

The Role of Language and Culture in Ethnic Integration in the Eastern Niger Delta:
The Obolo-Ibani Example, 1800-1991

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Abstract

This paper explains the role of language and culture in ethnic integration in Eastern Niger Delta: The Obolo and Ibani example 1800 – 1991. Language and culture are distinct aspects of ethnic identity and sources of integration in society. The peoples’ multilingual and multicultural composition enhanced greatly the integration of the component ethnic groups in the Eastern Niger Delta area. The Obolo and Ibani of Bonny and Opobo have a proximate cultural environment. As neighbours, their languages were mutually intelligible, hence, promoting daily commercial communications among the people of the ethnic groups. The methodology adopted to reconstruct this historical development is ethnography, linguistic evidence, and primary and secondary sources. This study noted that language and culture have contributed largely to ethnic integration through interactions. The paper concludes that ultimately, language and culture are basic aspects of life that brings people of different linguistic and cultural background together into an alien cultural environment as is the case with the Obolo and Ibani of Bonny and Opobo.

Keywords: Role, Language, Culture, Ethnic, Integration, Eastern Niger Delta.

Introduction

The relationship between Obolo and Bonny is not limited to economic, social and political relations but also covers the cultural spheres of their life. So, in the Eastern Niger Delta, they have similar and varied cultures, language inclusive. Among the Eastern Delta ethnic groups, there was culture diffusion. This cultural contact created closer cultural affinity which has improved their relationship. Culture and language are fundamental factors that bond people together. Therefore, imbibing the culture of other ethnic groups, and speaking their language integrated them into the non-indigenous culture. This specifically resulted in cultural assimilation and multi-cultural practice by the Obolo (Andoni), Bonny and Opobo (Ibani) ethnic groups. With the inter-ethnic mingling their culture began to spread to each other’s territory. However, cultural contact starts first with linguistic interaction since language was the first known human culture.

Linguistic Perspective

Linguistically, Obolo (Andoni) and the Ibani (Bonny and Opobo) do not belong to the same language family. The Obolo belongs to the lower Cross of the Delta-Cross Group and they speak Obolo as their language of communication while Bony belongs to the Ijoid family and they speak the Ibani language.¹ Therefore, they do not understand each other’s language. The Obolo dialect differs distinctly from the Ibani dialect which makes it difficult for them to understand themselves and communicate or interact freely. The language barrier

notwithstanding, both ethnic groups began to learn their dialect to enhance the free flow of communication and interaction. The Obolo people who had contact with the Igbo people can learn, understand and speak the Igbo language which enhanced their communications with the Ibani.²

The Ibani who naturally speaks the Ibani dialect became bi-lingual as they adopted the Igbo dialect of their host, the Azumini/Ndoki in the Imo valley in the course of their migration and contact with them. The adulterated Igbo became the second language of the Bonny and Opobo people which was promoted by the Igbo slaves to the detriment of their mother tongue-Ibani. It became known as Ibani-Igbo.³ The Igbo language later became the language of trade and communication, especially during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and palm oil trade. By the 19th century, the Igbo language had gained popularity and was deeply rooted in Bonny and Opobo linguistic culture which greatly influenced the Obolo by extension. The simplicity of the Igbo language endeared it to the Obolo people and other immediate neighbours in the Eastern Niger Delta. The influx of Igbo slaves in Bonny and Opobo; and the common usage of the Igbo language contributed to the near extinction of the Ibani dialect of Bonny and Opobo. Since the adulterated Igbo was popularized by the Bonny and Opobo people, the Andoni people who also had contact with the Igbo people during the domestic slave trade and trans-Atlantic slave trade and legitimate trade understood and spoke the Igbo dialect with ease. Thus, Bonny and Opobo become the nearest centre of the Igbo language to the Obolo people in particular and the Eastern Niger Delta in general.⁴

Some Obolo people who lived among the Bonny and Opobo people also learnt, understood and spoke the Ibani dialect fluently. Likewise, some Ibani (Bonny and Opobo) people did speak the Obolo dialect of the Andoni people, especially those who were residents of Andoni territory.⁵ Comparatively, the Obolo people who lived in Bonny and Opobo areas tended to speak the adopted adulterated Igbo of the Ibani more than the Ibani people did speak Obolo. However, to promote a cordial linguistic relationship, the Andoni people made efforts to ensure that the Ibani understood and spoke the Obolo dialect but the reverse was the experience. This may probably be because of the Ibani imperialistic tendency as a result of being highly educated than the Obolo at the time. Both Bonny and Opobo people refused to speak the Obolo dialect which was the dominant dialect within the territory.⁶

