

# Obolo and Ogoni Economic Relations in the Eastern Niger Delta

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**Abstract:** This paper discussed the Obolo and Ogoni Economic Relation in the Eastern Niger Delta. This economic relation spanned from the ancient period to the present. Their geographical proximity promoted and cemented economic relations between them. The Obolo are naturally riverine or coastal dwellers while the Ogoni are both coastal and upland dwellers. Their individual environment determines their traditional occupation. Thus the Obolo are traditional fishermen and women and the Ogoni are naturally farmers. This paper showed that both ethnic groups harnessed their economic potentials to foster inter-ethnic relations. The Obolo in their hospitable disposition to their neighbours allowed the Ogoni to fish in their rivers and use their water ways for their economic ventures. In contrast, the Ogoni will not allow the Obolo cultivate or farm on their land. So they are interdependent based on their comparative economic advantage. The Obolo are the major suppliers of fish to the Ogoni while the Ogoni becomes the key source of supply of agricultural produce to the Obolo. The Ogoni markets such as Kibani (Ogokan), Duyaakara (Iyanaba) and Ataba-Ija/Kaa became centres of contact, interaction and relationship where trading activities and other economic transactions are undertaking. The interplay of economic forces also regulated inter-group relations especially during war time. So, economic activities resumed after the Ogoni and Andoni war of 1993. The paper concludes that economic potentials of the Obolo and Ogoni made them indispensable and interdependent neighbours.

**Keywords:** Ogoni, Obolo, economic relation.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Obolo and Ogoni ethnic groups occupied the Eastern Niger Delta. Their geographical location and proximity naturally made them neighbours. The Obolo who occupies a strategic area are traditionally fishermen and women; and also engage in trading transactions. On the other hand the Ogoni coastal dwellers became influenced by the immediate harvest of the marine resources for home consumption and sale as against the protracted period of maturity of agriculture produce. Thus they began to adopt the fishing methods of the Obolo in addition to their natural farming occupation. As neighbours, the Obolo people allowed their coastal Ogoni neighbours to fish in their rivers, gather sea foods like cockle, oyster, periwinkle, whelk and hew mangrove trees which served as pools for the construction of mud houses and fire wood.

These economic activities undertaken by the Ogoni in Obolo territorial waters are viewed as encroachment on the environment and economic rights of the Obolo, especially being farmers. Yet the Obolo in their hospitable disposition to their neighbours consciously accommodated their excesses but also resist them when necessary. This laid the foundation of their economic of relationship in the Eastern Niger Delta.

On the part of the Ogoni, they will never allow the Obolo to encroach on their farmland or harvest their crops. However there is comparative advantage between them since they produce goods and materials that are indispensable to each other. Thus the Obolo are the major suppliers of fish to the Ogoni and the Ogoni are the major dependable source of Obolo agricultural produce. Also the markets located in the Ogoni area further cemented their economic relationship. These markets are Kibani (Ogokan), Duyaakara (Iyanaba) and Ataba-Ija/Kaa. In essence their economic relation began with fishing, trading and consolidated by the market centres.

## 2. OGO NI FISHING ACTIVITIES IN OBOLO MARINE ENVIRONMENT

Economic activity is one area that promotes strong relations between the Obolo and the Ogoni. This is expressed through fishing and trading. Obolo and Ogoni traditions indicate that fishing and trading activities played vital role in cementing the relationship between Obolo and her Ogoni neighbour. As earlier noted the Ogoni are predominantly farmers but also penetrate the riverine fishing environment of the Obolo. The coastal Ogoni communities embark on their fishing expedition into Obolo rivers and creeks. Their fishing venture even took them to the immediate surroundings of Obolo communities. The Obolo people most times did not tolerate it since they regarded it as security risk especially as their arch enemy. They could spy on the Obolo territory under the pretence of fishing.

As the new entrant into the riverine environment they emulated the fishing culture of the Obolo such as screen fish fence (odik) screen net and cane trap called *nkata*. They evolved their distinct cane trap which they set both in the river and mangrove to trap fish and mangrove crab. With the introduction of throwing net by the Ghanaians they also emulated from the Obolo. The Obolo people extended their liberality to their Ogoni neighbour by allowing them to explore their rivers and creeks. On the contrary, the Ogoni will never allow the Obolo to cultivate their land or harvest their farms. So through this fishing occupation, both ethnic groups built up their relations as neighbours. Also Ataba indigenes at their Otute satellite village who engaged in salt making became the major suppliers of salt to their Ogoni neighbours before the introduction of the European salt.

