

# Canoe, Gin Trade and Obolo-Nembe Relations

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**Abstract:** The focus of this paper is canoe, gin trade and Obolo-Nembe relation. Historically, Obolo and Nembe trading relations pre-date the slave trade. Then the major product of trade was canoe and later gin. The importance of canoe to the entire riverine people; Obolo inclusive made it an indispensable source of promoting inter-group relations. For the Obolo the use of canoe covered the economic, social, cultural and political sphere of life. Primary sources were adopted to generate data to analyse their relationship through canoe and gin trade. From the findings of this study, it shows that Obolo and Nembe are distant neighbors but are integrated through canoe and gin trade. As canoe carvers the Nembe people resided in Obolo territory to carve canoes in commercial quantity. Obolo people also derived the knowledge and technology of carving canoe from their Nembe neighbours. The legacy of this relationship is the Nembe village in Ekede-Andoni. Nembe is the gateway to the Ijo communities where gin is purchased by the Ataba-Obolo gin traders. The Nembe becomes an indispensable neighbour to the Obolo.

**Keywords:** Obolo-Nembe relation.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The accounts of Jones, (1963:24), Ejituwu (1991: 41) and Enemugwem (2006:19) indicates that Obolo and Nembe have had ancestral relationship. Ejituwu (1991: 28, 40-41) in tracing the historical traditions of diaspora from the Obolo heartland recorded that Oboloma whose forebears came from Obolo contributed to the founding of Nembe. From the foregoing, the historical relationship between Obolo (Andoni) and Nembe was hinged on the fact that Obolo constituted a component unit of Nembe ethnic group in the Eastern Niger Delta. Thus there exists element of Obolo historiography in Nembe. Obolo oral data recorded that they regarded Nembe as their kith and kin. Utong (2011), Iraron (2014) asserts that Obolo had an earlier settlement in Nembe in the area of migration from their place of origin. Thus Obolo and Nembe are distant neighbours; their relationship was cemented through socio-economic activities such as marriage, fishing and trading. So through these sources both ethnic groups established contact, interaction and relationship.

## 2. NEMBE AS OBOLO CANOE TRADING CENTRE

In another dimension, trading is a nexus that strengthen inter-ethnic relations. The people of the different ethnic groups who engaged in diverse commercial activities and transactions established economic and socio-cultural relationship among themselves. On this note Obolo-Nembe relations was lubricated or calibrated through trade. Historically, trading relations between Obolo and Nembe pre-dates the slave trade. Then the major item or product of trade was canoe. The importance of canoe to the entire riverine people makes it an indispensable source of promoting inter-group relations. Its uses covers the economic, social, cultural and political spheres of life, such as fishing, trading, housing, communications, regatta, chieftaincy unit (war-canoe house) and for war and peace. Others are carrying of fire wood, fetching of white sand from the river, as a unit of measurement, transportation, carrying of goods and services etc.

Andoni as a coastal ethnic group saw the inevitability of the canoe to its political, socio-cultural and economic activities; and transactions went in search of where to afford canoe. Nembe and other places like Igbogene, Akenfa and Kugbor

were places the Obolo indigenes did obtain their canoes. So the Obolo people started canoe trading business with these areas, thereby laid their trading relationship.

However, our concern here is Nembe trading relations with Obolo. Canoe trading made Nembe to feature prominently in Obolo historical relations and folk lores. The Obolo people naturally regarded the Nembe people as the major producers and suppliers of canoes to the Obolo since they were the people that usually convey the canoes to Andoni for sale (Utong, 2011). Later Obolo canoe traders did buy their canoes from Nembe and its neighbouring villages. This canoe trade has created a relationship of “credit and trust”. The buyers did give their suppliers huge amount of money in advance to procure the good for them on trust. This canoe trading contributed to the mutual economic benefits and social development of both ethnic groups.

Meanwhile research evidence shows that Nembe as a community does not have the timber in their forest to carve canoes; rather they bought canoes from the Ijo areas like Arogbo, Olodioma, Egbema and Apo who are the major canoe carvers and suppliers. These acquired canoes were sold to the Andoni people by the Nembe. Dick-Agbe (2013), Ombo-Ewaka (2013), Akpankpa (2011) indicates that the Nembe people, especially the Odioma and Egwema axis and Akassa are canoe carvers. Egwema and Odioma are part of Nembe. Nembe, Olodioma and Egwema people went to other forest areas in the Eastern Delta where they carved canoes for sale in those areas.

### **3. NEMBE CANOE CARVERS IN OBOLO TERRITORY**

This middlemen role of the Nembe in canoe transaction enhances the Obolo and Nembe relations till date. Iraron (2014), in his account state that Obolo has relationship with Nembe in the area of trade. We have good raport. They have the culture of bringing some canoes for us in those days called Kugbo canoe. In another account Utong (2011) asserts that another area of Obolo and Nembe relations is in canoe carving. Canoe carving brought the Obolo and Nembe into closer contact. The Nembe canoe carvers followed their Obolo friends and customers to Obololand and found Obolo forests abound with timber to exploit for carving canoes. They indicated their intension of carving canoe in their forest. Their curiosity was borne out of the fact that there was no timber forest in Nembe. So this caused their emigration to other ethnic groups in the Eastern Delta and beyond.