This, as noted by an oral informant Clinton I. Z. Utong stems from the fact that in an environment where there exist majority and minority dialects of the alien settlers, the majority dialect and language absorb the minority language as it is in the Kalabari area. It was on this basis that the original Ibani dialect was dominated by the popular Igbo language. So, the Ibani (Bonny and Opobo) continued with the Ibani-Igbo. Instead of Obolo, the majority and host, incorporating Bonny and Opobo into their Obolo dialect, it was the Ibani especially Opobo that was absorbing Obolo into their linguistic culture. Obolo had tried several means of interacting and communicating with them in the Obolo dialect but could not succeed. Rather they found themselves yielding to their Ibani-Igbo language as their second language and as the means of communication.⁷ Again, the Ibani being more highly educated than Obolo then, used that as an instrument of incorporating some nearby Obolo Towns and villages into their language and culture. Ikuru Town in Obolo is a typical example of the cultural imperialistic tendency of Opobo an Ibani extraction against Obolo. In this regard, Ikuru Town adopted the Ibani-Igbo language as their second language as well. They speak the Ibani-Igbo fluently in their Obolo homeland. Thus, they were commonly regarded as Opobo by other Obolo people (*ebi inya osiki/okoloba osiki*: Obolo reference to the Ibani of Opobo extraction).⁸

The assimilation or incorporation of Ikuru Town into Opobo Town was not by imposition as it was with the French assimilation of West African countries. In their case, it was voluntary based on aged long existing relationship between Ikwut (Ikuru) the founder of Ikuru Town and Jaja, the King of Opobo. Other factors were proximity and economic

relationship; Opobo became the centre in which Ikuru Town acquired Western education and above all intermarriage relationships. Therefore, Ikuru Town became a source of promoting the Ibani-Igbo in Obolo territory. Supportive of this fact, N. C. Ejituwu asserts that along with geographical proximity went a greatly increased intensity of social cooperation. Jaja married several Obolo wives and encouraged his fellow Opobo war chiefs to do likewise. Many Obolo chiefs on their part married Opobo wives and encouraged some of their young men to become temporary members of Opobo war-canoe houses to learn the secrets of the oil trade. He further stated that it seems probable that some Obolo leaders even became war-canoe chiefs and had their followers integrated into the Opobo house system. This seems the likely reality behind the reported fact that a whole section of Ikuru Town changed its name to Jaja.

This Obolo experience indicates that there was an asymmetric linguistic relationship between the Andoni people and the Ibani people in the Eastern Niger Delta. On the other hand, Andoni had the advantage of understanding and speaking the language of their immediate neighbour which helped them in their socio-economic transactions, interpersonal relationship and security among the Ibani. Through communications in both proto-dialect, Ibani and secondary language (Ibani-Igbo), equally enhanced mutual relationship between Ibani and Obolo. The Ibani reluctance to speak the Obolo dialect could be attributed to the fact of losing their proto-dialect which had already been on the verge of extinction due to the popular use of the Igbo language in the area. Adding the Obolo dialect of their host will facilitate the rapid extinction of the Ibani dialect.⁹

Culture is one aspect of life that promotes inter-ethnic relationships and integration. As people sojourns into other environment and are attracted and influenced by the culture of their neighbours, they tend to emulate and adopt those good aspects of the alien culture which will have a positive impact on their social life. Some of the alien and adopted cultural practices are in most cases modified to suit the indigenous cultural environment. Hence, we have culture blend, cultural assimilation and cultural unity. Through cultural contact, ethnic groups are incorporated and integrated since they adopted or emulated the culture of each other. In the context of this study, research has shown the prevalent cultural relationship between the Ibani and the Obolo ethnic groups. There was widespread cultural property within the ethnic groups. These alien cultures interspersed with the indigenous culture and sometimes the alien cultural attractions and influence overwhelmed the indigenous culture. By this development, both ethnic groups had abandoned some aspects of their indigenous culture and imbibed the new culture of their neighbour. In this circumstance, some indigenous cultures had been eroded and thereby encouraged inter-ethnic cultural integration.

Cultural Integration

From the cultural perspective, the traditions of Obolo and Bonny, as well as documented evidence indicated that the religious and cultural properties of the Obolo were emulated and adopted by the Bonny people. The *uta* which Bonny people called *Ikuba* was from Andoni. Bonny adopted it as their national war deity. Also, Bonny adopted the Obolo war culture, the house of skulls which later became a common practice in the Eastern Niger Delta. Obolo and Bonny's oral accounts state that it is from Ayangala (Unyengala) Obolo that Bonny got their god "*Ikuba*" which they are worshipping to date. That is why the sacred lizard, the monitor Lizard-(Iguana) was never eaten by the Bonny people because it is a revered totem of their god-Ikuba as it is also practised in Unyengala/Egwede.¹⁰ So, this is an element of Obolo historiography in Bonny cultural traditions which stimulates the cultural relationship between Andoni and Bonny.

