship elections. With the Obolo votes, he was declared the winner of that election and was sworn in as the governor of Rivers State.

Prior to this Opobo political fortune, His Excellency, Nyesom E. Wike appointed King Dandeson Jaja the Chairman of Rivers State Traditional Rulers Council for eight years. As chairman, he had cordial relationship with the Obolo recognized traditional rulers in the council. Similarly, Rt. Hon. Ikunyi Ibanl from Ataba (Andoni) emerged Speaker, Rivers State House of Assembly from 2015 to 2023. During his tenure, he enjoyed the cooperation of the member representing Opobo/Nkoro constituency in the Assembly.

Conclusion

The relationship between Obolo (Andoni) and Opobo was cordial and peaceful after the Obolo accommodated them at their present location. Later it became conflicting as a result of trade control or dominance and territorial expansion of Opobo; the new economic order occasioned by the trans-Atlantic slave trade and palm oil trade. Another phase was the period of colonial administration characterized by ethnic dominance and balkanization of the Andoni territory and new pattern of diplomacy (absence of physical war) through resistance, agitation and legal battle. While partisan politics promoted political alliance and equitable representation. There existed a superior-inferior relationship between Andoni and Opobo especially, as the Opobo through the advantage of Western education occupied position in the colonial government. The superiority of the Andoni was based on land lordship, military might and political strength.

The antagonistic relations between the two ethnic groups in the early colonial period did not completely jeopardise their political relations. The Obolo experience of balkanization, marginalization and Opobo claim of ownership of Obolo territory compelled Obolo to agitate for the recognition and sustenance of their ethnic political identity by the colonial government. The resultant effect was the recognition of Obolo as a distinct ethnic group through the creation of a separate Court and Native Council for them. Subsequently, their political relations improved greatly in the colonial era and Opobo political collaboration with Obolo led to the emergence of Late Hon. U. O. Ekenekot representing Opobo South Constituency in the Federal House of Representatives. This was an eloquent testimony to their

³⁷*The National Executive Council, National Union of Andoni Students (NUAS): Demand for Rectification of the Name of Andoni/Opobo/Nkoro Federal Constituency in the Official Records of the National Assembly, Abuja, 1-7 and Annexures B1-B2, C, F, D, H*

³⁸*Inegbe, M. S. (2024). Nigerian Politicians and Language Use during Political Campaigns: A Study of Select Speeches. International Reviews of Humanities Studies, 9(1), p. 16.*

political relations.

In post-colonial political developments, their relations were further lubricated and consolidated as both ethnic groups existed in the same political entity such as Opobo Division, Calabar Province, South Eastern State, Cross River State, Bonny, Andoni/Opobo and Opobo/Nkoro Local Government Areas respectively. However, Obolo people enjoyed Opobo political cooperation, which made them represent the constituency and produced elected Local Government Council Chairmen till the creation of Opobo/Nkoro Local Government Area in 1996. In the fourth republic Obolo reciprocated, the political gesture of the Opobo to them by supporting Opobo indigenes to clinch their political victories. The Obolo people produced all the elected chairmen of Andoni/Opobo Local Government Council until the creation of Opobo/Nkoro Local Government Area in 1996. The Obolo and Opobo political relations who were antagonistic during the early colonial era later became cordial, consolidated and sustained till date. This political relationship promoted peaceful co-existence and inter-ethnic cooperation in the Eastern Niger Delta and Nigeria in general.