Similarly, the Ogoni women who engage in fish trading came down to the Andoni rivers and creeks to buy fresh and dry fish from the Obolo fishermen. They regarded the Obolo as the “fish basket” where they can buy large quantity of fish at cheaper rate to re-sale at their individual communities. The Ogoni women in fish trading found this venture lucrative and as a source of supplying fish to their people since the catch of their fishermen cannot meet the fish need of the people. Also they became the source of fish supply to the upland or hinterland Ogoni. These women came down to the Obolo area on foot at water ebb and in canoes with their trading partners. They engaged the services of the men who paddled them in canoes to their buying centres. The women fish traders became the intermediary (middle women) that forged closer link between the Obolo and Ogoni (Eneunye, 2005, Iwowari, 2014, Nwate, 2014, Bakpo, 2014, Bakel, 2014, Benson, 2014, Kpee, 2014).

This fish trading relation between the Obolo fishermen and Ogoni women has created fish scarcity in Obolo towns and villages involved in this trade. This is so because the Obolo fishermen found it economically profitable to them than taking their catch home to be sold by either their wives or indigenous customers. Again they collect their money in cash after sales. The Ogoni women also gave the Obolo fishermen some valuable gift such as fruits, garri and other items. They have cordial customer relations and also exchange visits especially during burial and other ceremonies.

Apart from the prominent or significant function of the Obolo rivers and creeks to the economic development of the Ogoni, the Obolo river and sea becomes the waterway for the Ogoni fishermen who went to Cameroun, Gabon, and Equatorial Guinee for fishing, farming and trading. Fishing was their main occupation in those countries. So they stayed in the fishing settlement of those countries. Some of them return home at an interval of three months every year. The women engaged in fish trading and other commercial activities. Some of these Cameroun fishing settlements such as Mokuta (big and small) Buma, Mokangi, Poka are dominated by Ogoni while Swalloba is dominated by the Ijo. The Ogoni traders usually buy some goods from Cameroun to re-sale at home. They passed through the Andoni rivers to and fro Ogoni-Cameroun, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea.

So the Obolo waterway becomes the route to access some foreign countries in Africa. They use large size of boat constructed with wooden board and powered with engine. The boat carries fifty persons and above including wares and goods. The safe passage of the Ogoni traders through the Andoni water ways was a demonstration of the existing strong relations between the Obolo and her Ogoni neighbour. This relationship guaranteed the prosperous economic activities which contributed significantly to the socio-economic transformation or development of the Ogoni area.

## 3. OBOLO AND OGO NI TRADING ACTIVITIES

Another significant aspect of economic relations between Obolo and Ogoni exists in trading. It started with trade by barter. The Obolo who are predominantly fishing people exchanged their fish and other marine resources for the Ogoni

agricultural produce. This gave rise to the establishment of markets at various locations in Ogoni territory. Such markets include Kibani (Ogoni name), Ogokan (Obolo name) at Bomu coastal area, Duyaakara/Iyanaba (Ogoni/Obolo names respectively) and later Ataba-Ija/kaa and Bori. The Duyaakara/Iyanaba market was jointly founded by an Ogoni and Andoni friends. These markets became the centre of Obolo and Ogoni contact, interaction and relations.

They were used during the palm oil trade not only by the Obolo but also the Bonny and Okrika traders where they obtained palm oil and other agricultural produce. After the abolition of the trade by barter and the introduction of money economy they began to sell their products to each other. While the Obolo produce fish and marine resources the Ogoni produced foodstuffs and other agricultural produce. Their products of comparative advantage enhanced their economic interdependence.

Both Obolo and Ogoni oral traditions indicate that this economic interdependence fostered greater relationships between them as they complemented each other's material needs. In essence Obolo became the major source of fish and marine resources supply to the Ogoni which increased their protein consumption. In some instances the Ogoni fishermen bought canoes from the Andoni canoe traders. The Ogoni on the other hand are the major source of foodstuffs supply and palm wine to the Obolo. So they can hardly do without the other.