Another documented cultural relationship between the Andoni and the Ibani is traced to marriage between the two ethnic groups. Thus, E. J. Alagoa and A. Fombo recorded the existence of intermarriage between Andoni and Ibani (Bonny). Such marriages were consummated between King Opu Dappa and an Andoni woman from Unyengala.¹¹ Cultural

elements were interchanged through such marriages. Documented records indicate that Ikuba; the national cult and war deity of Bonny was introduced from the Ayangala (Unyengala) village of Andoni. Also, the Iguana or monitor lizard which was the symbol of Ikuba was adopted from Andoni. This was recorded by Barbot during their visit to Andoni and Bonny in 1699. By the 19th century, the Iguana or monitor lizard was more abundant in Bonny than in Andoni as earlier recorded.¹² The cultural relationship between the two ethnic groups was not limited to the religious aspect but extended to other cultural areas like masquerade displays, dance, dressing and naming of children. The Andoni who accommodated the Ibani of Bonny and Opobo in their territory found themselves surrounded by diverse cultures. Thus, they were exposed to two waves of the non-indigenous culture of the Ibani ethnic group due to their earlier contact with them.

These waves of cultural influence came from Bonny and Opobo to Obolo (Andoni). It was due to the proximity of Bonny and Opobo to Obolo (Andoni) on one hand. On the other hand, it was occasioned by the large population of Obolo fishermen and women, and traders who stayed at the Bonny fishing ports as well as those who engaged in the palm oil trade at Bonny and Opobo. Another source was those who schooled in Opobo in the late 19th century and Bonny in the early 20th century. Based on these factors, Obolo indigenes who were fascinated by the artistic displays of the masquerades became “carriers of the Ibani cultures” to Obolo (Andoni) cultural environment and later transplanted it there.¹³ This explains the strong cultural influence of the Ibani on Obolo and the innovation of cultural ideas.

This cultural assimilation by the Obolo was transformed beyond the cultural values. It became a source of creativity, relaxation and recreation, a tourist attraction, depicting the natural habitat and social bond of unity for the overall growth of the society. The cultural plays adapted from the Ibani cultural environment have their periods of play and most of them were staged during the Christmas period. This annual carnival that characterized the festivities usually attracted indigenes, friends and neighbours from both Obolo and Ibani towns and villages. Accordingly, the Obolo assimilated the Ibani culture more than the Ibani assimilated the Obolo culture. In juxtaposition, some of the masquerade plays in Obolo were adopted from either Bonny or Opobo but not much could be identified as being emulated from Andoni by the Ibani.¹⁴

However, the Obolo account of the cultural relationship with the Ibani affirms the presence and element of Ibani culture in the Obolo area. Thus, Simeon Dike Eyenkit and Solomon Atanfut Ogbidor narrated the scenario encountered by the first set of Ataba indigenes sent to school in Bonny in 1906. One of the scenarios led to cultural assimilation by the pupil, Benneth Iwowari later Chief Benneth Iwowari. The maltreatment meted on him by his Bonny guardian compelled him to abandon his pursuit of Western education to discover his artistic cultural potential. While schooling in Bonny, he learnt the artistic play of the masquerade called *Alagba (york ile)*. He returned to Ataba without completing his standard education in Bonny. Instead of a standard six certificate, he came home with Bonny's cultural identity.¹⁵ S. D. Eyenkit further stated that late Chiefs Samuel Ayasuk and Benneth Iwowari were always babysitting and for that reason could not complete their elementary education. As Benneth Iwowari was not given an adequate chance to go to school and was ill-treated, he then indulged himself in several cultural plays. With such cultural experience and expert knowledge, he introduced “*Alagba*” and “*Ifit odor*” cultural plays to his age grade which came to be named after that play. His age grade became known as “*ogboodor*”.¹⁶ That is barracuda fish which they carved with wood and carried on the head in the course of playing it.

Another supporting fact is the account of Utong who asserts that Ilotombi learnt and adopted some Bonny cultural plays like “Govinor” (big man). Bonny experts of this cultural play were invited to Ilotombi to teach them the dance steps, the rhythm of the song, drumbeats as well as songs in their language (Bonny). Some of them were adopted as Obolo

and participated with Bonny during their cultural plays as they stayed in their fishing ports.¹⁷ Ubelejit Wellington gave an account of how their age grade “*Ogbo Esu Ama*” of Ataba adopted the masquerade play of Bonny. The members of the Bonny masquerade were engaged by the age grade to teach them the artistic dance steps and display, performance, drumbeat pattern and songs. They later modified it and compose songs in the Obolo dialect. It was adopted in 1986. The masquerade was one of the best-performing masquerades in Ataba then.¹⁸