Based on the existing relationship between the two ethnic groups, Obolo communities willingly leased their forest to the Nembe canoe carvers without collecting any fee. The Nembe canoe carvers exploited several forests of some Obolo communities like Ataba (Orong Ikop, Ementian), Ilotombi, Ekede, Ikuru Town, Okoronboile etc (Utong, 2011, Akpankpa, 2011, John, 2011). Their carved canoes were sold to Obolo people and their immediate neighbours. It is from this perspective that Obolo regarded the Nembe as the exclusive producers or carvers of canoe and major suppliers to Obolo. The Nembe people also acquired land for farming (Utong, 2011).

The technological knowledge and expertise in carving canoe was exported to Obololand by the Nembe canoe cavers. The transfer of this technological culture integrated the Obolo into Nembe economic culture which has now become additional source of livelihood to Obolo canoe carvers. The Obolo people acquired the skill and art of carving canoe during their trading in canoe with the Nembe outside Nembe environment. Again another group learnt it as the Nembe canoe carvers are in Andoni forest.

Some Obolo men who learnt the skill of carving canoe are Mr. Bottler John, Mr. Minabibi Jeffrey who later taught his children all from Ataba others are from other Obolo communities. They carved both canoes and paddles. Mr. Minabibi Jeffrey was carving canoes and paddles as his professional occupation till his sight challenges prevented him from the business. His children are still doing it till date. Some of them like Bottler John diversify the knowledge to building boats with wooden boards and planks. They built bigger boats used for conveying traders to and fro the market and other commercial ventures including transportation (John, 2011, Akpankpa, 2011, Utong, 2011).

Oral traditions from Ekede (Andoni) recorded that Ama Amaramu, one of the satellite villages of Ekede where the Nembe people resided before they relocated to Ikuru Town was dominated by them. In fact because the founder and natives were nolonger living there, the place became popularly known as Nembe village till date (Ekprikpo, 2013). While there, they

assimilated and imbibed the linguistic culture of the people. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century one of the Nembe people was in the team that hunted and killed elephant in Ekede forest.

#### 4. NEMBE AS OBOLO GIN TRADE ROUTE

It is significant to note that Nembe is the Gateway into the Ijo area or communities where the Obolo did their business transactions especially the gin trade (*kaikai or Ogogoro*). This gin trade also created a fundamental economic relation between Obolo and Nembe-Ijo. It is obvious, that the production or distillation of the gin was the original initiative of the Ibibio and not the Ijo. The Ibibio secured the forest from the Ijo communities where the palm wine palm trees were in abundance. They cooked and locally distilled gin in the Ijo area with the use of palm wine. Later the Ijo learnt the process and method of distilling gin from the Ibibio (Enyekit, 2011, Akpankpa, 2011).

This opened avenue for gin trading in the Ijo and Nembe areas. As the “gateway” and trade route, the Obolo not only bought gin from Nembe, but it serves as the “stopover” for the Ataba gin traders who were the Obolo pioneer in gin trading. The Ataba gin traders engaged in this lucrative venture with the Ijo mainly and the Nembe as well. Other Obolo communities like Agwut-Obolo subsequently engaged in the gin trade. The geographical location of both ethnic groups (at two extreme) notwithstanding, the gin traders from Ataba-Obolo used canoe as the means of transportation (hand pulling) to go to the Ijo communities: Peremabiri, Diobu, Ekewo, Kianbiri, Egbematoru, Olugbobiri etc where the gin are produced and bought.

As a long distance trade, it took them between three days and one week to arrive there and return home. It takes them one week or more to buy the gin from the middlemen. So as they embarked on the business transaction, they usually stop over at Nembe especially when the tide was not favourable until the tide was even. Nembe people accommodated them and their route became safe for the gin transaction (Eyenkit, 2011, Akpankpa, 2011). They also bought other produce like plantain, sugar cane, and chewing stick.

Like the canoe carving, Nembe people do not distil gin but also bought the product from the gin producing communities of Ijo and sold it to prospective buyers. Again the Nembe people who are business magnet became the middlemen and middle women. Nembe oral traditions asserts that Nembe as a hospitable place welcome strangers. Thus it became a stopover for Obolo traders as well as a transit place (Dick-Agbe, 2013, Ombo-Eweka, 2013). Similarly, Iraron (2014) states that those who want to go to Warri and those going to buy the native gin they go to Nembe. These trading activities further ferterlised the relations which traverse the socio-economic spheres of both Obolo and Nembe.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

One nexus that strengthens inter-ethnic relations is trade. So Obolo and Nembe canoe and gin transactions bonded them together and integrated the ethnic groups into each other socio-economic environment and culture. Through this relationship the individual ethnic group explores and exploits the economic potentials of the other which contribute significantly to their socio-political and economic transformation. Canoe acquired from Nembe was not only used for economic activities but for the defence of Obolo territory against external invasion since the ancient time.

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**International Journal of Novel Research in Humanity and Social Sciences**

Vol. 3, Issue 6, pp: (47-50), Month: November – December 2016, Available at: [www.noveltyjournals.com](http://www.noveltyjournals.com)

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