The Ogokan and Iyanaba markets were used by both ethnic groups till the 1972/1973 Ogoni and Andoni war which caused its collapse. One significant legacy of the Ogokan market in Ataba Andoni is that a baby girl was delivered at home immediately the mother arrived Ataba from Ogokan market and the baby was named Ogokan after the market. Only Duyaakara (Iyanaba), Ataba-Ija/kaa and Bori markets continue to exist till date. Ataba-Ija/Kaa becomes a big commercial centre that regulates the economic activities of the Obolo, Nkoro, Bonny and some nearby Ibibio communities. Obolo indigenes and other ethnic groups carry on their business transactions at the market. The Obolo not only sell their fish, crayfish and sea food to the Igbo buyers but also ventured into other economic activities at kaa market. Some Obolo businessmen and women also reside in rented apartments among the Ogoni at kaa to avoid the risk and cost of daily transportation. This market is the single major and nearest centre of trade for the Obolo. Obolo traders also bought goods from the Ogoni to sell at home. They established customer relations and could buy and sell on credit.

#### **4. THE Ogoni AS THE OBOLO GATEWAY, TO LAND TRANSPORTATION**

It is noteworthy to state that Ataba-Ija/kaa is central to Obolo and Ogoni socio-cultural, political and economic link that bonded them together since the 19<sup>th</sup> century till date. This commercial town is the Obolo gateway to Ogoni, Port Harcourt, Igbo areas and beyond. The Obolo people access the Ogoni area and beyond through Ataba-Ija/kaa where they usually board vehicles for their socio-economic transactions. This transportation system became another source of Obolo economic venture for survival. Thus some Obolo indigenes who were traditionally ferry men and later marine drivers changed to motor drivers. They now convey people, goods and services to their various destinations. The centrality and importance of this market to both ethnic groups made it survive all the Ogoni-Andoni wars especially the 1993/1994. After it was attacked and destroyed by the Andoni people in 1993 economic activities resumed at the Ataba-Ija/kaa market. It was one source that re-invigorated their relations.

Before the construction of the Ogoni/Andoni unity road which became accessible in 2007, Ataba-Ija/kaa was the central land route for the Obolo. This land route facilitates the movement of people, goods and services from the place of production to the place of consumption. So from 2007 to present Obolo have another land route through the unity road which facilitates socio-economic and political activities between the two ethnic groups and as well reduce cost of living in Obolo since vehicles could convey goods down to some Obolo towns like Asarama, Egendem and Unyeada. With the unity road, Ogoni transport service providers also convey Obolo people to their various communities through motor-cycle and motor. Through this they understood the terrain of Obolo more than before. In this regard the use of both marine routes in Obolo territory and the land routes in Ogoni area fostered mutual understanding between them. This mutual understanding guaranteed free passage of both ethnic groups through their territories. The land transportation is the driving force of economic activities in Ogoni.

Through the land route transportation the Obolo people have contributed immensely to the socio-economic development of the Ogoni since they are the major patronage. Land transport and the market became dependable sources of revenue generation not only to individual transport operators and traders but the local government council. The revenue collected

from the traders and motorists through ticket by the Ogoni formed an aspect of the Khana Local Council Internally Generated Revenue. Thus the Ogoni regarded the Obolo people as their source of economic survival and so cordial relationship has been maintained for economic activities to thrive (Nwate, 2014, Iwowari, 2014, Kpee, 2014). In contrast Ogoni use of Obolo marine routes has contributed little or nothing to the socio-economic development of Obolo. Instead the Ogoni use of Andoni rivers resulted to several conflict and wars between them. This is true because Obolo marine drivers were not engaged to convey them to and fro Ogoni-Cameroun or to their homes.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Economic activities constitute one of the fundamental areas of inter-ethnic relations and integration. The economic resources of the Obolo and the Ogoni pulled both ethnic groups together and gender their relations freely in the Obolo territorial water and adopted the fishing culture of the Obolo. Obolo indigenes as well depend on their Ogoni neighbours for their agricultural produce for daily needs. They also traded together in the Ogoni markets since the Obolo had no such market. The comparative advantage and independence of the two ethnic groups cemented their relationship. This makes them indispensable neighbours in the Eastern Niger Delta. The Ogoni-Obolo wars since the 19<sup>th</sup> century could not prevent their economic relationship. Economic relations between the Obolo and Ogoni resumes immediately after the wars. It is one aspect that continues to strengthen their relations.

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