Similarly, another wave of cultural relationships from Bonny which engulfed Ataba town was the “*uke*”. The *uke* was emulated and adopted from Bonny residents in the Ataba territory especially Uyonoba (Iyoba) and Okuka (Amanuku). The people of Ataba became attracted by the fascinating display of the cultural groups and adopted these Bonny cultural plays. Maxwell Opuene Akpankpa in his account stated that contact with Bonny made Ataba and other Obolo towns and villages learn “*Owusara*” and other cultures from Bonny. Some of the cultures were learnt from the fishing port. According to him, his age grade called *Oyenwuchi* played *uke*, which observed the way and pattern Bonny played their own. Bonny players came to Ataba to teach them its pattern of play including drum beats and songs in Ibani which were translated into Obolo and as well composed Obolo songs. Other age grades that played *uke* were the *Amakiriala*, *Omakaribe*, *Wonder*, *Ekenere Owaji*, and *Uwadiegwu*. One notable feature of these *Uke* is that all their names are in Ibani (Igbo). *Uke* is commonly played in other parts of Obolo like Ngo, Ebukuma, and Unyengala.¹⁹ *Uke* thereafter became a popular cultural play in different parts of Obolo. Some Obolo towns and villages later used indigenous names like *Oruama*, *uke aranarang* (red *uke*), and *ukeokiket* (white *uke*). They also composed their songs in Obolo. This was a period of cultural integration in Obolo. The women were not left out in this cultural relationship. Ataba women through their contact with Bonny emulated the “*mgbede*” culture from Bonny since the remote time and it existed till the late 1980s. They called their own “*mbede*” and it served as the highest ceremony of womanhood rites in Ataba. *Mbede* meanstwo *ekwutin* Obolo which literally means “house of wrapper”. By implication, it means giving plenty of wrappers to the celebrant.²⁰ They also adopted the *ereminiogbo* cultural dance group. Another one adopted from the Ibani was the *owuogbo* which was played by the Agwut-Obolo people. This particular play was played by most people of the Eastern Niger Delta.²¹

Mbede as practised in Ataba entails the adornment of a woman either married or not with costly wrappers, blouses, neck and wrist beads, headgear, wrist watches, handbags, shoes and an umbrella to protect her from the sun. The woman was kept in solitary confinement for at least three months with her attendants who cared for her daily needs. After three months of fattening, the woman was presented to the public to be admired and to entertain the people through dancing for three days. Meanwhile, during fattening, she was educated on several house chores, care for the home and husband, behavioural patterns, and dancing steps by her trainers. A hut constructed at the compound square was stuck with assorted clothes meant for her to dress intermittently. She went into the hut to change the clothes she danced with earlier and adorned herself with a new set of clothes to continue dancing. The ceremony is concluded with thanksgiving in the church on Sunday, particularly Anglican Church. Thereafter the woman paraded the community well-adorned daily with different attires for one week. During the period of public outings, she visited family members, in-laws, friends and well-wishers. As custom and traditions demanded, those who visited gave her presents; in cash and material things to celebrate her.²²

Mgbede (Mbede) is significant in Ataba culture in varied ways; it helps to regulate the behavioural pattern of life of women in society. It was a mark of honour to the women and the attainment of full womanhood. Also, it was a way of promoting the conventional conduct and cultural ideology of the people. The cultural value for women was enhanced through the *mbede* ceremony and it became an avenue of celebrating women. *Mbede* cultural ceremony is

a pride to mothers who did it for their female children and it also compelled mothers to take responsibility for grooming and training their daughters on norms, moral values and ethics of life. It was also a process of preserving the cultural heritage of the people.²³

Ereminiogbo was the women's cultural dance group. The cultural group performed during festive periods and when invited by members and non-members to perform in honour of a deceased family member, in-law as part of the burial rites. At other times entertain important visitors to Ataba. Whereas, *Owuogbo* was a popular male masquerade play in the Eastern Niger Delta. These two cultural groups were significant because they promoted the cultural heritage of the Agwut-Obolo people. Both *Ereminiogbo* and *Owuogbo* were sources of promoting indigenous tourism and entertainment in Obolo. *Ereminiogbo* was a social group that united women together with a sense of cultural identity. Their activities contributed to the socio-cultural development of Ataba.²⁴ The existence of Ibani names in Obolo was attributed to several reasons which are secretive life, hiding their language and negligence in giving their children Obolo names in the Ibani area. Another strong reason is Obolo people stay in their fishing ports where the host language is the dominant dialect of communication and transaction. Thus, most Obolo children born at the fishing ports were called names in their landlord's dialect (Ibani) other than Obolo. Some were named after their bosom friends who are non-Obolo.²⁵ Utong asserts that some Ibani names are answered by Andoni people like Tamunokworo, Fubara, Ibiebara, Ayanaah and many others.²⁶

Gospel Aka Johnson Abanile notes that Obolo bearing Ibani names is one area that is affecting Obolo identity till today because someone's name is the person's identity; it identifies where one comes from. Therefore, the people of Obolo so benefited as they bore the Ibani name. So, in almost all the communities in Obolo, evidence of such names that are not Obolo exists but it is rare to hear such Obolo names among any neighbours. Except maybe they married an Obolo woman and the father is Ibani, the mother may give such children Obolo names alongside Ibani names but the Ibani names became the dominant ones. That is the lopsided relationship between Andoni and Ibani in terms of name identity and culture.²⁷ From these analyses, it could be asserted that this conscious cultural assimilation ultimately resulted in "cultural imperialism" in Obolo to the detriment of the indigenous culture of the Andoni people. Probably, this could be responsible for the Ibani claim of cultural superiority over the Obolo people. Apart from language and cultural plays which bonded the ethnic groups of Obolo (Andoni) and Ibani, there are other areas where they shared similarities without anyone identified as the originator. These areas include canoe regatta, gig, war canoes, mode of dressing, and talking drum (drum communications). All these areas have widespread influence and practice across the Eastern Niger Delta. They have no particular origin to any ethnic group, though various ethnic groups adopted peculiar patterns to themselves.

Like the ceremonial war canoe, it is commonly used in the sub-region to parade newly installed chiefs and coronated kings around the neighbouring villages with traditional ceremonial songs and drum beats combined with *ngelenge* (local xylophone). Chiefs were also conveyed in this same ceremonial war canoe to their traditional headquarters for recognition and registration by their Traditional Council of Chiefs. The corpse of a deceased king, chief, or chief priest is also usually conveyed in a ceremonial war canoe home especially if the corpse is in Port Harcourt or outside his home town. This constitutes part of the burial rites of the chiefs. The ceremonial rite is common among Obolo (Andoni), Ibani (Bonny and Opobo), and Kalabari as part of their last honour to their traditional rulers.²⁸ Though this canoe regatta and war canoes were common war cultural practices in the Eastern Niger Delta, some ethnic groups like Ibani, Okrika, Obolo, Nembe and Kalabari popularized it to the outside world as part of their annual carnival. Opobo is a typical example, and they display their war canoe regatta every 31st December among other cultural activities which

form their yearly carnival. This marine cultural display does not only promote tourism but is a demonstration of Opobo might and war culture.²⁹



Photograph showing a Ceremonial War-Canoe parade after the installation of Chief Gospel Aka Johnson Abanile III on Saturday, 18th December, 2010 in Ataba. Photograph by Mba Frank (Jnr.).



Photograph showing a Ceremonial War-Canoe carrying the casket of Late Chief Brownson O. Ogbolo of Egwe Aja, Ataba. Photograph by Stephenson Edwin (Jnr.).

In the case of Obolo, apart from war periods in which they launched their war canoes, the Obolo Canoe regatta came into the limelight in 1991 when the Rivers State Government invited canoe regattas from different ethnic groups of the Eastern Niger Delta to entertain the state's visitors. The Ataba which represented Obolo in that 1991 ceremonial canoe regatta thrilled the visiting General Ibrahim B. Babangida (Nigeria's Military president) and President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe.³⁰ In terms of foreign textile and dressing culture, it could be argued that obviously, the Obolo were the first to have contact with the Portuguese during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade before relocating to Bonny and other areas in the sub-region due to geographical hindrances. Thus, the Obolo had adopted the Whiteman's dressing culture before Bonny/Opobo who subsequently popularized it and gave it several names such as George Wrapper named after King George of Bonny because it came to Bonny during his tenure.³¹

Another significant aspect of Obolo-Ibani Relations is marriage. Intermarriage promoted integration and a greater relationship between the people of Andoni and Bonny. From the 1800 there was an increased marriage relationship between the Obolo and Ibani neighbours. Marriage which is a vital element of inter-group relations is regarded as a sacred institution that fosters cordial and peaceful integration of inter-ethnic relationships. In Obolo, in-laws are regarded as blood relatives as conveyed in "*Ugot Ika ki mun eje ugot*"-meaning that in-laws cannot shed the blood or see the blood of an in-law. This implies that even in a war situation, Obolo man cannot kill an in-law or the offspring of such marriage. Probably, this was what spared the life of some Bonny kings and chiefs captured during some of the numerous wars between Obolo (Andoni) and Bonny since some of the Bonny kings and chiefs had Andoni mothers.

A typical example was the war between Bonny and Asarama. Ejituwu records that the king of Bonny was captured in the war between Bonny and Asarama (Obolo) but released to return unhurt due to a blood relationship with Obolo. Bonny people regarded the Asarama as fools since they do not understand the basis of this generosity and resolved to destroy them.³² So, inter-ethnic marriage was contracted between Obolo (Andoni) and Bonny. The marriage of Obolo (Andoni) women by Bonny men was intended to purify and sustain the free-born class in Bonny since there was a high influx of slaves from Igbo land and elsewhere. This prevented the slave born from ascending the kingship throne of Bonny. This is supported by the account of Gentle Eric John who states that the Bonny people regard Andoni as free-born citizens.³³ Indeed, there were royal marriages contracted between Bonny kings, chiefs and nobles with Andoni princesses and women. On the part of Andoni, such marriage could be diplomatic to pacify further wars with Bonny not as weakling but for the peaceful transaction of economic activities and for economic penetration, to participate freely in the Atlantic trade without any middleman. The Bonny-Andoni marriages were diplomatic for economic growth rather than a demonstration of weakness by the former. Esuiku Eric Igbifa also noted that Bonny men who traded at the Ataba waterfront had marital relationships with Ataba women which resulted in the procreation of children. This demonstrated the cordiality between the Bonny traders and the Ataba people.³⁴

It is imperative to state that in addition to the above factors, is the Bonny consideration of Andoni women's marital faithfulness to their spouses and industriousness as against the infidelity of Bonny women. Utong posits that Bonny themselves never liked to marry Bonny women in the remote past because of their infidelity and lifestyle.³⁵ The situation improved in the 20th century as evident in the Ibani expression "*Idoni wu agba*". It is a comparative expression which means Andoni women were like paint that sticks on the spot that is applied. (*Idoni is Ibani name for Andoni and agba is paint*). "If you marry an Idoni (Andoni) woman, she does not abandon the marriage."³⁶ Supportive evidence from Bonny's traditions asserts that there were a lot of marital interactions between Andoni and Bonny. The king of Bonny married Andoni princesses and had kings who ruled Bonny for

many years. N. A. I. Waribere documented the marriage between Chief Ibani-buru-fight Manilla Pepple and Ogbolo-Ikang (Ogbulika) an Andoni woman. She was the woman who bought the boy whom she named Okpogho-Nkata-Mi, popularly known as Okponkata.³⁷ This man later established the Jumbo family in Bonny.

In his historical account of the Jumbo family, Waribere records that Chief Oko Jumbo was instructed by the oracle that he should return to his maternal home to get a wife else he will remain perpetually barren. In obedience, he married Iyagija from Andoni and had twin baby boys in 1846.³⁸ Another example of Obolo and Ibani's marriage relationship was recorded by E. J. Alagoa and A. Fombo. The work documented the royal marriage between Obolo and Bonny. King Opu Dappa who was the father of Kings Amakiri, Apia, and Wari married the mother of Wari from Unyengala in Andoni.³⁹ The reason advanced by Obolo traditions for a low rate of formal marriage with Bonny women is that Bonny women are not faithful to their husbands alone. They engaged in extramarital affairs with other men. This was partly influenced by the Europeans' presence in Bonny and exposure to the Western lifestyle. So, because of marital infidelity, Obolo men only have an informal relationship with their women. This relationship sometimes results in the procreation of children.⁴⁰

This marriage relationship is one-sided. It was asymmetrical since Andoni men rarely married Bonny women. In comparison, Bonny men married Obolo women than Andoni men married Bonny. However, the relationship between both ethnic groups produced children. The children of these marriages acknowledge their homes, lived with them even after the death of their parents and enjoyed equal rights and status.⁴¹ Trade contact exposed many Bonny men to Andoni women especially, in nearby Obolo communities. In Ataba there are many children from this marriage also. From Ataba's account, Igbifa states that King Ijork Oruk XI who had an existing relationship with Chief Waribo Manilla Pepple, handed over his younger sister to Waribo for marriage. Her name was Ogonte. All these relationships facilitated the process of handing over a section of Uyonoba (Iyoba)-Ataba to Chief Waribo Manilla Pepple of Bonny in about 1871. Bonny traders and chiefs established trading outposts and plantations in Obolo; which are Otuodong, Iwogoni, Okorkiri, Opuwari, Muma, Okuka, Otute, Uyonoba, Okpojoand others. The Ibani occupation of these villages integrated them into the Obolo environment. Marriage has significantly contributed to the integration of both Obolo and Ibani ethnic groups into each other's cultural spheres of life.⁴²

Apart from marriage, a social relationship which existed between Chief Nte Ituk III and Chief Squiz Atubobara Banigo of Bonny culminated in the pawning of Chief Nte Ituk's son since his successor and younger brother, Chief Thomas Ikwut Ituk IV refused to pay back the money borrowed from Chief Squiz Atubobara Banigo. This money amounted to 4000 Manilla which was used for oracle consultation. After the death of Chief Nte Ituk III, Chief Squiz Banigo sent his brother Apiafi and others to Chief Thomas Ikwut Ituk who was aware of the borrowed money. The death of Chief Nte Ituk III hampered him from fulfilling the traditional rites of those who went to Arochukwu to consult the *Ibini Ukpabi* oracle referred to as *amayok* in Obolo; thus, Thomas Ikwut became angry and refused to pay back that money. He preferred to surrender Eneyok the son of late Chief Nte Ituk to Chief Squiz Atubobara Banigo. When Eneyok got to Bonny, he was renamed Iwo. While in Bonny he married an Igbo woman and begat children. Prominent among them is Professor Iwo Nte who retains the name of their grandfather, Nte. These children have contributed to the socio-economic development of Bonny.⁴³

Obolo and Ibani's relationship from the remote past further indicates that Bonny is populated by Obolo people. Different chieftaincy houses in Bonny up till the present time have traces of Andoni blood. Prominent among the chieftaincy houses is the continuous existence of Obolo ancestral communities which have become settlements in the Jumbo section of Bonny. These community names are Aganya, Ogwede, and Ayambo. The inhabitants of these settlements were of Andoni extraction who replicated their natural Obolo

names in the heart of Bonny. This was intended to uphold their distinct Obolo identity in Bonny. The significance of this historical gesture is that it promotes ethnic integration since the Obolo population in Bonny has been absorbed by the indigenous population in Bonny through marriage and self-surrender to the cultural environment. They have since become Bonny people to date but most of them are ignorant of their Andoni origin. This development resulted in a population explosion and enlargement of the Jumbo house and manpower development. Even though the Obolo population have been eclipsed by the larger group in Bonny, there is an evident historical expression of their habitual relationship through the Obolo community name identity in Bonny.

Research findings showed that Andoni and Bonny's traditions differ on the source or origin of the above historical facts. Andoni traditions as rendered by Finomo I. Edubio and N. L. Iraron opine that the Obolo people of Egwede, Agana and Anyamboko were the inhabitants of the island of Bonny. That, where Bonny is located was the satellite town of Egwede, Agana and Anyamboko and a majority of Obolo people moved further into the mangrove forest in search of greener pasture, leaving a handful of them. The Obolo population was later dominated by the growing population of the Ibani.⁴⁴ If one visits Bonny today, it will be noticed that those names have been corrupted from Egwede to Ogwuede, Agana to Aganya and Anyamboko to Ayambo. They are now an integral part of Bonny. While Bonny documentary account indicates that Ayambo and Aganya were Andoni refugee camps in Bonny since ancient times. These refugee camps were established when King Wari was the king of Bonny since his mother was from Anyangala (Unyengala) in Andoni. Then the refugees came from Anyamboko and Agana in Andoni. They were allowed to name their settlements in Bonny in memory of their homes.⁴⁵

The oral account of Eric Gentle John attributes the establishment of these Andoni settlements in Bonny to the series of civil wars in Andoni. When Andoni had their civil wars, some of them escaped into Bonny territory. They were domiciled there, became Bonny people and were free. They had a civil war in Egwede, they fled and came to their in-law's place. The man accommodated them there and then changed the name to Ogwede from Egwede. They are now Bonny people. The people who live in this settlement (Jumbo family) are mostly of Andoni extraction; Aganya, Ayambo and Ogwuede. Some of them do not even know they have Andoni lineage.⁴⁶ Despite these divergent views, both sources could be correct but the fact remains that Andoni and Bonny's sources attested to the fact that there are Andoni settlements with their ancestral names in Bonny till today. Essentially, they have been integrated into Bonny territory.

In another dimension, according to Bonny traditions which affirms that some Bonny people from the Jumbo and Long John families established themselves in the ancient time at Ngo in Andoni and became Andoni people but still upheld their ancestral identity. In the account of Martin Jumbo who narrated his encounter with some people who answers Jumbo and Long John in Ngo, Andoni in the course of his two years stay in the area. When he further enquired why they were answering Jumbo and Long John in Ngo, he was told that their forebears came from Bonny and lived for a long time and established there and since then became Andoni people. They married Andoni women and their children were bearing their Bonny names in Andoni till date. According to him these Andoni Jumbo children do not know where their Bonny Jumbo people are but are inclined to Andoni origin. This source attributes the cause of this change of place of settlement to social vices and economic factors as the probable reasons. More so, the detects of the palm oil trade would have prompted these forebears to settle there and be close to the palm oil sources to play a very important role.⁴⁷ It is important to note that, some Ibani families were integrated into the Obolo area as well.

Also worthy of note is the historical relevance of the fishing settlements which promotes inter-ethnic relationship and integration. It did not only serve as a fishing settlement but a melting pot of cultural contact, culture integration, culture spread or diffusion as well as

ideas. Different ethnic groups that stayed at the fishing ports acquired knowledge of one another's culture, especially the host or landlord's culture. Through contact at the fishing ports in Bonny territory, the Obolo people adopted some aspects of Bonny culture, particularly in the area of masquerade and dance plays earlier discussed. Some inter-ethnic marriages were contracted at the fishing ports. Linguistic relationship to a large extent has been highly promoted at the fishing settlement.⁴⁸ Beyond economic relationships, the fishing settlements served as centres of cultural tourism and attraction among the ethnic dwellers within the ethnic territorial waters. Cultural plays like masquerades were usually staged during odd water tides and festive periods. The people paraded their different cultural plays, masquerades and dance plays to celebrate, merry, dine and wine together. The cultural ceremony attracted people from neighbouring ethnic groups to witness it. Some of them returned home to begin to play the masquerades they saw there.

Ataba in Andoni is a beneficiary of cultural ceremonies at the fishing ports. Akpankpa affirms that some of these cultures and masquerades play like *uke* by the *Oyenwuchi*, *Amakiriala*, and *Omakaribe* age grades of Ataba earlier mentioned were learnt from the fishing ports in Ataba territory occupied by Bonny people. During Bonny cultural festivals at Ataba villages and fishing settlements like Unyonoba (Iyoba), Okuka (Amanku), Ebonudanasuk, Emenakini, and Isiasia Egwe Ite. Ataba indigenes usually go to these places to watch their masquerades and other cultural activities. It was from such cultural festivities that the Ataba people adopted Bonny masquerades and their patterns after perfection.⁴⁹ Indeed, cultural plays at the fishing ports enhanced cultural unity, peaceful co-existence and harmonious relationship between Andoni and Bonny ethnic groups. The above fishing settlements and Ataba satellite villages turned into centres of indigenous tourism which further enhanced the economy of the people. Social relationships were established across gender, some men found their wives during the festival period while others-initiated business contact.

Conclusion

The study indicates that ethnic groups who may not necessarily belong to the same language family and culture area can be integrated into each other's cultural sphere to foster a huge cordial relationship. The Obolo and Ibani understanding and speaking of each other's language enhanced their daily communications and economic transactions. The fluent speakers of the language are regarded as fellow natives. This helps to improve their social relationships and interactions beyond the ethnic locality or environs. In the same vein, culture has contributed immensely to the Obolo and Ibani integration. This was achieved through cultural contact, adoption, marriage, name-bearing as well as inhabiting each other's cultural environment. It points to the fact that Obolo and Ibani did not live or exist in isolation. The resultant effect was that both ethnic groups co-existed and promoted peaceful socio-economic transactions irrespective of the several wars fought between them from the distant past to the 1840s. To date, Obolo fishermen are the dominant ethnic group in Bonny fishing settlements. However, during the nineteenth-century legitimate trade, the Ibani ethnic group occupied Obolo territory which they used as trading outposts.

Endnote

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²Interview with N. L. Iraron, 63 years in Elekahia, Port Harcourt, 19/2/2014,

³Ndimele and Williamson, Languages, 154

⁴Interview with Gospel A. Johnson Abanile, 58years in Ozuoba, 26/8/2011.

⁵Interviews with Godspower Festus Iwowari, 58 years and Eric Gentle John, 69 years in Bonny, 16/1/2014 respectively.

⁶Interview with Clinton I. Z. Utong 65 years in Rumualogu, 2/7/2011.

⁷Utong, 65 years

⁸Abanile, 58years, Utong.

⁹Abanile, Utong, John, 69 years. See also N. C. Ejituwu. *A History of Obolo (Andoni) in the Niger Delta*, (Oron: Manson, 1991), 144.

¹⁰John, Iraron, 63 years.

¹¹E. J. Alagoa and A. Fombo *A Chronicle of Grand Bonny*. (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1972), 76

¹²G. I. Jones, *The Trading States of the Oil Rivers: A Study of Political Development in Eastern Nigeria*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1963), 71. See also Alagoa and Fambo, 76

¹³Abanile, Utong.

¹⁴Oral account of Maxwell O. Akpankpa, 70 years in Ataba, 15/ 8/2011

¹⁵Interviews with Simeon Dike Eyenkit, 61 years and Solomon Atanfut Ogbidor, 82 years both in Ataba, 14/8/2011, 16/8/2011 respectively.

¹⁶Eyenkit, 61 years.

¹⁷Utong.

¹⁸Oral Account of Ubelejit Wellington, 45 years in Ataba, 10/ 8/2013.

¹⁹Akpankpa, 70 years.

²⁰Account of Alice Akpatane, 96 years in Rumueme, 9/4/2005, Helen Jacob, 79 years interviewed in Ataba, 26/ 5/2005

²¹Utong.

²²Oral account of Ujaenewan Florence Hanson, 51 Years in Ataba, 5,8/6/2023. Josephine Benson, 73 years in Rumualogu, 7/6/2023, Oral account with Eyorka Festus Iwowari, 74 years in Ataba, 8/6/2023.

²³Iwowari, 74 years, 8/6/2023.

²⁴Akpatane, 96 years, 9/4/2005, Jacob, 79 years, 26/ 5/2005, Utong.

²⁵Utong, Akpankpa, Abanile.

²⁶Utong.

²⁷Abanile.

²⁸Abanile.

²⁹Interview with Godwin Joseph Alaminiokuma, 78 years in Opobo, 10/6/2013. Messiah C. Brown, 65 years documented in Opobo, 9/6 2013

³⁰Abanile.

³²N. C. Ejituwu. *A History of Obolo (Andoni) in the Niger Delta*, (Oron: Manson, 1991), 69

³³John, 69 years.

³⁴Esuiku Eric Igbifa, 62 years documented in Port Harcourt, 14/ 6/ 2012

³⁵Utong.

³⁶Akpankpa, Abanile.

³⁷N. A. I. Waribere, *A Short History of Jumbo House of Grand Bonny*, (Port Harcourt, Divine Printers and Publishers Nig. 2007), 1-2.

³⁸Waribere, *A Short History of Jumbo House*, 38

³⁹Alagoa and Fombo, *A Chronicle of Grand Bonny*, 75

⁴⁰Eyenkit.

⁴¹Utong.

⁴²Igbifa, 62 years, See also Romokere Mgbowaji Benson, "The Ibani (Bonny) Civil War of 1869 and the Obolo Response", *LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research*, Volume 16, No.3, September, (2019), 8-9

⁴³Igbifa.

⁴⁴Finomo Iko-Awaji Edubio, 55 years documented in Rumuolumeni, 4/2/2014

⁴⁵Waribere, *A Short History of Jumbo House*, 45-46

⁴⁶John.

⁴⁷Martin Jumbo, 50 years interviewed in Ignatius Ajuru University, Iwofe Rumuolumeni, 30/1/2014

⁴⁸Akpankpa, Edubio 55 years.

⁴⁹Akpankpa, Eyenkit.